We should care more about online privacy

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You talk to your friend about how bad your cavities have gotten and an ad for a toothpaste pops up on Facebook the very same day. You brush it off, share a meme about the platform eavesdropping on your conversation, and wait to see how many reacts you get. The creepily accurate ad is pondered momentarily but ultimately forgotten.

This experience may be more common on Facebook primarily because they are more obvious about it. However, it is not limited to just social media platforms, as voice recordings on Alexa have been found as text logs on Amazon servers, even after being deleted by their owners. A report discovered that Google still tracked users, despite their location history being disabled. These weren't isolated incidents in recent years, unfortunately.

The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation went into effect in 2018, requiring transparency from any company with a digital presence operating in the EU, signifying a tipping point where even a law was enacted to counteract it. The law had a nice ripple effect, spurring certain tech giants to extend these rights to non-EU citizens as well.

Data breaches like the Cambridge Analytica scandal have motivated many to start using online privacy tools in a bid to take matters into their own hands. VPNs and adblockers seem to be the majority's first line of defence, but other sophisticated tools have also emerged in the market due to growing security concerns. Dedicated private browsers, encrypted messaging apps, tools that mask emails and credit cards, services that search the dark web for data leaks, and even entire operating systems that pro-vide online anonymity have been useful in limiting users' digital footprints.

At the end of the day, it is still unrealistic to expect people to reject technology because some corporations may or may not be keeping their data. No amount of fear mongering or paranoia would motivate people to give up something as useful as Google, even if it knows more about them than their best friend. Hence, making jokes about big data is as far as most get.

On the flip side, it's not feasible for companies to stop collecting data altogether. Information is the price we pay for using social media, and viewing most content on the internet, "free" of cost since businesses need to generate revenue somehow or the other. The data is also used to personalise our experience on the internet and help improve customer experience.

When it comes to internet usage, a compromise has to be made between convenience and security. Raising awareness about how much personal information is being taken and whether it's a reasonable transaction for digital consumption is one way to fix the power balance between users and websites.

While it's very tempting to click on "accept all cookies" and move on with our lives, keeping an extension that auto-deletes cookies might be a good one-time investment as well.

References:
1. The Washington Post (May 6, 2019). *Alexa has been eavesdropping on you this whole time.*
2. Associated Press (August 14, 2018). *Google tracks your movements, like it or not.*

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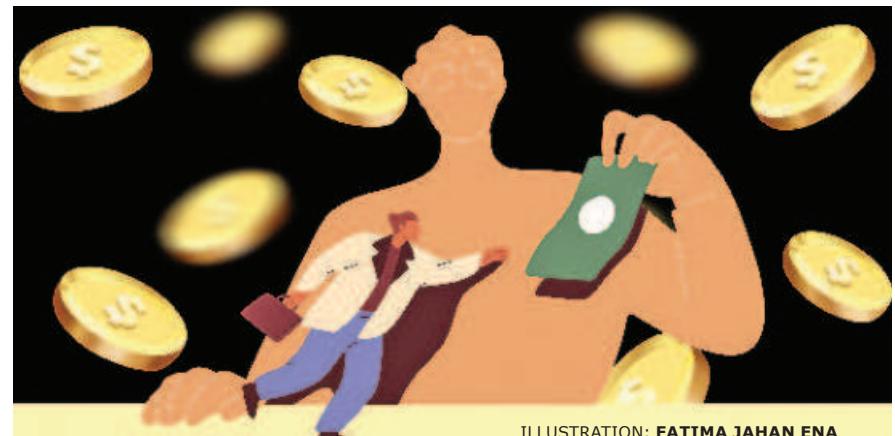

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Our misconceptions surrounding philanthropy

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"You know who would be a really bad firefighter? An arsonist."

American journalist and author Anand Giridharadas believes that "philanthropic" ventures of the rich and their businesses actually fuel the social and economic problems that these millionaires set out to solve in the first place.

The appeal towards rich businessmen and multi-million-dollar companies is still prevalent across varying demographics. The idea of being a super-intelligent college dropout with a killer business plan who makes it big by the time they're 25 is very attractive to the youth. Movies about entrepreneurs also play a part in this, where they romanticise the rags-to-riches narrative and present it as attainable. However, we need to be reminded that ultimately, the story of the self-made billionaire is almost always a myth. In an ideal world, billionaires would not exist.

Coming back to the firefighter-arsonist quote, let's explore how donations and charity do not add any net benefit to social causes, but only brings it back to a net neutral position after inflicting harm to the working class.

Under the structure of capitalism, there is almost no such thing as an ethical business. Greater profits usually mean greater exploitation of workers. For these rich investors, money brings money, not hard work or fair pay.

A major reason for the rise of funds, trusts, and philanthropic organisations is not just to save face, but to chase tax reductions. The uber-wealthy charitable tax deduction can be applied to things that are not money – real estate properties, stock money, capital gain, etc. These assets can be used by the absolute rich as charitable donations in amounts that are close to negligible to them, but they end up reducing their taxes by up to 74 percent. For every billionaire giving a dollar to charity, citizens pay 74 cents of it.

Charity in and of itself is not bad. However, the fact that a large portion of people in the world depend on this charity from the uber-rich is regrettable. Put simply, the existence of 0.1 percent and their charity threatens democracy. Taxed money is supposed to go towards the enrichment of public goods and services, something that a democratically elected government decides. And that decision, however flawed it may be, still reserves the populace's right to choose.

This is the very reason why "capitalist democracy" has now almost been rendered an oxymoron. When billionaires donate money to private foundations, they get to put their interests ahead of the public's. They decide on policies without actually getting democratic approval. The money goes where they want it to go. Now, instead of funds being allocated on the basis of collective decision-making and equitable distribution, it is being controlled by big tech.

Our world's biggest socio-economic problems are created by wealth inequality, something that the ultra-wealthy rely on to sustain their massive amounts of riches. So why should we continue accepting, or at times glorifying, a system that headlines and depends on these "charitable" donations, rather than one that puts enough money into everyone's hands to live a good life?

References:
1. Inequality.org (March 19, 2021). *For Every Buck a Billionaire Gives to Charity, You Chip in Up to 74 Cents*
2. Second Thought (February 25, 2022). *Why Billionaire Philanthropy Won't Solve Anything*

Koushin Unber is on a mission to finish her dust-collecting Letterboxd watchlist by this year. Send her motivation at koushinunber27@gmail.com