From an incorrigible New Year enthusiast

NO STRINGS ATTACHED

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It is ritualistic for us to begin the year on an optimistic note. It could be because the year left behind was so terrible that we can't think it can get any worse, and things can only get better after hitting rock bottom. Right? Not if it was a year like 2021, when we actually believed the Great Plague of 2020 was over and we would go back to the way things were. Some delusion that was!

But enough of this morbid thinking. Just look at our brand new shiny metro rail that is about to transform our debilitated transport system – fingers crossed – and make it difficult for Uttara residents to make traffic an excuse for being late for work.

The new year is going to be better, we whisper to ourselves, even as the doomsayers give us the grim scenario of all the baggage of 2022 that will be carried over – a global financial crisis, no real timeline for the end of the Ukraine war, fuel shortages, food scarcity, abnormally chilling months for the west and sweltering days for the east, more authoritarianism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, misogyny, violence, rise in brutal crimes, deadlier variants – you get the drift. Yes, we can predict the miseries that await.

Does this mean we just throw our hands up in the air and give up? Of course not. We have to find ways to keep us buoyant even in the roughest waters. So let's think of some out-of-the-box ways to tackle even the most formidable of problems, specifically those that are relevant to us Bangladeshis.

They say the dearth of foreign exchange next year may continue to be a killjoy for import dependent businesses. Our recommendation to the government is to get "certain people" in public service to sell a few of their mansions and malls in all the Begum Paras around the globe and a few of the shell companies in places like the Cayman Islands, and just make "contributions" to depleting forex reserves. Just to show how patriotic they are. They can bring the dollars back the way they siphoned-sorry-sent-it – we won't look. PK Halder can advise.

Speaking of financial advice, 2023 should also be the year we train a few thousand Specialised Financial Planners for people-who-do-not-know-what-to-do-with-so-much-money. These are the business "typhoons" and their entitled offspring – otherwise known as the filthy rich – who have bought up chunks of the city, including waterbodies and wetlands, through their "art of persuasion" with the help of their weight-lifting, gun-toting bouncers. They have already bought their seventh BMW, taken so many foreign trips they are just bone-tired with jetlag, brought in Russian dancers for their niece's wedding, become citizens of the most expensive country in the world, and still cannot get rid of all those bundles gathering dust in the closet.

This is where these specialists come in to create investment portfolios for "brownie point projects", kind of like the CSR of the Obscenely Rich Person (ORP). These could be in the form of donations to existing (and real) charities, state-of-the-art hospitals that are affordable for the poor, scholarship programmes for needy students, homes for the impoverished elderly, boarding schools for street children, and so on. Again, apart from acquiring an invisible halo on social media platforms, they will be actually doing something in the public's interest for a change. Plus, this might give them tax breaks (from the taxes they never paid), as well as priceless political mileage in case they become election candidates.

A major thorn in the hip of our financial sector is the monster named "non-performing loan" that has reached an impressive Tk 1,343.96 billion. Our banking culture of yore has always nourished individuals who have taken out loans with the idea that banks are like overindulgent parents absentmindedly giving out generous allowances that, of course, are not supposed to be repaid. Thus, the grand lifestyles and noble endeavours taken up by these elegant bank robbers, who have not had to spend a single day in jail for running off with people's precious deposits. It reminds one of the suavity of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, who were portrayed as sexy heroes rather than hardened criminals.

The problem is, during the current financial haemorrhaging, defaulted loans are becoming open wounds for banks where liquid assets are drying up like the Teesta in the winter.

It is time for an intervention.

Rescheduling loans or writing off chunks of the amount have not worked, so we need to delve deeper into the issue. It is time to invest in rehab centres for loan defaulters. Treat loan defaulting as an addiction and illness that requires months of counselling and consistent weaning off the habit of taking a loan without any intention of repaying it. Perhaps teams of rural women who are members of microcredit programmes and have excellent credit payment records can work as mentors.

But money matters are not the only thing we should work on – 2023 is an election year and blood is likely to be spilt. To minimise the overspill in emergency rooms and heaven forbid, morgues, some diffusing mechanisms have to be employed. Law enforcers, and Chhatra and Jubo League members, especially, must be required to take "anger management courses" well ahead of the election date. This may include meditational yoga to calm the agitated mind, and Zumba dancing to work off the aggressive energy. Members of the opposition, meanwhile, can be given training in achieving a Zen state in which nothing can provoke them into retaliating, not even with those ubiquitous brick chips. All these services are also available on apps.

The wise men and women are saying that 2023 will be a "make or break" year for Bangladesh. As ordinary folk, we too must chip in to make everything great again. Keeping up with tradition, we must adopt all the austerity measures asked of us with a brave and dazzling smile. We must eat with gusto, a little less rice and lentils, cheerfully pay more taxes on our life savings, and sleep fitfully in a smaller apartment while paying a few times more for electricity, gas, school fees and diagnostic tests. We must learn not to stress so much about these "little" financial hiccups. By the end of December, we will be looking forward to another New Year – when everything will be newer, shinier and better than the year left behind.

Hand over that keycard, 2022: Your access has been revoked

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SHAER REAZ

Put your winter socks on, snuggle in under that comforter and plug in those wireless headphones – it's time for 2022 Wrapped. Not Spotify Wrapped, since these streaming tech companies arbitrarily decide whether a country/region (sorry, Bangladesh) should get an exciting new feature or not – no, it's time to take a look back at the biggest tech happenings in the past year. Spoiler alert though, we're still teetering on the brink of total collapse of human civilisation due to climate catastrophe with barely any shift in outlook since last year, so... yeah.

Climate change may be the farthest thing from your mind when your supposedly-safe areas of work are crumbling around you. Not literally, as would be the case for minimum wage workers from sweatshops in the Global South – more of a figurative crumbling, as tech jobs in the United States and the western world disappeared overnight in 2022.

According to Crunchbase, close to 91,000 tech workers were laid off, with some estimates putting the total figure closer to 150,000. Even the largest software-based companies – including Meta, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google – were forced to lay off staff to cut costs in the post-pandemic revenue crunch, as bloated hiring in a remote-work environment finally caught up. Some are speculating that a significant number of these jobs are due to be shifted eastward, outsourced to the cheaper labour markets of India and Bangladesh, but it's hardly a silver lining for those laid off – some of whom are immigrants on work visas from those "cheap" countries.

It's not just factory floors feeling the crunch either – latte sipping, man-bun and Burberry sporting crypto-bros felt the effects as well. Brought about by a series of scams and market crashes, cryptocurrency enthusiasts lost millions as their NFTs lost whatever little digital value they had overnight. Bitcoin, Ethereum, Logan Paul's NFT zoo game – everything graced by Web 3.0's toxic and often inexplicable presence crashed and burned. Twitter sizzled with the anguished sorrows of people making bad investments in crypto, but it wouldn't be a raging fire until much later in the year.

Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter and subsequent dismantling of the once-mediocre social media platform has been covered so thoroughly that there's little else left to say, except he seems to have wisened up to his own ineptitude after a poll he himself posted about stepping down from running (read: ruining) the company decidedly called for his removal. Not before he let a bunch of clowns back onto the platform however – as Elon soon realised, having the crazies of Donald Trump, Kanye West and Andrew Tate back on Twitter is bad for business.

If only Twitter employees had the foresight to push harder for unionisation, they might have fought back the egomaniacal billionaire firing them for the smallest of slights. A silver lining is that 2022 saw a series of high profile union formations across some of tech's biggest names – 110 of Apple's 160,000 employees formed a union in June at an Apple Store in Maryland, USA, paving the way for much needed unionisation efforts across Amazon warehouses and order processing chains. Hopefully, the trend continues despite the mass layoffs and union-busting practices encouraged in the US, and workers can finally protect themselves from unachievable targets, absolute disregard for mental and physical wellbeing, and the greedy and predatory practices that are so prevalent in the global tech industry.

How do you fight that which you are asked to create, though? Many tech workers are faced with the ethical dilemma of engineering Artificial Intelligence engines that might replace them in the near future. At present, AI engines that generate images and motion graphics based on prompts and use millions of datapoints gathered from real art – such as MidJourney and Stable Diffusion – are threatening to replace the very artists that they use as sources of AI training data.

In 2022, artists of all backgrounds and nationalities took a stand against use of their intellectual property as reference data by image generation AIs to produce work for commercial purposes. Important discourse on intellectual rights, creative vision and artistic talent aside, it is surely a mood dampener on the fact that Stable Diffusion's founder, Mohammad Emad Mostaque, is a Bangladeshi-Briton who coded one of the most intricate (and, thankfully, open source!) image generation models in the world. His company is now reportedly valued at over USD 1 billion, and the engine has millions of monthly users.

ChatGPT is a variant of the GPT (Generative Pre-training Transformer) language model that has been fine-tuned for the task of chatbot dialogue. It is designed to generate human-like responses to a given input, using the information and language patterns it has learned from a large dataset of conversational text.

Like other language models, ChatGPT is able to generate text that is coherent and flows naturally, and it can be used to create chatbot systems that can hold a conversation with a human user in a variety of contexts. ChatGPT is trained to understand the structure and content of conversational text and can generate appropriate responses to a wide range of input. It can also handle a variety of language

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styles and levels of complexity, making it a useful tool for building chatbots that can communicate effectively with humans.

This is clearly understood from the fact that the entirety of the last two paragraphs was written by ChatGPT. Journalists, copywriters, editors and people working in communications, are you scared for your job yet?

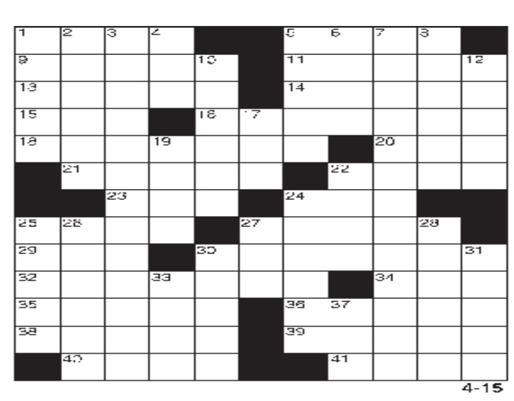
Thankfully, there were slight glimmers of hope – in what is a sure sign of progress, digital artifacts can now be admitted to a court of law in Bangladesh as evidence, and digital forensics tools can help ascertain their authenticity. Outlined under the Evidence (Amendment) Act, 2022, this implies that perpetrators can no longer hide behind a veil of digital anonymity. For example, an altered image posted online and used to incite communal violence can now be admitted into evidence, and its metadata can be used to determine ownership, transference and dates of origin. However, as with almost all laws drafted for digital governance and law enforcement, there exists unexplored loopholes – lack of specificity being the chief culprit in this case. Given our track record with the Digital Security Act and its use in curbing free speech and clamping down on journalists and cartoonists, it might just prove to be a different face of a well-known monster.

Many things happened in the expansive, sprawling world of tech in 2022, and most were less than desirable, but the important thing is we all trudge on, pursuing that dream of outdoing ourselves on almost every front, with the biggest entertainers repeatedly coming from the tech industry. It's a rat race, but with our hands seemingly tied against the whims of Mega-Corporations and Mega-Characters, we might as well take a sick sense of joy from it. Are you not entertained?

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Hemingway nickname
5 "The Simpsons" bar
9 Basketball great Patrick
11 Some exams
13 Prickly plants
14 View over
15 Family
16 Criticized strongly
18 Adds to the batter
20 Mendes of movies
21 Reporter's hope
22 Small songbird
23 Dog holder
24 Little lie
25 Jazz style
27 Spanish snacks
29 __ Cruces
30 Becomes fond of
32 Annoying
34 Boxer Norton
35 Cornered
36 Inklings
38 Located
39 Owner's paper
40 Spot
41 "You there!"

DOWN
1 Quick kisses
2 Looks forward to
3 Yogi Bear's thefts
4 Colony member
5 Painter Edward
6 Mineral sources
7 Candy containers
8 Shirt part
10 Martini's kin
12 Family car
17 Backtalk
19 Decisive win
22 Use a sponge on
24 Improvise
25 Thin cuts
26 Stephen King book
27 Scot's cap
28 Boosts
30 Rum drink
31 Start
33 Ooze
37 Brief drop



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT