Doomsday Clock: It is now two minutes to midnight

QUAMRUL HAIDER

THE Doomsday Clock was created in 1947 by the Board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists at the University of Chicago. Original members of the Board were a group of scientists who worked under the auspices of the Manhattan Project, the secret scheme responsible for developing the first nuclear weapons.

The clock is not used to make any real doomsday predictions; rather it measures "worry"—how worried we should be about the state of the world. Hence, it is a metaphor used to alert our leaders and the public about how close the world is to a potentially civilisation-ending catastrophe. The closer the hands of the clock are to midnight, the closer we are to total annihilation, with "midnight" representing doomsday.

The timescales of the Doomsday Clock are completely different from that of a real clock. As a hypothetical example, if it would take 100 years for climate change to melt all the ice in Greenland, then "one minute" on the clock could perhaps represent 100 years.

Changing the clock is not as simple as adjusting its hands. In January of each year, members of the Board, together with a dozen or so physicists (some Nobel laureates), scientists from other disciplines, including climate scientists and policy experts, get together to analyse threats to humanity's survival and subsequently decide whether the clock will tick or not. Should it tick, then the direction and how far from midnight should the minute hand be moved is decided by the Board.

Since its inception, the clock has moved backwards and forwards 23 times—from 17 minutes to two minutes before midnight. It was initially set at seven minutes before midnight because back then, there was only one major threat to humanity: nuclear war. The clock was reset to two minutes before midnight in 1953, when the two superpowers, the USA and Soviet Union, tested hydrogen bombs within a few months of each other.

After the superpowers signed the Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1963, which put an end to nuclear weapons tests in the atmosphere, in space and underwater, the clock was moved back to 12 minutes before midnight. It was reset to 17 minutes before midnight in 1991 after the Cold War was officially over. This was the farthest the clock has ever been from midnight.

The halcyon period of 17 minutes to midnight did not last long, though. In 1998, testing of nuclear weapons by India and Pakistan, combined with increased military spending throughout the world, prompted the Board to put the clock back within ten minutes of midnight, at 23:51. Between 2002 and 2007, the clock see-sawed between 23:53 and 23:55, mainly because of America's withdrawal from the previously signed Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the uncertainty of Iran's nuclear ambitions.

In January 2012, President Barack Obama's plan to end nuclear proliferation and curb greenhouse gas emissions raised cautious optimism and the clock was moved back to six minutes before midnight. However, because of the failure to reduce global nuclear weapons and the nonchalant attitude of our leaders toward climate change, the clock was moved forward in 2015 to three minutes before midnight.

The updated time designation is visible underneath the Doomsday Clock in Washington, US, on January 25, 2018. PHOTO: REUTERS/LEAH MILLIS

Today, the clock is influenced by the "new abnormal," which is described by the Board as a moment in which "fact is becoming indistinguishable from fiction, undermining our very abilities to develop and apply solutions to the big problems of our time." The new abnormal also includes risks arising from climate change, as well as unpredictable behaviour of leaders like the US President Donald Trump, a blowhard who blusters when unsure what to say, and Kim Jong-un, the intriguing North Korean dictator.

After Trump's "Fire and Fury" threat to North Korea in 2017, the Board thought that we are indeed closer to the apocalypse now than at any other time in the history of our civilisation. Moreover, because of the rising nuclear threat posed by North Korea and the unsteady state of geopolitical affairs that have gripped the world, the clock was advanced to two minutes before midnight in January 2018. Another reason given in favour of moving the clock so close to doomsday is the "failure of Trump and other world leaders to deal with the looming threats of climate change."

As for climate change, the Board is taking a wait-and-see attitude. It is because they believe there is "admittedly" a fair amount of uncertainty about what is going to happen in the future and how soon. Nevertheless, the Board believes that civilisation would eventually be dreadfully affected by climate change, unless we make radical changes to our lifestyle and start phasing out the use of fossil fuels without further delay, thereby putting the world on a path to a stable climate. The clock's hand will probably be moved forward, albeit not by a minute, if Trump is re-elected and continues to show his troubling propensity to discount or outright reject the conclusions of experts on climate science.

Even if we are spared the nuclear holocaust and utter devastation by climate change, a rapidly growing human population that more than doubled in the last 50 years could be a factor in the movement of the clock. It is quite likely that once the population reaches a "critical mass," our resources—food, water and a whole lot more required for sustenance of life—will not be adequate enough to support life on Earth. As a result, famine and starvation will push the clock closer to midnight.

Finally, by keeping the Doomsday Clock at two minutes to midnight, the same as in 2018 and the closest it has ever been to doomsday, the Board of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists warns that it should not be taken as a sign of stability. Instead, it is a stark reminder for our leaders and citizens around the world that "the future of the world is now in extreme danger from multiple intersecting and potentially existential threats." The longer world leaders and citizens ignore this new abnormal reality, it is more likely that our civilisation will soon experience a catastrophe of historic proportions.

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Fake News: How to Fight It?

QADARUDDIN SHISHIR

FOR quite some time now, the term "fake news" has been the buzzword and everyone seems to be anxious about it. We often see high government officials speaking emphatically about how bad "gujob" (rumour) or fake news is for the society and how it should be eliminated for the sake of people and the country. Journalists, civil society members and rights advocates regularly express their concern about growing online misinformation and warn people and the government about its grave consequences in a society where minorities are frequently at the receiving end of violence ignited by fake news. And the common people themselves are no less worried about this evil. Social media is swamped with users expressing their disgust at those who spread fake news for their personal agenda.

So everyone seems to be on the same page and wants to fight fake news for the common good. Despite this perceived consensus, the menace of fake news is not declining, rather it is on the rise. Why?

After intensive research for two years trying to learn about fake news and misinformation and simultaneously fighting against them, I have tried to find some answers to the "why".

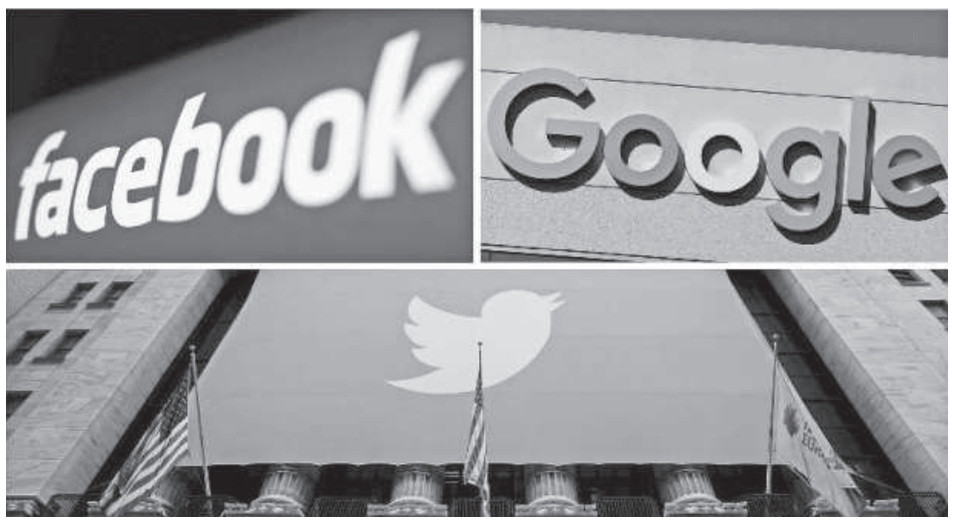
There are three forms of indifference that have helped in the spread and success of fake news.

Public indifference:
People in general tend to believe things that confirm their prejudices no matter how bizarre they are. This is where the problem begins. In the era of social media, which breaks the traditional notion of gatekeeping in the flow of information, one has to be much more cautious in relying on content found online. People need to be their own gatekeepers. They should control their predispositions and take time to verify a claim or information from random online sources before passing it on. But this is not happening in most cases.

An MIT research on people's behaviour on twitter last year concluded: "We have a very strong conclusion that the spread of falsity is outpacing the truth because human beings are more likely to retweet false than true news."

Working as a fact-checker for more than two and a half years, I found numerous cases where people with advanced academic backgrounds did not bother to take down their social media posts despite being notified, with evidence, that those were fake news stories. This indifference among the public to get rid of political, ideological, religious and other prejudices is playing a big part in keeping the fake news industry booming.

Fostering critical thinking is key to tackling this problem. However, in Bangladeshi culture and education system, critical thinking is something not welcome at all. Students are brought up and taught, at home and in classrooms, not to ask questions, and sometimes questioning unusual things and practices could be deemed offensive here.



Facebook, Google and Twitter logos are seen in this combination photo from Reuters files.

Indifference of the media:
The mainstream media is partly responsible for the current surge in misinformation. According to many studies, the media has been steadily losing its credibility due to its partisan role in crucial issues.

A recent Gallup survey said, "Americans remain largely mistrustful of the mass media as 41 percent currently have 'a great deal' or 'fair amount' of trust in newspapers, television and radio to report the news 'fully, accurately and fairly.'" In the case of Bangladesh, there is no data available to say anything about people's trust in media. But if one takes the increasing shrinking of media freedom into consideration, it can be said that the situation is even worse here.

Gradually losing trust in the mainstream media, people have been in search of alternatives, and social media emerged as an option for them. With confirmation bias among the masses proliferating, unfiltered social media and purposefully erected "online portals" filled the vacuum that was created by the erosion of trust in mainstream media.

Increasing self-censorship in the Bangladeshi media landscape is a sign that the media itself is apathetic about regaining its trust. This plays into the hands of the peddlers of fake news. Moreover, there is no visible effort in the mainstream media to fight online misinformation, rather top news outlets fall for fake news on a daily basis leaving the readers bamboozled, which is further contributing to eroding trust in media.

Indifference of government:
We often hear government officials asking people not to fall for "gujob" or rumours—in other words, "fake news"—and sometimes issuing warnings to those who play with people's ignorance and emotion.

There are lots of examples where the government appears to be a "fierce anti-fake news" actor. However, the reality says otherwise. In December 2018, Facebook and Twitter said they had "removed accounts and fake news pages linked to the Bangladesh government that had posted anti-opposition content," days ahead of the national election. (Reuters)

Fact-checkers in the last two years debunked many fake news stories spread online by people linked to the government, and even sometimes ministers peddled misinformation targeting the opposition (the opposition groups too targeted the government and the ruling party). To put it precisely, the people in power are vocal against some sort of fake news, but they are evidently reluctant to fight the monster as a whole.

Such unresponsiveness from these three stakeholders— the general public, the media and the government—cannot help but embolden the epidemic of falsity in the digital sphere.

Digital Literacy Matters
To combat the mis- and dis-information problem, some countries are trying to formulate new laws and some have already done so. But such laws can be used to aggravate the current fragile free speech situation in developing democracies. The best weapon is education. Media literacy and digital literacy are a must to combat fake news. Finland has recently topped a list of European countries deemed to be the most resilient against disinformation thanks to its increasing digital literacy initiatives. They are teaching digital literacy in classrooms. Quite recently, government schools in India's Kerala state started a similar campaign. Bangladesh can and should follow such strategies, too.

Here are some preliminary tips for the readers about detecting fake news in online platforms:

Check the URL: Before clicking on a link in your newsfeed, check the URL first. It can be a "mimic" of a renowned news organisation just replacing one or two "characters", which you may not spot at first sight. And if the name of the website is not familiar to you, google the name first to know what it is actually.

Know the publisher: After reading an article with "extraordinary" claims or information on a not "so-well-known" website, do not forget to verify what it is about. Is it a satirical publication? Or a blog? Or ideological propaganda website? Check the "About Us" section and take help from Google to know more about the publisher. "Who.is" can help you determine the owner of the domain.

Check the date: It's a common mistake while reading online articles. Sometimes old stories resurface and can be taken out of context that amounts to misinformation.

Don't be excited: After seeing a social media post containing extraordinary information that stunned you, control your emotion before clicking on the Share button. Simply google the keywords or names mentioned in the story to find "news" in a reliable news outlet.

Notice the Ads: If you notice any social media post, no matter what stunning information or photo it contains, asking people to "spread it", be careful. Such promotional content often contains misinformation designed to attract people to their platforms.

Beware of excessive adjectives: While reading news stories or social media posts, notice the use of adjectives. Professional news reporting does not contain excessive adjectives (negative or positive) to describe any characters; fake news and propaganda stories do.

Spelling is helpful: Grammatical and spelling mistakes in online articles are also indicators of non-professional work that cannot to be relied on.

Reverse Image Search: If a photo or video clip makes you confused about the claims it associated with, just use Google Reverse Image Search to come to a conclusion. You should enable the add-ons in your android handset or computer and follow through with the direction.

Fake news is now a global problem. But in societies like ours, this evil can do much more damage than anywhere else just because people here are less critical and more prone to believe any kind of campaign or propaganda. At a time when the reader him/herself has to play the role of gatekeeping in the ocean of unverified information about what to believe and what not to, fostering critical thinking is a must. The government has many things to do in this regard. And the people should equip themselves with adequate media literacy and digital education to save themselves from falling prey to fake news.

Qadaruddin Shishir is a Dhaka-based journalist and co-founder of BD FactCheck.

QUOTABLE Quote

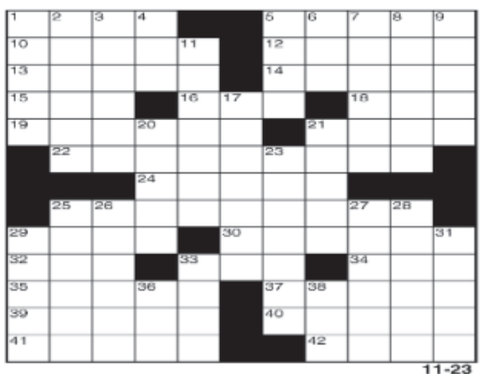
ZIG ZIGLAR
(1926-2012)
American author and motivational speaker

People often say that motivation doesn't last. Well, neither does bathing - that's why we recommend it daily.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Docking spot
5 Short
10 Bitter
12 Washer cycle
13 Sizable
14 Let up
15 Pitching stat
16 Amusement
18 "Far out, dude!"
19 Like an atrium
21 Courage
22 Draw
24 Prison-related
25 Yearbook signer
29 Expert
30 "Yeah, right!"
32 Bowler, e.g.
33 Start for pitch or mo
34 Peace, to Caesar
35 Elroy's dog
37 Not those
39 Museum piece
40 More robust
41 Anomaly
42 Largest amount

DOWN
1 Shows fright
2 Son of Daedalus
3 Straying
4 Outfit
5 Fiber source
6 Umbrella part
7 Needing change
8 Will topic
9 Supplies
11 Taints
17 Spoon or spatula
20 Bolivian city
21 Fancy dos
23 Bigger than big
25 Beer after a shot
26 Miniature
27 Elvis's birth-place
28 Makes blank
29 Docking spot
31 Put to use
33 Foot holder
36 Narrow inlet
38 Deli choice



YESTERDAY'S **ANSWERS**

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S	A	L	O	N		S	A	L	T	S

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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott