



SHOULD YOU GET
THE SHOT?

PG 3

PLACES WHERE YOUR
OPINIONS DON'T MATTER

PG 4



UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL LABELS



EDITORIAL

I've always been told things stop being scary once you face them. I don't believe that's true. There are things that never get not scary enough. Covid is one of those things.

We keep hoping for things to change, that miraculously this will be the last lockdown and the pandemic will be over. We'll go back to days of not wearing masks and things will be as they were before March 2020, but we're in denial and we need to snap out of it. This isn't the time to be extremely optimistic, nor is it the time to dabble in the labels and controversies that seem to have plagued our minds.

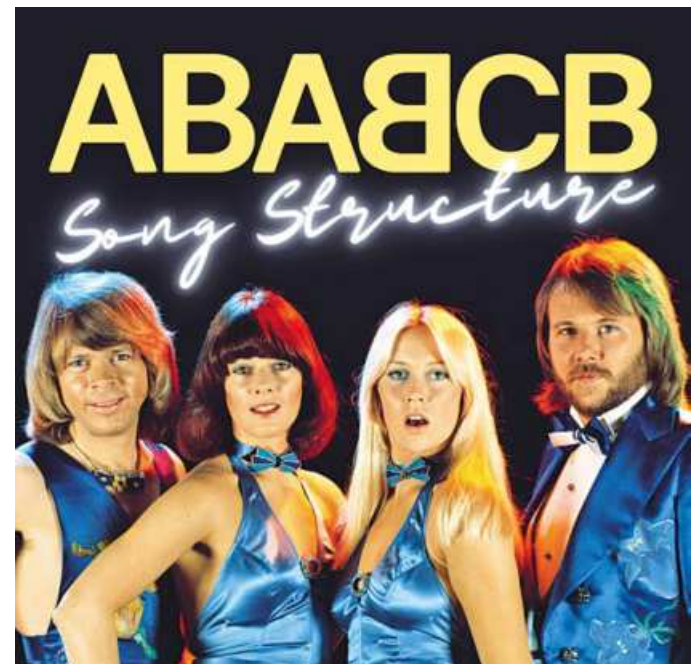
I'm not a scientist, nor am I studying to become one, but from general observation and watered down explanations of actual scientific papers from my sister who is, in fact, a scientist, I can tell Covid-19 is stubborn and here to stay. It won't magically disappear until we play our parts. Wear masks, stay inside and if you qualify to register for the vaccine, GET VACCINATED.

- Syeda Afrin Tarannum, Sub-Editor, SHOUT



PLAYWATCH

MUSIC



The Usual and Rare Structures of Songs

SABIH SAFWAT

The dynamics in contemporary music often resemble the ebb and flow of ocean tides. In songs, there are defined sections of varying levels of energy.

There are sections where energy is minimal while tension builds up – the lull in the sea – and where the pent-up tension gets released, like torrents during high tide.

In a simple combination, the build-up is titled a “verse” and the release section a “chorus”. Songs are structured in the form ABABCB where A represents a verse, B denotes a chorus, and C is a bridge connecting the sections. It creates tension for the chorus to resolve. At the very ends, an intro and an outro.

This structure is very common in rock, pop, electronica, folk and metal music. Some songs sound slightly different, but in all probability, that's because of one or two instrumental sections inserted here and there within the ABABCB structure, or variations like ABCAB or ACBACB.

I went through albums from local artists to find how many Bangla songs have been made with *unconventional* structures. While the number wasn't exactly impressive, I did come across a few gems.

“Olosh Shomoyer Pare” by Artcell uses six unique sections, with only two significant lines being repeated throughout the song. The song begins with very low energy, releasing some at the midpoint of the song. From there it falls back down, cascading into an epic peak at the end.

“Nirbashon” by Warfaze pieces together sections with subtle changes in dynamics, putting off the release till the very end of the song. There's no chorus; the tension builds until the finale when

Sunjoy's insane high notes stab you right in the heart.

“Lal Neel Golpo” by Shironamhin doesn't have any defined verse or chorus either. All the sections are high energy with similar levels of impact, but the song keeps itself interesting by varying the pace of the sections throughout the song. The catchy instrumental hook helps, too, of course.

“Tui Ki Janish Na” by Arnob is another track that fiddles with pacing in interesting ways. The song starts with a dark, almost ominous mood. Over the next three sections, the pace keeps getting faster till peaking at around the midpoint of the song, where the mood changes to a lighter one. Then, the song keeps losing momentum, ending at the same place it started.

“Shobuj Bagan” by Karnival holds your attention without even needing to change dynamics or mood. The whole song is pretty much a single section, the vocals droning on at the same intensity throughout. The slight variations in the piano accompaniment and clever placement of additional vocal layers throughout the song create motion, a technique rarely deployed by our local artists.

Note these are just a few picks to represent some types of variations. I've also skipped progressive tracks as, well, they're supposed to have complex structures.

Reference

Understanding Basic Music Theory by Catherine Schmidt-Jones. Chapter 5: Harmony and Form.

Sabih Safwat is always up for trying new music. Send songs to listen to at sabihsafwat@gmail.com





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 with feedback, comments, and reader submissions.



For Those Who Feel They're Falling Behind

ADHORA KABIR

The early twenties are very complicated years. On one hand, you are more energetic than ever, ready to chase your dreams and brimming with inspiration. On the other, it is very easy to get lost among a sea of achievers.

For some people, it seems like every other day they are congratulating a friend for a new milestone, be it personal or professional. And for those feeling a little left behind, here are some helpful words.

It seems like you were attending classes with your friends just yesterday, and your biggest worry was not messing up the board exams. Suddenly, you find yourself attending their weddings, baby showers, anniversary parties and so on. Then come the incessant questions from your relatives.

"When is the good news coming?"

"When are you settling down?"

"Aren't you getting a little too old to be lying around all day?"

Sometimes, you do not even realise if you actually want to settle down or being peer pressured into thinking you want these things. If you are unsure, you might want to concentrate on what actually makes you happy rather than conforming to society's expectations.

It is completely fine to live life on your own terms. You can be happy for your friends getting married or reaching milestones, without you having to worry about living the ideal life.

Watching your friends succeed in different arenas professionally, you might have conflicting emotions. You can be extremely proud of their success and achievements while feeling a certain sense of insecurity. You may feel as though you are not good enough or not working as hard as the others.

It gets tiring to congratulate people for their victories because you seem to wonder, *"When is my turn?"*

You cannot rush through the process. Everyone has a different definition of success. Just because you do not feel satisfied with yourself does not make you a failure. It just means you have to pat yourself on the back for pushing through a very difficult phase of your life and understand that for some people, success takes a little longer.

This does not mean the taste of victory is any less sweet. With hard work, a sound state of mind and a good support system, you can do anything you set your mind to. A competitive environment can take down even the most resilient person. So, the best thing would be to find inner peace and work hard, at your own pace.

There is a lot of pressure on a young adult, and it does not help when people point this out and urge you to head towards a direction in your life that you are not even sure you are ready for.

To the people who feel like they are falling behind, stay focused on your own path, and you will be alright.

Adhora Kabir likes to speak her mind but only when her identity is undisclosed.

SHOULD YOU GET THE SHOT?

SUBAH NUZHAT HUSSAIN

Vaccines have abolished debilitating illnesses like polio and smallpox. According to the WHO, global vaccinations prevent around 4 to 5 million deaths per year. An additional 1.5 million deaths can be avoided if global vaccinations improve in the future.

Despite knowing how important vaccination campaigns are, people tend to put off getting vaccinated.

No one has fond memories of getting jabbed in the arm with a long, thin needle. Pain experienced after getting an injection is nothing compared to the breathlessness due to Covid-19 infection. It definitely beats getting hospitalised and it is the least you can do to protect yourself and your family.

The biggest concern related to the vaccines available is the efficacy rate. The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine had a 95 percent efficacy rate against the first strain of Covid-19 while the Oxford/AstraZeneca one had a 79 percent efficacy rate.

Does that mean that Pfizer is better than AstraZeneca?

Efficacy rates depend on the timing and location of the clinical trial. Pfizer and Moderna trials took place mostly in the US before the appearance of more contagious strains. Whereas other vaccines were tested in Asia and Africa when infection rates started climbing higher. It is not sensible to compare different vaccines since their trials took place under different circumstances.

An efficacy rate of 95 percent does not mean that five in a hundred people will get sick after vaccination. Instead, it means that compared to an unvaccinated person, someone who is vaccinated is very, very less likely to become infected when they

are exposed to the contagion.

Vaccines are not invincible. It is possible to get infected even if you are vaccinated. However, most vaccines are 100 percent effective against moderate to severe infections. Vaccination significantly raises the odds of surviving Covid-19 and reduces the chances of getting hospitalised.

Another reason why people are still afraid is the side effects associated with vaccines. One should not be alarmed by mild fevers and aches after getting the shot. Your body is training its army of lymphocytes in preparation for a very likely encounter with the virus.

Less common side effects include anaphylaxis, which is treated with an injection of epinephrine. Even rarer side effects include rare blood clots associated with AstraZeneca's vaccine and myocarditis associated with mRNA vaccines. However, these side-effects are so rare that only a handful of cases are reported in a million doses administered.

As Covid-related mortalities climb higher each day, it is important now more than ever to get vaccinated. Get your papers in order. Register for a vaccine if you are eligible. Encourage people to get vaccinated, and help them through the registration process. The faster we contain the virus, the sooner everything returns to normal.

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Subah is an average science nerd. Contact her on Twitter @hussain_subah



PHOTO: NAYEM SHAAN

Have Entrepreneurs in the Family? *Treat Them Well.*

BUSHRA ZAMAN

As more and more young people start their own businesses, they are often subject to unfortunate and unwarranted behaviour from their family members in the guise of “support.”

Here’s how you can do better.

ASKING FOR DISCOUNTS

Sometimes, ordering from an acquaintance who just opened a business does them a favour. If your intention is to appreciate and explain how efficient they are at serving clientele, then you would be helpful.

However, if your intention is to order a product to then gloat about how you are saving their new business from going under, and then asking for a discount using family ties, then it may be best for you to not order at all.

Ordering products and services and asking them to be free of charge can really make things difficult for the businessperson, since they may feel inclined to serve you on account of you being a family member, even if it may cost them their initial profits.

CANCELLING ORDERS

Cancelling orders is always problematic, especially if it’s done last minute. Imagine spending hours baking a cake and after finishing, your relative calls and says they no longer want it. The thing is, it is already



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

more than nerve wracking when serving a relative as a customer.

Even the slightest “inconsiderate behaviour” on your part may just be the hot topic at any future *dawaat*. When you know a customer on a regular basis and they have

a legitimate reason for cancelling, it may be understandable. However, doing so over and over can cause the businessperson in question to suffer from losses.

This especially applies when another customer wanted the same thing you or-

dered, but the product was kept for you on a first-come-first-serve basis.

RESCHEDULING DELIVERIES

When delivering a product, whether by personnel from the business in question or by separate delivery companies, deliveries are often done area-wise for convenience. Rescheduling deliveries can prove to be a hassle, especially if customers do so as an excuse to not take the product.

This gets even worse if you know a relative is at home, but the delivery person is called to inform you saying that they are not. Why make things unnecessarily awkward? It is always best to not order if you are not sure whether you can pay for the product, or to be direct about delivery dates if you’re worried about any changes to your plans of being at home.

Opening a new business can be daunting as is, and it is true that support from your loved ones can help make things better, even during the most confusing and frustrating times of your career as a businessperson. But such support should only be offered with the best intentions, in a way any other regular, well-mannered customer would have.

