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# Democracy's digital challenge

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At the beginning of the current millennium, the world celebrated the visible empowerment of citizens through digital technology due to emergence of social media platforms and search engines. The popularity of social media platforms for channelling uncensored freedom of opinion and fearless expression of thoughts were meant to be democratisation at its best, giving voice to the voiceless. The power of social media has been felt by every government in the world irrespective of its standing in the global power ranking.

Corporate giants, under constant fear of a single adverse tweet or a Facebook status that could shatter the image of the company or the product/brand, struggled to cope with the consumer reactions. There are plenty of examples that saw these platforms made the impossible possible by making people at the top of the governance chain, be it the state or a company accountable.

Power of social media has been witnessed in political uprisings throughout the world, some resulting in bringing down the government like in Tunisia, however, in many other places including Thailand, Egypt, Bahrain, and Myanmar, the struggle for democracy continues. Governments facing challenges of these uprisings, organised and coordinated over social media platforms and handheld mobile sets, resorted to blanket shutdowns of the internet ranging from days to weeks.

In Bangladesh, too, we have seen restrictions imposed by localised shutdown and national slowdown of data-transferring speed by cutting down bandwidths during student movements. The recent reversal of an administrative decision within hours following social media backlash for making an exclusive zone for women tourists in Cox's Bazar was another example of smaller, but significant gains in citizens' empowerment.

The world has also witnessed the exploitation of the power of social media platforms by populist politicians in getting into elected offices and then using it to create social division and spread hate that exposed its potential for causing greater harm to society, disempowering people, and weakening democracy.



PHOTO: **STAR**

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Electoral successes of Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, Jair Bolsonaro and few others have been partially-credited to their activism on social media. But, now all of these populist leaders are being criticised for spreading falsehood to stoke frenzy among followers and hurl abuse at opponents.

Many experts are now terming these developments as digital disruption of democracy. According to them, digital disruptions will hurt democracy and it will weaken significantly due to control over artificial intelligence (AI) by tech giants and their political bias.

Stanford research has shown AI's in-built bias against certain communities based on religion or political belief. The most common trend in mainstream media to link Muslims with terrorism and Palestinians' struggle for freedom against Israeli occupation are the most likely reasons of such undesired AI bias. Another survey by Pew Research, published in February 2020, found about half of the experts responding said people's uses of technology will mostly weaken core aspects of democracy and democratic representation, but even those who expressed optimism often voiced concerns.

Some of the comments in their answer to the main question about the impact of technology on democracy by 2030 are a chilling read. An internet pioneer and technology developer said, "My expectation is that, by 2030, as much of 75 percent of the world's population will be enslaved by artificial intelligence-based surveillance systems developed in China and exported around the world. These systems will keep every citizen under observation 24 hours a day, seven days a week, monitoring their every action."

Professor Miguel Moreno of University of Granada, Spain,said, "There is a clear risk of bias, manipulation, abusive surveillance and authoritarian control over social networks, the internet and any uncensored citizen expression platform, by private or state actors."

Robert Epstein, senior research psychologist at the American Institute for Behavioral Research and Technology said his research showed, as of 2015, the outcomes of about 25 national elections in the world were being determined by Google's search engine. Democracy, as originally conceived, cannot survive as Big Tech is currently empowered. His research – dozens of randomised, controlled experiments involving tens of thousands of participants and five national elections – showed that Google search results alone can easily shift more than 20 percent of undecided voters – up to 80 percent in some demographic groups – without people knowing, and without leaving a paper trail.

Controversy centering data harvesting and political manipulation in the Brexit referendum in the UK, probably, was the first revelation of the dark side of technology in a democracy. Investigations by the Guardian and Channel 4 unmasked how micro-targeting of social media users for political messaging, with an aim of psychological manipulation, was done. Later came out Indian investigative journalist Swati Chaturvedi's book I Am a Troll: Inside the Secret World of the BJP's Digital Army, in which she showed

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trolling was an organised political activity and trolls were the Twitter equivalent of a communally-charged mob out to burn down somebody's home or village as part of a pogrom. The abuse opposition politicians and journalists get in India from such trolls are truly horrendous and well documented by global human rights groups.

In another part of the world, the US presidential campaign and following political upheaval and chaos over electoral disputes have highlighted the urgency in having a fresh look at the power and impacts of digital platforms. A good amount of academic work shows Twitter as one of the key enablers for Donald Trump's meteoric rise to power and consolidation of his support base. A New York Times analysis pointed out that his follower number grew by six times by the time his presidency ended. Though Twitter banned him permanently at the end of his reign, his contribution to the alt-fact continues to reverberate in the US. A new investigation by ProPublica and The Washington Post reveals that in the weeks between the election of President Joe Biden and the January 6 siege of the US Capitol, there were at least 650,000 posts in Facebook groups attacking the legitimacy of his victory.

The spread of fake news and misinformation has now generated new debate about the role of tech giants. Their failure to curb dissemination of false propaganda over their platforms had serious consequences in many countries, including fuelling communal hatred that resulted in genocide and crimes against humanity. Facebook, in particular, has been accused of aiding Myanmar's persecution of the minority Rohingya community that left about a million people stranded in Bangladesh as refugees. Bangladesh also had few communal disturbances, though on a limited scale and quickly contained.

These incidents have given governments an excuse to reign in on online freedom. Using the need of maintaining law and order, social harmony and stability, governments, particularly the autocratic ones around the world, have been investing heavily in surveillance technology. There's growing concern that even democratic regimes could become less democratic from the misuse of surveillance systems with the justification of national security.