

A case for our mental privacy



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is the pro-vice-chancellor of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

THE thoughtfulness of my son-in-law in printing a personalised letter on a blanket as a paper-themed anniversary gift to my daughter enthralled me. This new generation is full of surprises, even when some of these surprises are influenced by the media. Otherwise, who among you has heard of paper as the theme for a first-anniversary gift? I am sure some lifestyle magazines have promoted this year-by-year gift idea to carve out a niche business. I was sharing my bemusement with a colleague, and lo, my Facebook wall offered me a video on how to send a paper blanket to a daughter. I did not browse any keyword to prompt the suggestion, and the online platform pitted my love for my daughter against that of my son-in-law. Nice try, Mark Zuckerberg! During the same *adda*, I was telling my colleague that it was a jailable offence to forget one's spouse's birthday in Samoa—something that I learnt on Facebook. That evening, my colleague received a video suggestion on some strange laws including the one I mentioned. I gave my phone a suspicious look. Has it been spying on me?

The mind-reading algorithm is very much here. About two years back, in a blog post, Facebook announced that it was creating brain-machine interfaces that could collect thoughts from human neurons and translate them into corresponding images and words. The research initially aimed at helping patients with paralysis, giving the disabled individuals a much-desired medium to express their thoughts without moving any muscle. Many companies, including the US military and Elon Musk's Neuralink, have been engaged in developing such brain-computer interfaces for some time now. For me, it was an eye-opener to realise that such neurotechnology already existed, and I had been its unknowing subject. I felt like I was wearing the proverbial Emperor's New Cloth that failed glaringly to hide the bare self of the wearer.

Gone are the days when privacy used to be a concept. The science behind it is no longer fiction. It is embedded in the devices that we are carrying in our hands as an extension of our bodies. The social media app on my phone can now figure out what I do, see or hear. It is the modern-day angelic scribes that sit on our shoulders recording everything for the judgement day. Through functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), our devices can now measure blood flow to the brain as a proxy for neural activity, paint a corresponding image, and translate them into words.

As a student of culture, this worries me, because I have been owned by an agency that has the intention of using my mind as its own frontier. It has every intention of colonising my mind. It is a type of "imperialism" that Edward Said defined as "thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others." Similarly, Facebook has taken over my virtual space to control the space it does not own or possess. At the same time, as a student of humanities, I am appalled by the consent I have given to Facebook to subjugate me. While glossing over some fine print, little did I know that I had made myself vulnerable to Big Data. The exciting video threads, news bites have lured me into joining a platform, manufacturing my consent and making me a helpless cog in the browsing machine. I am responsible for my own virtual enslavement. In the prison house of cyberspace, my brain, which has been the ultimate reservoir of our privacy frontier, has stopped being private.

Traditionally, we have heard of Big Brother state machinery carrying out clandestine surveillance operations on its subjects. It seems intelligence agencies are not the only ones prying into our private lives. Our data is up for grabs for anyone who is interested. Facebook has already been accused of peddling information to

ILLUSTRATION:
VECTORPOUCH/
FREEPIK



through which artificial intelligence (AI) could hack human brains. For the safe operation of these new technologies, Harari suggested observance of three principles so that no agencies obtain "a frightening accumulation of power." These include: 1) Making sure that the data is used to help, rather than

insurrection in the US. We were once again reminded of the dubious role of Facebook when it failed to prevent far-right groups from planning the US Capitol siege. It tracked the "stop the steal" hate messages, but did not alert the authorities concerned. The social media platform has been equally guilty of being complacent

different agencies, including advertising firms. The digital marketing network has thus targeted me as a potential client. How do I know? While researching on this topic, I was dogged by a "Study Digital Marketing in Europe" campaign. The app analysed my profile to think that my admin role involves educational marketing. I have thus become a product of neuro-capitalism without my foreknowledge. The question is: How do we protect our privacy, our brain data from these all-aggressive giant technological innovations? The danger is bigger than we can imagine.

