

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

BRTA cannot absolve itself of responsibility

It has consistently failed to take actions to prevent road crashes

In Bangladesh, every year, Eid festivities invariably get marred by fatal road crashes. This year has been no different: around the time of Eid-ul-Fitr holiday, 295 people were killed, with 405 more injured, in 254 road crashes between April 4 and April 18, per the estimates of Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA). These numbers mark an 18.75 percent rise from last year's death and injury tolls during the same period. The BRTA has identified 10 reasons behind this year's crashes during the Eid rush. Interestingly, nowhere has it found itself to be responsible for this preventable loss of lives.

The 10 reasons listed by the BRTA include drivers' carelessness leading to loss of control over the wheels, rash driving, pedestrians carelessly crossing the road, bikers and drivers not following traffic rules, etc. We find it fascinating that this list does not include old, dilapidated buses, minibuses and trucks running on the roads without proper fitness clearance and/or route permits, or drivers without valid and/or proper licence operating heavy vehicles. In the three major road crashes that took place last week, either the vehicles lacked fitness clearance, route permit and/or tax token, or the drivers didn't have a valid licence.

What does the BRTA have to say about it? When asked, the BRTA chairman responded, "If you want to blame us, you can." Well, why shouldn't we, when the BRTA, and all other government agencies involved with this sector, failed to ensure safe roads for us? In May last year, the BRTA issued an order capping the economic life of buses and trucks, aiming to reduce road crashes as well as pollution. Less than four months later, the Road Transport and Highways Division (RTHD) stayed the order to pacify transport owners. One of last week's crashes could probably be prevented had the RTHD not reverted the BRTA order, because the bus that caused the crash would not be on the road.

At this point, it may be safe to assume that road safety in this country holds zero priority to those who are entrusted with it. Nothing else explains this persistent apathy on the authorities' part towards the loss of lives in frequent road crashes. This is why the BRTA can shrug off its own accountability and that of other relevant agencies, while road crashes continue to take lives and destroy families. If this attitude doesn't change, and the authorities are not made to answer for every single oversight regarding road safety, safe roads will remain a pipe dream in Bangladesh.

Stop dehumanising our workers

Why crack down on workers who are demanding their dues?

We condemn the law enforcers' crackdown on garment workers in Narayanganj's Fatullah area on Sunday, which led to 50 workers and 10 policemen getting injured. This inclination of the authorities to turn to violence, instead of listening to workers' legitimate demands, is concerning. According to the workers and eyewitnesses, the clash started when law enforcers used water cannons to disperse the peacefully protesting workers and baton-charged them. Although we cannot condone the workers blocking the Dhaka-Munshiganj Road for their protest, the authorities could have convinced them to clear the road without using violence.

We also have to agree with the workers that demanding their due salary is not a crime. Had they been paid on time, they would not have to take to the streets in the first place. Moreover, the factory in question—Abanti Colour Tex Ltd, a concern of Crony Group—has allegedly been irregular in paying its workers for some time. The reason why workers were more agitated this time was because they were promised their monthly salary for March via mobile banking before Eid, but are yet to receive it. Many workers could not even travel to their villages as they remained unpaid in the month of Eid—except for their Eid bonus. The sentiment of the workers, therefore, should have been taken into consideration by the authorities.

The workers even tried to negotiate with the factory administration, who refused to pay any heed to their demands; instead, they put up a notice indicating that the factory would remain closed for a few days. This tendency to close factories instead of giving the workers their dues is also indicative of how poorly factory owners and administrations treat workers, who form the backbones of this industry, as they are then also denied remuneration for the days the factory remains closed.

This vicious cycle, which only dehumanises workers, must end. The government has to ensure that the factory immediately pays its workers their dues. It should also create a mechanism to mediate fairly between workers and factory owners in such situations, instead of violently cracking down upon them when they stage a protest.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Heatwave's killing spree

The scorching heat wave serves as a stark warning. As temperatures soar, so do concerns about the lack of shade and greenery in our city. Our way of "utilising" resources has always been extremely selfish, for which we are suffering. Case in point last year, the City Corporation cut more trees on the sides of pavements rather than planted them, forcing us to accept their unplanned vision. As a reader, I've read so many accounts of trees being felled illegally that I've stopped bothering to remember the areas. The bottom line is, things can't go on like this for long and our authorities simply can't keep getting away with shabby responses, finding no fix to our ailments. We need more greenery, we want the government to plant more trees. As citizens, we're only asking for the bare minimum to survive. Now only time will tell if our authorities will let us down yet again.

Shyamol Chandra Das
Motijheel, Dhaka

Should social media be our new public square?



THE OVERTON WINDOW

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In the US, teens are now spending on average five hours a day on social media, according to the latest Gallup poll. Nine years ago, UCWeb conducted a survey on social media use in Bangladesh and found that 70 percent of users spent more than an hour on social networking sites and about 23 percent spent more than five hours a day. Today, those numbers have surely gone up. And even though there isn't enough hard data on that, you can just tell by the number of people you see staring at their screens regardless of where they are and what they are doing.

As social animals, human beings have a desire for others to know what they are doing and saying. It's why we post on our social media accounts. But aside from posting, social media has become the go-to place for many to get their news, views and overall information, and for communicating them; thus popularising the notion that social media has now become the new public square, perhaps on a civilizational scale. That, however, is a false dichotomy, according to American social psychologist, author and professor at the New York University Stern School of Business, Jonathon Haidt.

In his book, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, Haidt argues that social media is not the modern day equivalent of the public square, but that of the Roman Colosseum. While having many positives, social media has essentially provided everyone with a dart gun to shoot just about anyone else, sometimes based on something as trivial as the usage of merely one word they didn't like. There is an extraordinary amount of intimidation available via social media and this has led to leaders of all kinds of organisations and people who are more rational and on the saner side of any debating spectrum, "to run scared."

"Social media allows whoever is angriest and can mobilise the most force to threaten, harass, surround and mob anyone," according to Haidt. So, fundamentally, those individuals who disagree with the groupthink are

being forced into silence in the face of this mob mentality—as the mob is less interested in having an open discussion with greater diversity of thinking, and just like in the Roman Colosseum, are more interested to see blood. But, "in a large and secular democracy, people have to be able to speak up," says Haidt, which is currently not happening via social media.

Another issue that people are just starting to realise because of Israel's genocidal actions against Palestinians—where pro-Palestine content is being heavily censored—is how easy it is for these social media

giant—in support of candidate Joe Biden—even though it was true.

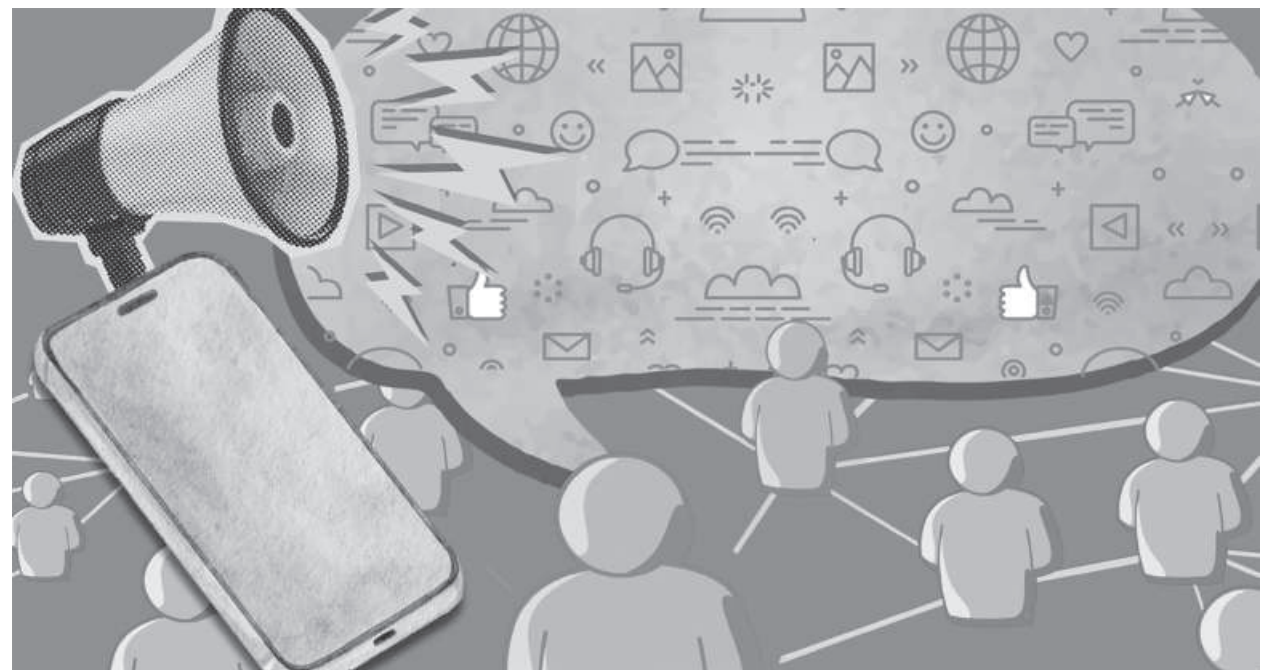
The fact that social media giants are constantly under pressure from governments around the world (and other powerful groups) to manipulate their users is nothing new. Just recently, the Bangladesh government has threatened to ban social media giants Facebook and YouTube if they do not comply with its instructions to prevent the spread of "disinformation." However, as we have previously seen in the case of all governments—including ours—the government and its officials often tend to be the biggest originators and promoters of disinformation, or censors of true information that can debunk or counter disinformation. Under the guise of "preventing the spread of disinformation", they tend to regularly "censor true information" that can inconveniently disrupt the existing power structure.

As was revealed when the Twitter Files were coming out, a large percentage of Twitter accounts were bots, many of which were actively

revolution in our ability to educate each other, the consequent democratic explosion has shaken existing establishments to their core." This will lead to increased but "undetectable mass social influence powered by artificial intelligence [which] is an existential threat for humanity."

While still in its infancy, Assange believed that the geometric nature of this trend was clear—this "phenomenon differs from traditional attempts to shape culture and politics by operating at a scale, speed, and increasingly at a subtlety, that appears highly likely to eclipse human counter-measures."

Social media is a disruptive technology, that has immensely disrupted human societies—for better or for worse. But, its underlying technological structure is increasingly being encroached upon, for the purpose of discourse control. When you add the all too human flaws mentioned by Haidt into it, what you have is not fit to serve as the new public square.



VISUAL: AMREETA LETHE CHOWDHURY

giants to influence people to be "pro-this" or "pro-that" on any political issue. This is also obvious when it comes to a range of other topics. For example, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, TikTok—owned by a Chinese company—had reportedly changed its algorithm in support of Russia's side of the narrative. Similarly, as the Twitter Files exposed, during the 2020 US presidential elections, social media companies were heavily influenced by the US security state to censor the Hunter Biden laptop story as being

trying to shift people's opinion when it came to select important subjects. Such problems will only worsen as AI and other technological tools continue to advance in their levels of sophistication, and as countries and interest groups clash to establish their "narratives as reality," to push their agendas and promote their interests.

These dangers had been foreseen and warned about by some tech experts and human rights defenders long ago. Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, once wrote that: "While the internet has brought about a

What is essentially missing when it comes to the social media landscape are substantive discussions—since its deepest flaws remain a mystery to most—to establish the philosophical underpinnings that can drive changes on its technical front and, consequently, establish some universal legal norms to ensure that it is not being used to manipulate human perceptions, at least at scale. Until then, to assume that it should serve the purpose of a public square will definitely be foolhardy.

Abu Saeed Khan: A Champion of Connectivity



Rohan Samarajiva
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ROHAN SAMARAJIVA

Abu Saeed Khan has taken leave of us. We celebrate a life well lived and mourn the loss of a valued friend and colleague. The public sphere of Bangladesh and the region is diminished by his demise.

I met him in Dhaka in September 2000, on my first visit to Bangladesh, where I had been invited as a former regulator to a regional event organised to welcome and encourage the just-established Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC). Learning that the World Bank had pulled its funding to signal displeasure about some last-minute chicanery to create openings for political interference in the governing statute, I did not limit myself to bland good wishes as is customary. I could see my words resonating with a majestic looking man across the room. He came up to me in the break and thanked me. That was the beginning of a friendship, a collaboration and conversations that extended over two decades and many countries in addition to Bangladesh.

In the years that I have known him, he held many positions. He worked for Ericsson out of Malaysia, he was

the first Secretary General of AMTOB, the trade association of Bangladeshi mobile operators, he served as a consultant to the World Bank, UN-ESCAP (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) and others. He was the voice in Bangladesh for LIRNEasia, an information and communication technology policy and regulation think-tank. But there was one constant. He was laser-focused on making decent quality connectivity available to all at affordable prices.

I have been fortunate enough to have had opportunities to work from within government and from outside to advance these common objectives. Abu Saeed Khan had to work from outside. But that did not in any way diminish his contribution. I will use only one example: the rationalisation of 1800 MHz frequencies with the consent of all the operators that occurred during his leadership at AMTOB. The BTRC Chairman was quoted as saying that "after the rearrangement, a total of 15.6 Mhz frequency worth more than Tk 2,000 crore will be saved, which will be sold during 3G auction." I used this case in my teaching and talks to show

that good regulatory practices can also be initiated by those from outside government.

Coming from a media background, Abu Saeed Khan was always available to journalists with evidence-based analyses of current issues. He lived through the efflorescence of the telecom sector and greatly contributed to the understanding of some key



Abu Saeed Khan

issues. He was always learning and always sharing his knowledge. He sat through the entirety of a LIRNEasia course on regulation in Singapore. His suggestion that we use microwave attenuation by rainfall in our disaster risk reduction work led to a short-listed research proposal.

Abu Saeed Khan was present during

the founding of LIRNEasia in 2004. Over the past 20 years, he was a stalwart colleague. Consistent with LIRNEasia's mission, he conceptualised LION [Longest International Open-Access Network]. In his words, Asia was behaving like it was not a continent but a collection of coastlines, with all the big pipes being undersea and none running overland. From the time he convinced me at the Islamabad Serena Hotel after much debate, we worked together to promote the concept. We won the cooperation of ESCAP, with the division responsible for ICT essentially reorienting its entire work plan around the concept of an Asia Pacific Information Superhighway (APIS). Perhaps in honour of the Bangladeshi origins of the concept, one of the key meetings of APIS was held in Dhaka. We met resistance at the ITU's (International Telecommunication Union) Bangkok office and within ESCAP with the transportation people. But we had impact. Every time I read about hybrid cables that snake their way through land and ocean, I think of his LION concept that catalysed new thinking on long-haul networks which raised the salience of redundancy and open access.

He was a great son of Bangladesh, proud of the language that defined its identity, and always wanting more for its people. His endeavours were not limited to one country. His work was not complete. But he did much in the time that he was given. He was kind and caring. He never lost hope. We are thankful to have been a part of his journey.