Bushra Zaman likes books, art, and only being contacted by email. Contact her at bushra-zaman31@yahoo.com

Places Where Your Opinions Don’t Matter

TANZIM NOOR TANMOY

An opinion can be considered to be the easiest form of expression – it doesn’t have to be true, nor does it have to fulfil any purpose, except being a perspective on a matter.

That’s why everyone seems to always have one, about everything. This is not always helpful. Good or bad, understanding the nuances of forming and expressing an opinion can seem complicated.

Here is where we can start.

YOUR SINCERE COMMENTS ON A FEMALE CELEBRITY’S SELFIE

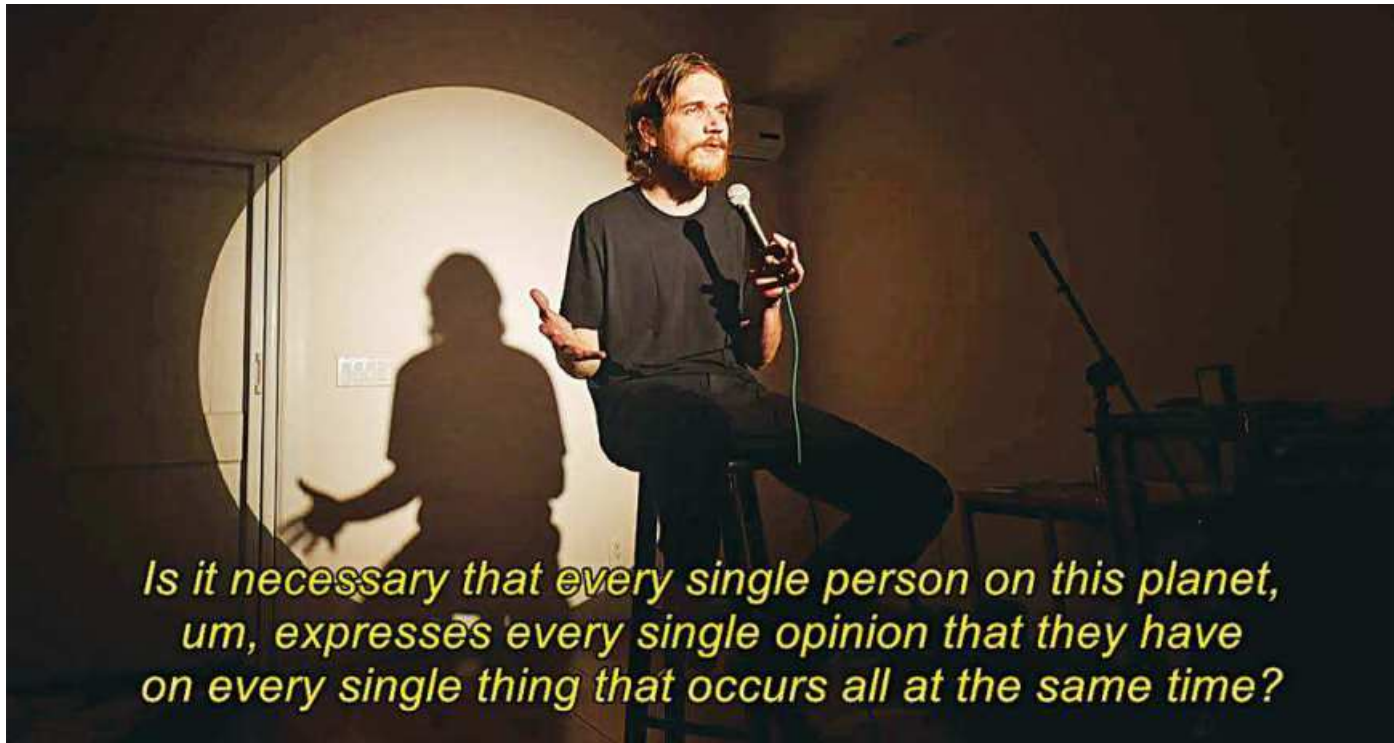
Although it might seem like you are the *only* person this entire planet who cares enough to advise a female celebrity on what she should and should not post, trust me, she already has a support system of people around her to help.

So, the next time you are brimming with an opinion about how her photo disrupts the cultural values you are the sole protector of, take a step back and re-evaluate. Frankly, the online space these celebrities occupy is already pretty intrusive and toxic, so just cut them some slack on a selfie.

SCEPTIC REMARKS IN AN EXPOSÉ POST

A little scepticism is good, but if you’ve taken it upon yourself to pour all your life’s scepticism in a post about someone’s alleged abusers or harassers, then I hate to break it to you, that’s a solid “don’t”.

Incidents of harassment, abuse, gaslighting, cheating and such can take weeks, months, even years for a victim to come to terms with and talk about, let alone ask accountability for. Refrain from taking away what, in most cases, is the only form of capital these victims can afford and get



Is it necessary that every single person on this planet, um, expressēs every single opinion that they have on every single thing that occurs all at the same time?

some accountability through.

WHATABOUTISM IN SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES

When any issue regarding some sort of injustice or oppression arises, counter questions or accusations to dilute the incident are not uncommon.

This is extremely harmful towards the victim party, whoever they may be, since not only does this not add any new narrative to help them, but also it directly leads to victim silencing. Let’s just all

agree to never do this.

THE ONLY CONSTANT GREEN LIGHT

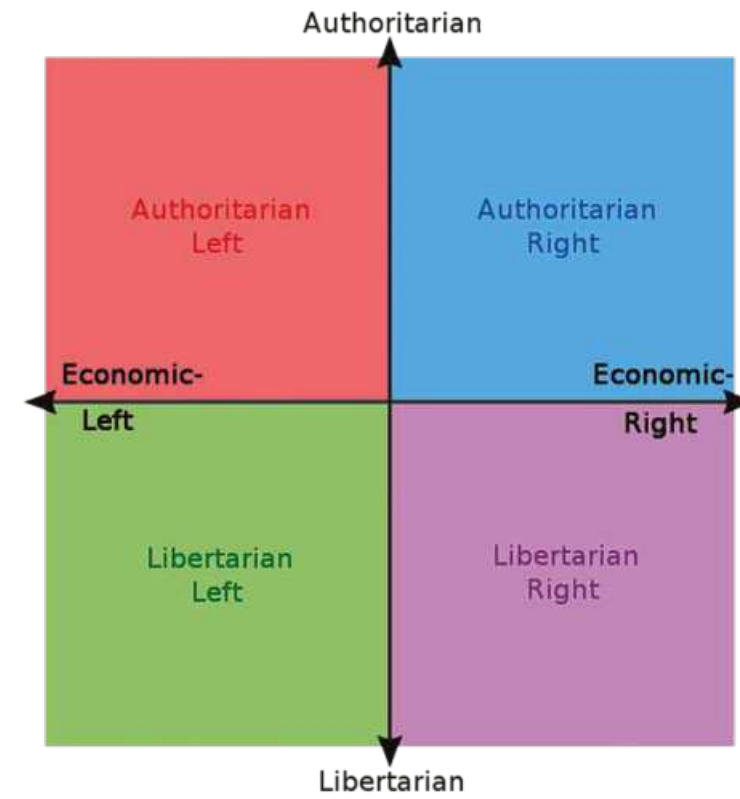
The only good idea for an opinion is when you have something nice to say or when it’s constructive criticism that was specifically asked for.

Being nice to someone doesn’t require much effort. On the other hand, a simple compliment can make a person’s day. That’s why this is the only automatic “do” in the list. Criticise someone if they specifically asked for it and it’s constructive, that’s

the only way to go about criticism.

Even this article is me expressing my opinion, so maybe take this with a grain of salt. Using empathy and filtering your biases will always lead to better decisions of when to engage and when to stay put, and that should be the takeaway from this.

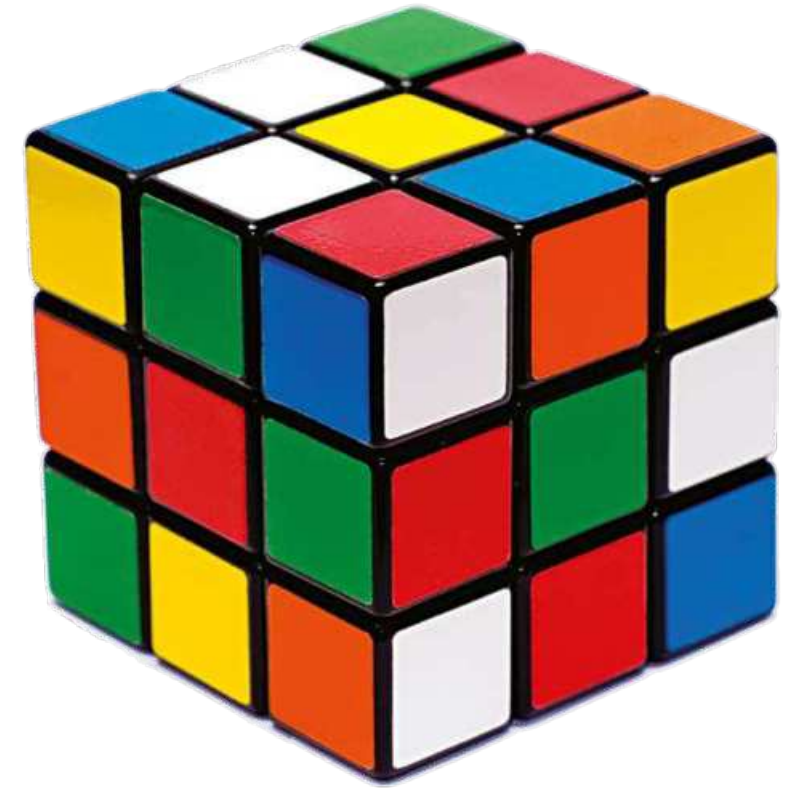
Tanzim pretends to like anime and have a personality outside of pop-culture references, educate him at www.facebook.com/tanzim



What it looks like...

Understanding Political Labels

What it feels like...



ALIZA RAHMAN & FATIMA JAHAN ENA

Political labels, much like the concept of politics as a whole, may seem like faraway titles that are out of our immediate reach. As a result, we may not give much thought to the nuances of political labelling that can exist within our own spheres.

These labels exist to bring unification and solidarity. Coalescing under specific titles or labels allows people to work together towards a common goal or have a shared identity. However, the shortcomings of the labels may be ignored, which could potentially become barriers to our goals.

WHAT LABELS MISS

A commonality in the political discourse in many countries is to conflate the left and the liberals by those who might be deemed to be on the right. This example is one that is particularly useful in explaining one of the biggest issues of labels and how labels are often used by groups or influential individuals to mark people for their base to not listen to, because those who follow even a handful of influencers, academics, or personal acquaintances identifying as leftists may see the scathing critique of neoliberalism and other systems and ideas that liberals push and ignore and vice versa.

What might eventually become obvious to anyone who keeps up with political news for a time is that labels can be used to obscure, mislead, and distract. Not only do we begin to form preconceived notions about people based on the labels they use for themselves, we also assume certain behaviours automatically indicate a person has certain political beliefs.

The umbrella effect of a label can often exclude the chance to interact with people who believe in other ideologies. Political discourse is regularly nipped at the bud when the mention of labels comes into play. This is an unfortunately common sight in popular social media platforms with Facebook being a prominent example. A user may want to begin a civilised discourse about political issues, only to be met with ridicule by

people from the opposing mindset.

This results in the formation of political echo-chambers. Regardless of political identity, these echo-chambers filled with like-minded individuals become unavoidable once labels are adopted. While it may be fulfilling to engage in discussion with people who have similar mindsets, beliefs, ideologies, etc., it can be detrimental as the sharing of new opinions and perspectives are greatly curbed.

In the daunting face of becoming politically educated, people often turn to more accessible options. More recently, a trend on the internet has been that of a *political compass* quiz. As is often the case, there are several aspects to it that warrants a closer and more critical look.

THE QUIZ

The quiz does not have the options of “I don’t know” or “Neither”, thus pushing people to side with a position they may not be aware of or haven’t thought of clearly. Not only can this lead to a skewing in results, but this can also show that the intent behind the quiz is more to entertain than educate.

Further lacking include the complete absence of context in the questions which ignores the unique situations of each country and the highly reductive nature of the questions. This forces generalisations to be made on whole populations (“People are ultimately divided more by class than by nationality”) that requires knowledge of available data and ability to determine to a reasonable enough extent whether said data one uses to make a judgment is reliable or not.

The framing of certain questions often bypasses many layers and angles for the average person. For example, one question states, “Those who are able to work, and refuse the opportunity, should not expect society’s support.”

From underemployment to precarious jobs that pay nowhere near a decent amount for labour are just a few of the caveats ignored. Questions like these form opinions that can be dehumanising to others in unfortunate positions who might be just as unaware about the

systems exploiting them.

WHAT ARE THE SOURCES OF INFORMATION?

One of the most ironic questions in the quiz happens to state, “There is now a worrying fusion of information and entertainment”.

Whether one takes this to mean that this question by itself shows that the makers of the quiz are responsible or that it is a tongue-in-cheek reference to itself, one thing that most might agree on is that this quiz is the very example of the phenomenon the question is describing.

YouTube has become filled with political commentary with people both passionate and dispassionate about politics engaging in discussions about matters that are likely to have a massive impact on the lives of citizens. However, much like in the rest of the internet, especially Facebook, the conversations invariably devolve into arguments and insensible chatter. One might be tempted to turn to traditional media.

However, distrust in the traditional has been rising for a while. A *Columbia Journalism Review* report titled “The Fall, Rise, and Fall of Media Trust” asks, “Has a healthy scepticism become a civically disabling cynicism?” J.J. McCullough, a columnist at *The Washington Post*, explains in his YouTube channel that the political pundits who go on talk shows and become popular are often those who gain prominence through confidence and consistency, even if their knowledge isn’t proportional. Both of these sources also mention the dangers of the 24-hour news cycle that requires the constant churning of content to vie for people’s attention.

Schools, as nearly everyone has been saying for decades, are often outdated and unsurprisingly are likely to steer clear of educating students on matters of politics. As one half of this team can confirm from personal experience, knowledge regarding politics from educational institutions can be scant to the point where only in an introductory political science course in university did we learn about terms as basic as “unicameralism” and “bicameralism” and that our country

adheres to the former system.

The average young person nowadays is introduced to political ideologies through social media. This is in contrast to the “olden days” when political literacy had to be learned either through discourse or through academia.

As evident in the past decade or so, memes play an alarmingly important role in this context. A quick search of the word “communist” on Facebook yields dozens of results for pages titled with some iteration of certain political labels. The content that they share follows suit, ranging from the generic “if we share something it falls under communism” meme to the somewhat less frequent calls for guillotines.

The increasingly common occurrence of these posts that barely scratch the surface of the ideology have become widely accepted. As a result, the population that is exposed to them adopt these labels and ideologies as their own.

On one hand, this may be considered as a positive as they learn more about political theory, but it can be said that the negative aspects far outweigh the positives. For one, the bite-sized political content doesn’t offer much in terms of knowledge. Consequently, that responsibility of becoming educated on the “right” track falls on the shoulders of the generally young and susceptible audience.

IN CONCLUSION

The nature of the internet not only enables but rather encourages this sort of behaviour. Expectations of instantaneous responses, greater engagement and sharing of outrageous behaviour, and subsequent dopamine hits from the increased attention no matter how negatively incentivize thoughtless behaviour in individuals who may then double down when confronted with criticism. The issue becomes murkier and more serious with political terms where dictionary definitions and actions of political actors often contradict. A look at campaign slogans of various politicians will make you aware of buzzwords such as “hope”, “change”, and “revolution” but specifics might be largely absent thus rendering the promises empty.

How Many Copies of the Same Book Do You Need?

The sneaky connection between publishing industries and your growing bibliomania

ADHORA AHMED & RASHA JAMEEL

"Take a look at the spellbinding new edition of This Popular Book featuring never-before-seen interviews of the author and brand new illustrations from well-known artist, X. Coming to bookstores near you in early 2022. Keep an eye out on our Instagram!"

...and you're sold. It doesn't matter if you've read this book several times before because you already happen to own three exclusive editions of it.

It's perfectly fine to ignore the fact that this is an unnecessarily expensive luxury you probably can't afford in the time being. It's all okay because this exclusive new edition you've just gotten wind of is trending all across social media and you can't be the only one who doesn't partake.

This isn't the first time this has happened to you, is it?

The term "bibliomania" was first coined by physician John Ferrier, in 1809. Generally, bibliomania is regarded as a rather trivial hardship which tends to befall readers who are a little too passionate about their love of books and resort to obsessively hoarding books as a result.

It appears as though in the present day, publishing houses are seemingly exploiting that very obsession in readers so as to reap increased amounts of profits through the release of reprinted books alone.

In the 80s and 90s, publishing houses operated in a seemingly closed-off and old-fashioned manner, working only with well-established and successful authors who'd approach them with completed manuscripts of their work.

Advertising tactics during that period weren't the most creative, with the publishing houses relying largely on popular community book clubs and most-frequented bookstores to

ensure greater sales of physical copies of books.

As the 21st century dawned upon us, authors such as David Baldacci, J. K. Rowling, Zadie Smith, Dan Brown, Stephenie Meyer, and Marjane Satrapi rose to international prominence owing to the widespread successes of their works in fiction, all of which eventually attained cult status in the later years. Soon enough, the publishing houses came to see the potential that the cult status of the aforementioned authors' works in fiction had to offer.

Enter *Hollywood*.

For a globally-bestselling book series such as *Harry Potter*, it was expected that the series' massive fanbase would ensure the success of screen adaptations. Reality met the expectations as the film adaptations of Rowling's books emerged as box-office hits, paving the way for a franchise associated with the literary and cinematic world of *Harry Potter*.

Banking on the films' growing popularity, it expanded into the *Wizarding World* as we know it today, a commercially-viable franchise in its own right. Aside from the movies, the *Wizarding World* franchise continues to churn out massive profits thanks to new editions of the original source material, each offering something new, whether it be illustrations or Hogwarts house-themed covers.

Publishers don't limit their lucrative marketing strategies to only promote "pop lit" books like *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, or even Dan Brown's *Robert Langdon* series. They are using similar tactics to lure readers into hoarding classic works of literature they might already have studied in English class.

Penguin Books, who started out printing cheap paperbacks of classics to make them accessible to the masses, now sells attractive editions like the *Clothbound Classics* in tandem with

their iconic black-spine paperbacks. Moreover, there are publishers who bring out editions with gilt or deckled edge pages, or leather-bound tomes.

These additional features of reprints and the umpteenth editions with the long-dead author's handwritten notes are merely for aesthetic value, an aspect heavily promoted online by book influencers, which is good for the publishers but bad for your wallet. How many copies of *Pride and Prejudice* do you need anyway?

The eagerness on the publishers' part to find innovative ways to keep readers buying books could be a reaction to the changing of reading habits.

In the early 2010s, there were fears that the publishing industry was dying due to the advent and growing popularity of e-books. A decade later, physical books are still going strong, thriving even. However, the way we read books *has* changed since readers can choose to buy a book in either its print, e-book, or audio format. In addition, a book now has to vie for our attention through extensive social media-based marketing campaigns, when it would have to compete only with other similar books back in the day. Then again, there are platforms such as "bookstagram" and Goodreads to keep the love of reading alive.

Traditional publishing houses also have to deal with the rise of self-publishing authors, because there are many online platforms available that streamline the trajectory of the publication process. Case in point: bestselling Wattpad authors Anna Todd and Beth Reekles, both of whose works in fiction, the *After* series and *The Kissing Booth* duology, have gone on to become cult classics in literature and on screen.

If you, a publishing house, don't have hopeful writers (or their agents) come to you with their manuscripts

now that they can publish on their own, doesn't that spell trouble for your business? Hence, the fancy covers, the film adaptations, and the merch.

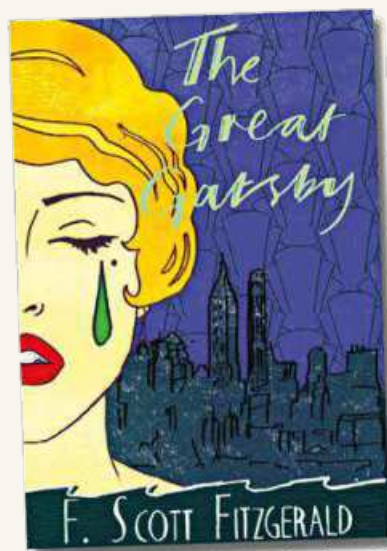
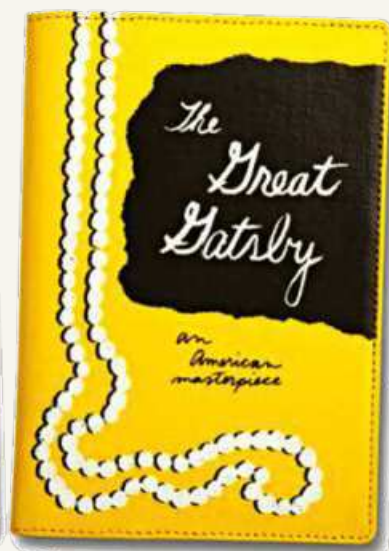
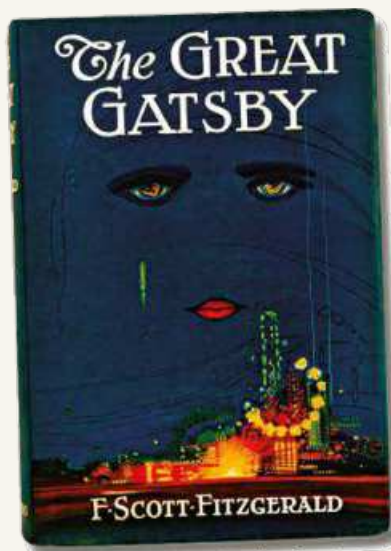
Then comes the pandemic. The local industry has been particularly hit as evident in the poor sales and turnout at this year's Boi Mela. Yet, the lockdowns have turned readers towards books for solace during these difficult times. Since we can't go to bookstores, online shopping has become the default purchase method. In Bangladesh, readers are well-acquainted with the various book distributor pages on social media, while international readers rely on publishers' websites or online shopping platforms like Amazon.

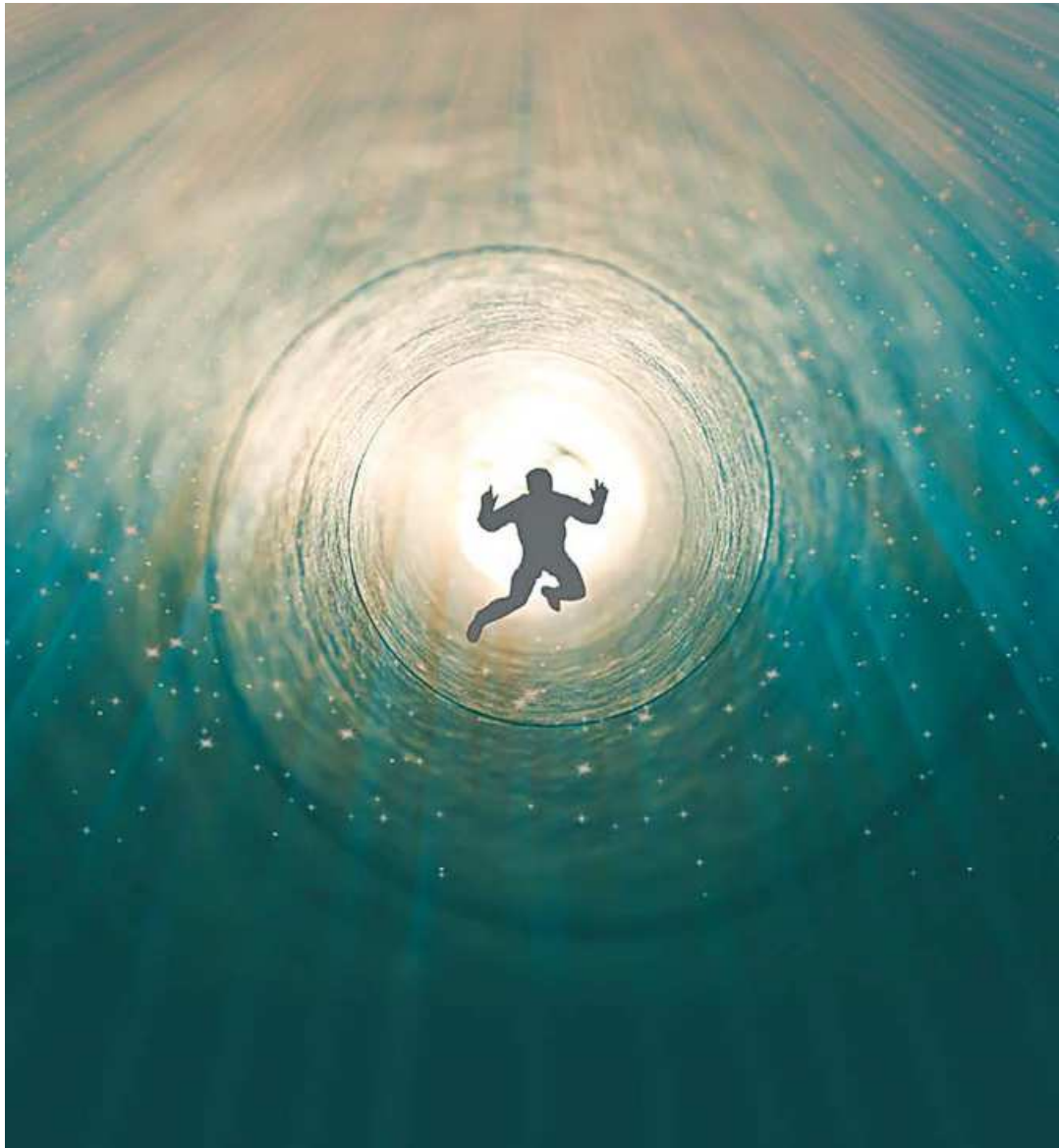
Hence, the publishers have to step up their online game by optimising their websites to increase site traffic. To stay afloat, publishing sites have now opted to commodify literature even further with the introduction of limited-edition merchandise with their bestselling reprints. Forget *Harry Potter* mugs, you can now also buy t-shirts with Shakespearean quotes modified as puns.

The concern here is whether in the publishers' efforts to retain glory, they're inadvertently causing significant amounts of damage through their manipulation of customers' demands, by encouraging an unhealthy habit of hoarding expensive reprints of books.

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MY ETERNAL SLEEP

MEHRAB RAHMAN MRITTIK

I got drowned; drowned, in the serene ocean waves of my eternal sleep.
The water, so dark and so deep;
Bearing the engraved marks of my forever sleep.

So many deaths, in just one life;
Drowned I was, in the large tides of time.
Dust to earth; again, earth to dust.
Who cares about the stained marks, even if one day, they turn to rust?

Don't let the stone break, don't let the waterfalls fall.
We all are just a visitor of time, with a gift to breathe so long.

I died and died, before I finally died forever;
Underneath the garden full of flickering stars; above the sky full of sweet white flowers.

I was just a lost traveler who forgot all his ways.
I breathed my last breath; and suddenly all of you fell in love with me that day!

I got buried, buried in the everlasting earth which I can never escape from.
Tear drops kept following me like a shadow, from the womb to the tomb.
Alone I came, alone I was to return.
Forgive me for all those promises that I left undone.

Garden over now; garden underneath then.
I might not return now, but I may return again.

The writer is a first year student of Finance at the University of Dhaka.

The Greatest Showman on Earth

HASIB UR RASHID IFTI

Around 15 minutes before midnight, Mr. Altaf went to his room after a tiring day of pretence. His daughter, her husband and their two kids decided to stay over. His son, though, felt he had done his part and caught the next flight back. It didn't quite hurt Mr. Altaf; he was his father's blood after all.

Mr. Altaf took off his white Panjabi and stared at the mirror for a while, at his costume. He played his part perfectly. Wrinkles all over his face, white hair on his chest looked like layers of green on the slanted slopes of Dighinala. His belly was enormous, almost hideous and his breasts saggy. He stared at his hairy hands and his bald head, his weary skin looked like flesh dripping off bones. It didn't bother him though; he could take it off anytime he wanted.

He stared at the grimy walls; 24 years of sighs, 24 years of anguish. He knew the scent by heart, hated it even more. Jobaida had painted the entire room sea-green, her favourite colour. He hated the shade but kept it to himself. He had been a good son, a good husband and a decent father. When his dying old man begged him to take care of the family, he obliged. He obliged when his ageing mother said she wanted to watch her grandchildren play before she died. And he obliged when his newlywed wife came closer than ever that cold winter night.

He did all the things fathers are supposed to do – played with his children, made sure they got good marks in their exams and married them off to reputed households. He kept quiet when the fanatics rose, when democracy fell and when the voices died. He took his fair share of bribes like others. He even took his family on vacation once in a while, stared at the vast ocean from the top of the mountain. And he waited.

He retired with a healthy pension and bought a new house. When his wife got older and more infuriating than ever, when her morbid soul aged faster than her skin, when everything that came out of that betel-leaf filled mouth were curses and profanity – he waited. All those sleepless nights when she'd cry and blame him for ruining her life and driving their son away, Mr. Altaf kept quiet. And he kept quiet when she died last week.

And now in his old room, with a decaying peel covering his rusty bones, he opened his trousers and stared at his naked self. Each muscle, tired of its own weight. Mr. Altaf pinched himself on the back of his neck, hard enough to make himself bleed.

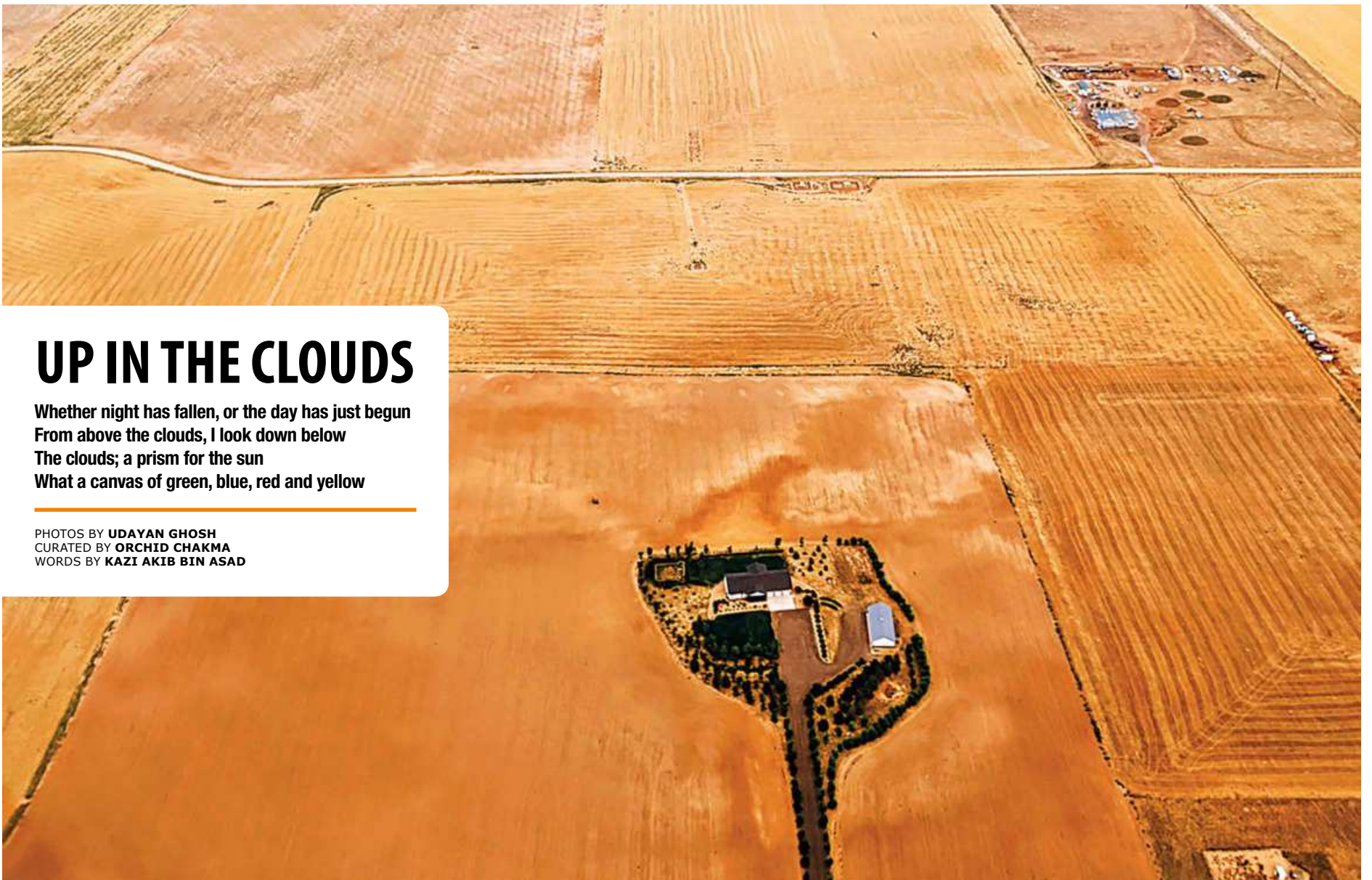
He pulled with all his effort until his skin started to come off. He pulled and pulled until it was just flesh plopping off his bones. With his costume lying on the ground in a pool of dark red, his final act was over.

The audience clapped louder than ever. As tears rolled down his glistening cheek, Mr. Altaf raised his hand and bowed one last time. The curtains closed and the show was over.

For the first time in 81 years, it was all quiet and numb. Mr. Altaf could sleep now.

Hasib Ur Rashid Ifti reads books, idolizes Osamu Dazai and plans to check his email any day now. Send him book suggestions at: hasiburrashidifti@gmail.com





UP IN THE CLOUDS

Whether night has fallen, or the day has just begun
From above the clouds, I look down below
The clouds; a prism for the sun
What a canvas of green, blue, red and yellow

PHOTOS BY **UDAYAN GHOSH**
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