Certain authoritarian companies are already using this brain-mapping technology to measure the emotional and cognitive health of their employees. They are given EEG headgears so that the employers would know the emotional level of their staff members. They have been used for brainwashing. Such technologies can very well be used for criminal investigation and interrogation. The group that has access to this power will rule over the rest, turning them into mere zombies that Satyajit Ray caricatured in "Hirak Rajar Deshe."

Yuval Noah Harari, the author of "Sapiens," in a recent interview with CBS 60 Minutes, warned us of the process

While most countries are giving in to the manufactured consent of AI, the Latin American country Chile has been an exception. Addressing the mental privacy issue against the backdrop of the rapid encroachment of brain-computer interfaces, the country adopted a neuro-protection bill last July.

manipulate; 2) Monitoring any agency that has the power to monitor us, so that it employs its power responsibly; and 3) Ensuring that the data is not concentrated in just one place to avoid dictatorship.

This is easier said than done, especially in societies where mind-reading can be exploited for personal gains. While most countries are giving in to the manufactured consent of AI, the Latin American country Chile has been an exception. Addressing the mental privacy issue against the backdrop of the rapid encroachment of brain-computer interfaces, the country adopted a neuro-protection bill last July. Chile's parliament agreed that neural data is a special kind of information related to our essential self as it defines our identities. The bill considers neural data as an organic tissue. "By treating neuro-data as an organ, the law prohibits Chileans from being compelled to give up brain data and, crucially, its collection will require explicit 'opt-in' authorisation," wrote Abel Wajnerman Paz, a Chilean university teacher, on Restofworld.org.

Do we need similar legal protection? The issue resurfaced during last week's review of the January 6, 2021 Capitol

during the genocide in Myanmar and ethnic cleansing in Ethiopia. It is said that 90 percent of Facebook users reside outside of the US, where the company employs 10 percent of its surveillance efforts. Whereas for 10 percent of its users in the US, it uses 90 percent surveillance apparatuses. To safeguard ourselves from the malpractices and misuses of social media, we, therefore, will need our own safety valves.

In theory, access to brain information is good for research, education, health, and entertainment. In reality, it will allow certain groups to acquire more power for their own sake. A state agency may temporarily benefit from its access to the brain data of its own citizens, but the problem arises when other agencies make inroads in cultivating choices and manufacturing consents. It is no coincidence that Facebook is not only monitoring the purchasing behaviour of my family, but also creating a familial contest to encourage me into starting a new behaviour.

The paper blanket for my daughter is a cute gesture from her husband. To make me compete for the cuteness is perverse. And the machine, without an ethical code written by humans, will never understand that.

QUOTABLE
Quote

ISAAC ASIMOV

American writer (1920-1992)

Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Puts away

6 Hold tightly

11 Vietnam's capital

12 Ham's device

13 Correct, as text

14 Even a little

15 College head

17 "The Simpsons" bartender

18 "Password" or "Jeopardy!"

22 Manual reader

23 Nome's home

27 Solemn

29 Prank

30 Treated, as leather

32 Secluded

DOWN

1 That woman

2 Woolen cap

3 Count start

4 Curious

5 Factions

6 Healthy snack

7 Mouse's cousin

8 Genesis name

9 Farm sight

valley

33 Articles of clothing

35 Tennis court divider

38 Fabric worker

39 Banish

41 Thin coins

45 Make broader

46 Deeply impressed

47 Spirited horse

48 Concur

10 Warsaw native

16 "That's it!"

18 Blast of wind

19 Nick and Nora's dog

20 Cruel

21 Peripatetic

24 Sax great Getz

25 Highland attire

26 High cards

28 Cul-de-sac

31 Parched

34 TV, radio, papers, etc.

35 Latest word

36 Way to go

37 Shore eroder

40 Director

Spike

42 Ruin

43 Lamb's mother

44 Take in

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT