

NEAR-SHORING APPAREL SUPPLY CHAINS

Time for some home truths



A common cry we hear in global textile supply chains is that near-shoring is a more sustainable and perhaps ethical option for apparel brands. In the past couple of years, we have seen evidence—albeit limited—of this, with the US President Donald Trump talking about bringing manufacturing home, and efforts by the UK to redevelop its once-burgeoning textile industry.

In theory, near-shoring is more sustainable for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it cuts down on CO2 emissions associated with the international transport of textiles and clothing. Secondly, there is a train of thought (which is far from proven) that local production equals ethical production.

The first of these arguments is difficult to dispute. If something is made in the US and sold in the US, its GHG (greenhouse gas) emissions associated with transportation will clearly be lower than if it were made in Asia and transported to the US.

The second argument is less clear-cut. There are tens of thousands of apparel



PHOTO: REUTERS/TIKSA NEGERI

Is near-shoring a threat to the apparel sector?

factories in the world. Some are ethical and treat their staff well, paying them a fair wage. Many, as we all are aware, are not. But the point is, the whereabouts of these factories are random. Asian apparel sourcing hubs do not have a monopoly on poor worker rights. There are good and bad factories in Bangladesh and, indeed, in other sourcing hubs such as China and Vietnam. But there are also good and bad factories in the UK, in the US, in Eastern Europe.

The one common denominator with all of these factories, wherever they are based in the world, is that they face downward pressure on prices from apparel brands. This means there is, in turn, downward pressure on wages for factory workers. This is not a well-paid industry, wherever you operate in the world, and that's just basic economics.

But there is another, perhaps more

important factor, to consider in the discussion around near-sourcing. As intimated, there is often an assumption that closer to home is more sustainable. But what if production techniques in textile supply chains in Asia are better than those in the West? What if they are cleaner, use less water, use less chemicals and create less waste? Actually, this—textile production techniques—is something we all need to consider in the debate about where apparel is made. Brands, policymakers and economists all need to be part of this discussion.

As a factory owner myself, I can attest to the huge strides made in apparel production in recent years. The industry in Bangladesh is undergoing a minor revolution. In denim production, for instance, new techniques are being introduced which use far less water

than was previously the case, while factories are also becoming much smarter on the issue of water recycling and harvesting the use of rainwater.

Wastewater, meanwhile, is managed far better, often being cleaned using costly effluent treatment technology so it can be used again and again. This is an ongoing pattern of continuous improvement, and many factories are in the process of serious industrial upgrading in this area.

In the area of chemicals, new methods are being introduced, the net result of which means that less chemicals are used in clothing production, and the chemicals that are used are carefully scrutinised to ensure they are not hazardous or harmful to humans. Getting to grips with this issue has taken years and has been helped enormously by the Zero Discharge of Hazardous Chemicals, which

has helped foster good practice across supply chains.

In case of Bangladesh, we can also consider the fact that the industry has undergone a huge safety overhaul. Garment factories in the likes of Bangladesh are cleaner, safer, more efficient and more sustainable than at any time in history—that's no exaggeration. Billions of dollars have been spent in a process of industrial and technological upgrading that continues in all garment production hubs in Asia as they battle to win and maintain the business of brands.

How ironic, then, that having reached this current state, there is talk of taking garment production "back home," as part of a pattern of near-shoring.

In actual fact, there is not a great deal of evidence to suggest that near-shoring is happening. Statistics suggest that some production has left China for the US but the picture is very mixed. If anything, production and output in the likes of Bangladesh is actually continuing to increase. Bangladesh has had a fantastic 12 months in terms of export revenues.

Why is this? A personal hunch is that near-shoring is a political slogan and not much else for the time being. Brands have been placing greater and greater demands on their Asian apparel suppliers to produce smarter, faster, and cleaner. In short, to produce more sustainably. This has not happened overnight, and it has been a major, hugely expensive learning process for all involved.

There is now a level of sustainability learning and expertise in Bangladesh's apparel supply chain which would take years to replicate elsewhere, even if there was a will to do so—which is far from evident.

Politicians might like to talk about near-shoring, but for brands, it is action not rhetoric that counts when it comes to purchasing sustainably. And on this front, for now at least, Bangladesh's RMG sector holds all the trump cards.

Mostafiz Uddin is the Managing Director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the Founder and CEO of Bangladesh Denim Expo and Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE). He can be reached at mostafiz@denimexpert.com.

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'Doing something' about social media?



ROHAN SAMARAJIVA

SINCE some recent terrorist incidents, concerns about the impact of social media have been reverberating throughout the world. Legislators and policy makers are under pressure to "do something," even without fully

understanding the problems and the viable solutions.

Understanding social media

The term "social media" is not the most illuminating. Facebook differs from Twitter and both are very different from TikTok. All these are platforms (that allow for users and producers to connect) and all depend on user-generated content: content generated by millions of users with no chokepoints conducive to regulation (otherwise known as editors, producers and media owners). But beyond that, the affordances of each are very different.

There were 2.4 billion active users on Facebook by 2019 Q2, but none of the millions of content producers can gain the attention of all 2.4 billion people. Attention is a finite, valuable resource and the design of the platform requires work to be done to gain attention. Some fail, while others reach audiences in the millions.

How does one attract attention? Humans are genetically programmed to pay attention to signs of danger and opportunities of procreation. So in general, those who seek to assemble large and engaged audiences tend to emphasise content that leverages violence and

titillation. Those who seek to maximise audiences for political purposes tend to purvey polarising content based on fear. Mainstream media do this too, but the new platforms do it better.

Selling aggregated attention to advertisers is how platform companies dealing in content make money. So their algorithms and designs are optimised for attention gaining and holding.

What terrorists do

Professor Yuval Noah Harari likens terrorists

to a fly that wishes to destroy a china shop. The fly cannot budge even a single cup. Instead, it gets inside the ear of a nearby bull and starts buzzing. The bull goes wild with fear and anger and destroys the china shop. What role is played by media in the buzzing?

After the coordinated bomb attacks in Sri Lanka on April 21 (the enraging of the bull), social media is seen as having played a role in the enraging of the bull which took the form of attacks against Muslim citizens on May 13 and the resulting harm to Sri Lanka's

multi-ethnic society (the damage to the china shop).

What can be done?

Would the events of May 13 have happened if not for social media? Mainstream media, though in decline, can still aggravate the rage of the bull and cause significant damage. When some Facebook groups are larger than the circulation of most newspapers, one cannot ignore the potential of social media to amplify violence-inciting messages. Many who want something done about social media neglect the old ways of transmitting hate.

So it is necessary to ensure that all laws criminalising incitement to violence are technology-neutral; and even more importantly, that cases against those violating such laws are expeditiously concluded and that punishments are well-publicised. Exemplary punishment is what will deter future hate speech, not the length of prison sentences in unenforced penal provisions.

The objective must be clear: is it to punish or deter miscreants or is it to prevent conflagration? If the latter, the solution must give priority to prompt take-down of incendiary content. That means steering clear of state action under law.

In all law-governed countries, penal actions are preceded by some form of legal and quasi-judicial proceeding wherein the state presents an indictment; the affected party is given an opportunity to defend him or herself; and an "unbiased" authority makes a decision. State action resulting in a take-down or other punishment will necessarily take a few weeks at least. By that time, the damage will have been done.

Thus, the best way to avoid violence resulting from terror attacks is cooperation with non-state parties who can take down

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offensive content promptly based on community standards that are part of the terms of service. This requires continuing dialogue between state authorities and platform companies, with the participation of civil society groups who can assist in shaping appropriate community standards that can be applied.

The Christchurch Call, an initiative led by the governments of France and New Zealand, which has been joined by countries such as India and Indonesia as well as by the major platform companies such as Facebook and Google, presents a law-governed framework for acting on social media that preserves core democratic values including the freedom of speech. All countries should consider aligning their actions with the Christchurch Call, rather than hurriedly "doing something" that could do more harm than good.

Professor Rohan Samarajiva is Chair of the ICT Agency, the apex body for ICT within the government of Sri Lanka, and founding Chair of LIRNEasia, a think tank active across emerging economies in South and South East Asia.



The impacts of social media on people have emerged as a major concern for nations and governments.

PHOTO: REUTERS

QUOTABLE Quote

TONI MORRISON
(1931–2019)
American novelist, essayist, editor, teacher, and professor emerita at Princeton University. She won the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for "Beloved".
Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Play group

5 British lockups

10 Group of top players

12 Portion out

13 Bookie's list

15 Numerical prefix

16 Farrow of films

17 Goose formation

18 Old salt

20 Cash drawer

21 URL separator

22 Methods

23 Espresso order

25 Niagara's source

28 Hog fats

31 Eye part

32 Drives

34 Id --

35 Low die roll

36 "Yup" opposite

37 Spot for laundry

40 Tribe symbol

41 Refinement

42 Unemotional

43 Top-rated

DOWN

1 "The Stranger" author

2 Makes amends

3 Continuing story

4 Light brown

5 Music's Lady --

6 The works

7 "Twelfth Night" heroine

8 Feeling friendless

9 Girds (oneself)

11 Champagne/orange juice drink

14 ABC news program

19 Valleys

20 Annoying fellow

24 Least wild

25 Votes in

26 Move on the schedule

27 All told

29 Poet Levertov

30 Inclines

33 Sugary

35 "Dear me!"

38 Toe count

39 Chemist's place

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

SLAM L E D A R E S T S I G O R C U T O U T M A R I T A L O D E E L E G A N T P I E R O P A L S C O R D S B O L D M A N T I S P Y R A M I D U S O O R E G A N O S O R E S T O R A L E N A M E L L I N E S N O R E D E E D

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

LOOK HOW HIGH I CAN THROW THIS CANDY AND THEN CATCH IT IN MY MOUTH.

LOOK HOW EASILY SARGE IS DISTRACTED WHILE I MAKE A GETAWAY!

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

HI, DAD HOW WAS WORK?

OKAY, I GUESS.

JUST OKAY? NO INTERESTING PROJECTS? NO SPECIAL SNACK? NO FUN GAMES AT RECESS?

I WANT TO GO BACK TO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL.