Is human civilisation at an inflection point?

THE GRUDGING URBANIST

Adnan Zillur Morshed
is a public thinker and professor at Catholic University of America in Washington, DC.

ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

Spectacular technological advancements have been made in the last two decades. Humanity has accelerated its technical prowess by leaps and bounds. The nature of our lives on this planet has been irreversibly altered, for better or worse.

One change stands out with both known and unknown consequences. Social media has profoundly transformed how we carry on with our daily lives, how we present ourselves to communities, and, most importantly, how we see the world and make decisions about it. Our lives and the everyday political decisions that shape them are intricately enmeshed with the virtual geography of Google, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), Wikipedia, and other online media.

But think about it for a second. As recently as the 1990s, there was no all-encompassing virtual infrastructure called social media. There were neither smartphones nor internet search engines the way we know them today. There was no Google (which was founded in 1998 but became a part of our everyday life much later), Wikipedia (2001), Facebook (2004), Twitter (2006), Instagram (2010) or TikTok (2016).

We are certainly better connected today with our families, friends and colleagues around the world. The knowledge and information that we seek are simply one click or tap away. The internet empowered humanity to be versatile, informed, and future-ready. Different social media platforms gave grassroots people a voice and a presence, and empowered the powerless, bottom-up. They offered the public opportunities to gather in the virtual space and challenge the political oligarchy wielding unjust power.

Yet, this empowerment came at a potential cost of civilisational mutation. Whether we acknowledge it or not, social media's influence on our lives has become Orwellian. At the heart of the problem is the invisible machination of a mind-manipulating algorithm that convinces us to see the world in certain ways. By mining a user's online behaviour, interests, search patterns, and other digital footprints, this algorithm deploys a complex set of calculations to prioritise the content social media users see in their feeds. It determines what we want to see on the internet, and even what we will be excited about and agree with, reducing the complexities of our minds into a discernible template of yes or no, agree or don't agree.

Slowly but steadily, the user becomes engrossed in, and addicted to, a particular type of narrative about the world and its people, market, politics, etc. In the end, the algorithm controls our thinking in ways advantageous to the people sitting at the apex of the power pyramid, while the masses remain unaware of their slow manipulation and quiet subjugation.

There is a political cost to it. Social media produces

and declining trust in institutions, despite higher political engagement due to digital media use. The hard reality is that social media is not only mining our personal data, but also steering us towards collective loyalties. People are reluctant to consider the farcicality of what cements the group mindset. Furthermore, paradoxically, being exposed to the viewpoints of political opponents seems to amplify political polarisation. On the other hand, a recent study in Germany found that 50 percent less anti-refugee sentiment on social media would reduce violent incidents by 12.6 percent.

Look at US politics today. People who support Trump simply refuse to understand the dangerous implications of the US Capitol invasion on January 6, 2021. They see no problem in the violent attempt to dismantle the institutions of democracy that define the US. I observed this invasion on that fateful day, quietly standing in front of the US Supreme Court, steps away from the US Capitol. The marauding crowd seemed absolutely convinced in their belief that the 2020 US presidential election was stolen. There was no looking back, no looking right or left. Only forging ahead.

The heartbreaking atrocities that are being perpetrated in the Middle East now are in fact a war on a nuanced history of the levant. As people quickly seek shelter in their ideological fortresses, what is being sacrificed is any contemplative thinking on a peaceful coexistence of Palestinians and Israelis. Social media's barrage of news feeds on the ongoing war ensnares people in rigid, inflexible domains of revenge and condemnation. The news feeds rarely allow any dispassionate distance from the source of atrocities. In an increasingly calcifying black-and-white world, there is no desire to see the world from the other side of the divide. So, in the end, what happens is that, at the altar of technology and political theatrics, reflective thinking and reasoning are triumphantly sacrificed.

Consider the recent Argentine election. Javier Milei, Argentina's newly elected, chainsaw-wielding, and "anarcho-capitalist" president, understands the nature of our unnuanced world and social media's benefits to cultivate public support. An Argentine colleague of mine told me that Milei's rise has been a product of popular discontent and a response to the growing distrust in "conventional" politics, allegedly mired in corruption. Populist angst thrives in a culture of herd mentality, one in which people are unlikely to vote based on their individual reasoning.

Let's turn to Bangladesh now. The country's political discourse has long been reduced to simplistic cell blocks of blind allegiances. If university teachers openly flaunt their political affiliations as academic assets, what happens to the quality of the learning environment? What are our students learning? When lawyers—hardened along party lines—engage in physical fights, can we trust our legal system? A cursory aerial mapping of the country's social media landscape brings to fore precariously oversimplified stories: AL and anti-AL, pro-1971 and anti-1971, pro-Islam and anti-Islam, pro-faith and pro-secular, pro-Bangla and pro-English, and many such binary models. The monolithic nature of our narratives has often been reinforced by social media. People fanatically adhere to one singular narrative, both refusing and denying

VISUAL: **SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR**

a binary view of society, one in which people are either "with us" or "against us." If you are against us, you are forbidden. Two dangerous things are likely to happen at this point. First, people become incurious about others, as the relentless feeds of one type begin to appear as the "whole truth." Second, people begin to weaponise their social-media-led worldview to dehumanise presumed opponents, including immigrants, political adversaries, and people of other faiths, nationalities and ethnicities.

Think about this: the neo-panoptic algorithm, supported by artificial intelligence or AI, has acquired the power to classify the world into a neat grid of allegiances. The comfort of conformity has the propensity to become addictive, producing a black-and-white world before us. That world rejects nuance, analysis, investigation, and contemplation. Our brains are being reprogrammed to look for the easiest solutions to our most vexing social and political questions. The relentlessness of agreeable content on social media fortifies our ideological beliefs.

The Kafkaesque absurdities in all this are that social media itself is not necessarily biased, but its algorithm creates sharply divided and biased worldviews, with the possibility of profound and structural transformation of the human character. We are confronting a civilisational litmus test.

Researchers have found ample evidence of a causal relationship between social media and political polarisation, hate speech, populism,

its complex entanglements with other narratives. Like GDP, critical thinking should be an indicator of national well-being. The acknowledgement of complexities and contradictions in our lives is healthy and shows meaningful progress.

We don't quite fully understand how social media—and increasingly, AI—would change the civilisational trajectory. At this point, we can only speculate on whether humanity is at an inflection point. AI is complicating the matter further. *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks has recently written about the uncharted waters we are in: "A.I.'s history is so exhilarating precisely because nobody can predict what will happen next...The people in A.I. seem to be experiencing radically different brain states all at once. I've found it incredibly hard to write about A.I. because it is literally unknowable whether this technology is leading us to heaven or hell, and so my attitude about it shifts with my mood."

Heaven or hell, we must keep on valuing critical thinking as an antidote to the herd mentality fostered by social media, populism, and the politics of grievance. As an educator, I find our young students the most fertile and promising demographic to foster non-binary thinking. Over the years, in one of my history courses in which I discuss the history of consciousness, I found that students become most animated and curious when I tell them about the possibility of looking at something from many different angles.

Contributors to the loss and damage fund should include, among others, those states which have earned a lot of money with fossil fuels or have enjoyed high growth rates in the last few years.
PHOTO: **REUTERS**

COP28 is an opportunity, if we all play our part

Annalena Baerbock
is federal minister for foreign affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany.

ANNALENA BAERBOCK

A farmer in Niger whose fields have dried up due to the heat.

A father in Palau who does not know whether his house will still be standing when his children are grown up—or whether the rising sea levels will swallow up his village.

Mayors in Spain, Germany or Lithuania who have to find a way to protect their towns and cities from a water shortage and ever more dangerous floods.

Regardless of which country you look at in the world, one crisis is evident everywhere: the climate crisis. It is the greatest security challenge of our age, affecting us all—with varying degrees of severity but with the same relentlessness.

What gives me hope is that we have the knowledge, the technology, as well as the instruments to contain the climate crisis together. What we need is political will.

In 2015, the international community showed this will and paved the way for a new, climate-neutral world by adopting the Paris Agreement. Almost 170 countries set themselves ambitious climate targets back then. The expansion of renewable energies has accelerated dramatically. However, as we are coming together for the Climate Change Conference in Dubai, we know that we are in a race against time—and, to date, we have been too slow.

The forthcoming COP28 is a huge opportunity to pick up the pace—an opportunity that we should seize together by forming alliances among countries at the forefront of climate action. In Dubai, we will be carrying out the Global Stocktake agreed in Paris for the first time. This will allow us to review our progress towards reaching the targets set in Paris and to determine where we have to step things up.

Germany believes that three points are key here.

First of all, we should hugely ramp up the global energy transition by 2030, because every tonne of CO2

that a country emits harms us all. According to the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), we have to work together to decrease global emissions by at least 43 percent over the course of this decade. Every percentage point reduction in greenhouse gas emissions means fewer droughts, fewer floods, and fewer lives lost.

In the EU, we have set a course for climate neutrality by 2050 with the Green Deal. In Germany, we have pledged by law to become climate-
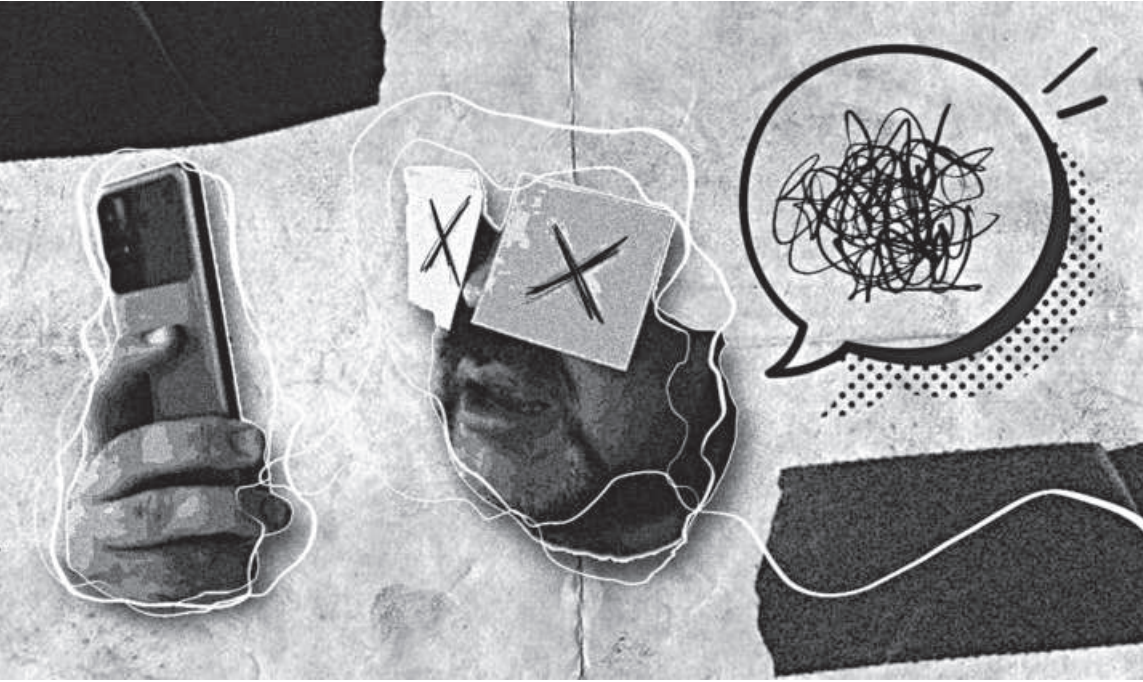
> We know that the climate crisis is already having effects that can no longer be reversed. That is why we are also pressing ahead with adaptation to climate change and providing special support for developing countries. The contributions of all donors for adaptation should be doubled to $40 billion by 2025 at the latest.

neutral by 2045. However, the energy transition is a global task. That is why we are working to ensure that a joint agreement is reached at COP28 on tripling renewable energies, doubling energy efficiency, and gradually phasing out fossil fuels. By doing this, we also want to make it clear that the transition towards an energy system largely free of fossil fuels has begun.

Secondly, our best tool for tackling the climate crisis is solidarity. That is why we are standing shoulder-to-shoulder with those who have played a minuscule role in bringing about the climate crisis but are now being hit hardest.

Three years earlier than announced, Germany has increased its annual contribution to climate

finance to more than six billion euros from its budget funds. In so doing, we are playing our part in the industrialised countries' pledge to make available 100 billion euros for climate finance—and we are confident that this pledge will be fulfilled by the end of this year.

We know that the climate crisis is already having effects that can no longer be reversed. That is why we are also pressing ahead with adaptation to climate change and providing special support for developing countries. The contributions of all donors for adaptation should be doubled to $40 billion by 2025 at the latest. Germany intends to play its part in reaching this target.

At COP27 last year, we agreed to establish a Loss and Damage Fund and we recently fleshed it out in Abu Dhabi. Our task now is to confirm this agreement at COP28 and to fill the fund with money. To achieve this, it is key that the funds go first and foremost to the most vulnerable states, and that all states with the means to do so contribute to the fund. Naturally, this includes the industrialised countries. However, it also includes those states which have earned a lot of money with fossil fuels or have enjoyed high growth rates in the last few years. We all have an obligation.

That is why, thirdly, we want to invest in our partnerships at COP28. We know that the conditions necessary for a successful energy transition and climate action are different in each country. And that the radical change which the green transformation will entail can only work if it is socially just. We will support our partners to this end.

We can all benefit because every investment in solar panels, in green hydrogen or in heat insulation technologies is an opportunity for growth, new jobs, and a secure energy supply. For this reason, we are expanding climate, energy, and development partnerships. They will enable both sides to learn from each other and will benefit both sides. After all, no country should have to decide between development and climate action. Every society has its own path to follow.

It is important that we all have the same goal: a climate-neutral and -resilient future in which our children can live in security and prosperity. In Dubai, we will have an opportunity to set out on this journey together—an opportunity we should seize.
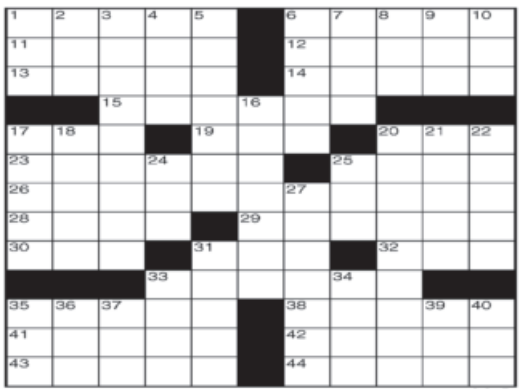

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Goddess of the hunt
6 Spanish snacks
11 Figure of speech
12 VCR button
13 Green sauce
14 Stylish
15 Bank, at times
17 Expected
19 "Skedaddle!"
20 Pampering place
23 Evaluate
25 Pollux, for one
26 Experience trouble
28 Test type
29 Uses a mirror
30 Superlative suffix
31 Eastern "way"
32 Stocking

stuffer
33 Diminutive
35 Take it easy
38 "If — a Rich Man"
41 Summon up
42 Director René
43 Mythical trio
44 Famed fur tycoon

DOWN
1 Brief drop
2 Chemical suffix
3 Flying choice
4 Jot down
5 In the middle of
6 Basic belief
7 Cracked
8 Fido or Fluffy
9 Be decisive
10 Pig's place
16 Sink vessel

17 Willem of "Spider-man"
18 Manual readers
20 Candy
21 Grand, for one
22 Nervous
24 Wing
25 Common article
27 Racy reading
31 Government funders
33 Make cookies
34 Saddler's tools
35 Game caller
36 Mendes of movies
37 Fortune
39 Southern resort
40 Mess up

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MONDAY'S ANSWERS