Whom do the information blackouts ultimately benefit?

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When the internet was initially made accessible to the public in the late 1980s, the once-secret communication tool developed by the US military was regarded as a passing fad, reserved for the technically competent and the computer savvy, and not something that would significantly alter daily life. Now, as I write this in the relative information darkness of a country-wide internet shutdown, on a text editor in lieu of Google Docs, with only yesterday's newspapers for fact-checking purposes, it is a sobering reality that we are crippled without access to the internet.

As Bangladesh struggles to contain the outpouring of frustrations of quota reformists, general students and dormant anti-government political opponents who would take advantage of the quota reform movement, internet shutdown is one of the major aspects of control that the Awami League government has exercised to curb the protests.

On July 19, news reports on TV channels communicated the government's official line that nationwide internet outage is due to a fire at a supposedly critical building in Dhaka, contradicting statements made by State Minister of Telecommunications and ICT Zunaid Ahmed Palak that specifically mention enforced shutdown of internet access. Since the night of July 18, internet access has been intentionally withdrawn from the capital, as well as large swaths of the country. Previously, since early July 18, mobile data was completely inoperable across the whole city. This is nothing new, and it was an expected measure from a government that has repeatedly put down mass uprisings by controlling the flow of information.

During past elections and mass mobilisations, the effect of choking the free flow of information has clearly backfired. For example, during the previous quota reform movement and road safety movement in 2018, the nationwide shutdown of Facebook, Messenger, YouTube and mobile data led to a wildfire of rumours and speculations. Whether true or not, such rumours do not do the party any favours.

It is in stark contrast to the general attitude of the Awami League-led government when things are going well. "Smart Bangladesh," "Digital Bangladesh," and the general promise of growth through neoliberal application of technology has long been an election mandate of the party, and to be absolutely fair, the government has largely followed through by steadily increasing the bandwidth of internet connectivity, state-led

funding and nurturing of tech parks, startup accelerators, recognition of innovators in the tech industry, and more. However, the price of unmasking a forward-thinking, technology-enabling government is apparently student deaths at the hands of police and Bangladesh Chhatra League during mass uprisings.

When it comes to accepting the blame or taking accountability of state-sponsored violence against students, the proponents of internet and technology-led innovation are equally fickle. The star and darling of startup founders and accelerators, Zunaid Ahmed Palak, has made comments that directly blame Facebook and social media platforms for the deaths of students. Facebook/Meta's complicity in political violence and genocide on a global scale is well-documented, but for Facebook to intentionally target a fourth-year student of English in Rangpur for summary execution—or at least 39 others confirmed killed in the protests as of this writing—is a bit of a stretch. Perhaps the state minister meant it less literally; perhaps he meant the "idea" of Facebook: unfiltered, uncontrolled stating of opinions, political organising, video documentation of police and BCL brutality, requests for help from general people so that high school and university students don't have to face the horrors of it

all alone.

Forcing telecommunication operators to shut down mobile data access or reduce network bandwidth is also a common tactic, and we have seen it employed quite effectively to cut communications between protesting groups across the country. The neoliberal machine of the AL government has ensured, through bullying of tax collectors and regulatory bodies, that every private provider of information technology infrastructure is beholden to the government's requests for access or control.

This is a fact that we have also seen applied to foreign entities. Fearing the loss of access to vast user bases, companies like Meta and Google are commonly seen answering requests by the Bangladesh government for data on specific groups or individuals, and monitoring of supposedly encrypted network traffic on these platforms revealing more about users than they are aware of. While other parts of the world are fighting tooth and nail through enforcement of policies like the EU's General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and via anti-trust commissions to protect user data, it is exactly here that we see our own government not only taking steps in the opposite direction, but actively utilising predatory data privacy policies of internet

and social media platforms to surveil users in Bangladesh.

It is irony of the highest order that the interconnected nature of everyone's lives through the internet and social media—as promoted and established in part by the Awami League's electoral pledges—is also the bane of the party's existence, and one that requires a variety of measures to control. Whether it's the draconian Digital Security Act (now the Cyber Security Act), ICT Act, or more literal tools like BTRC's network jammer vans, threats against internet service providers and telcos or surveillance tools that monitor and track "persons of interest," the government has shown time and again that they have no qualms using information blackouts during elections and protests to establish their agendas.

Then why promote digital innovation and technology adoption in the first place, if your first order of business during a political crisis is to plunge the country into a medieval-era information blackout?

The answer is simple, and it is a sobering reality for tech innovators and proponents of technology to contend with. The more technology adoption there is, the more dependency there is on mediums of communication that ultimately end up

in government control and regulations, the wider the blackout. We have seen how protesters use platforms like Facebook and Messenger to organise and coordinate their movements; by first funnelling them into positions where they depend on platforms like these and then creating a blanket enforced outage when the proverbial excrement hits the fan, the information blackout is double effective and actually crippling.

In a country where political representation, freedom of expression and mass mobilisation around common political issues is severely repressed, it is vital that information blackouts are resisted at the root level. Understanding how information flows are surveilled and where access to information can be severed is a critical component of ensuring rights to personal freedom of speech, political protest and assembly. It is important to realise that every political protest will inevitably turn to violent dispersal and information warfare, be it through misinformation or state-enforced blackouts.

If the state has indeed taken steps to provide internet access and digitisation of services with the malicious intent of accessing, surveilling and effectively controlling the flow of information, then it provides dissenters no other option but to take their organising and mobilising offline. It is a scenario where civil unrest can lead to increasingly dangerous and potentially violent situations with plenty of misinformation spreading post-fact, whereas, providing public forums for expressions of discontent without intentional information blackouts can minimise misinformation and unnecessary violence.

If the events of the quota reform movement are looked back upon, it is not going to be any stretch of the imagination to assume conversations post-fact are also full of misinformation and biased attempts at manipulation of public opinion. Numbers—of dead, injured, and picked up for questioning—will continue to be questioned, while events and narratives—that of law enforcement, the protesters, and state actors—will hold less and less value over time. This is a direct by-product of the information blackout imposed on the nation's media houses and civilians.

After being in power for 15 years, it is not strange to expect the Awami League to be comfortable in their position of power enough to let the conversation flow without attempting to control or disrupt it. Dialogue is the basis of any democracy, and if the AL is to show to the world that Bangladesh is indeed a functioning democratic nation—in reality or as just a perception—it is paramount that the government allow information technology to operate uninterrupted, even during times of political crisis. If not for the sake of ensuring freedom of speech and assembly, then for the sake of their own political image.

VISUAL: **EHASANUR RAZA RONNY**

Are we educated merely to continue the cycle?

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ABIR HOSSAIN

Education is the beacon of enlightenment. It is also the backbone of a nation. Pursue it well enough, and you can make it up the ladder of success. One doesn't need an incentive to pursue education because the entity itself has always been a means to attain one's goals. Why wouldn't it? What is so wrong about envisioning a better life for oneself, demanding greater resources, and thus mobility? How does one attain that?

Time and again, education has been professed to be an area of great interest—one where our "leaders" would like to invest more. However, a glance at the fiscal year budgets over the last decade coupled with recent developments reveals a rather grim picture of where our education stands. It is stagnant, discriminatory and, unsurprisingly, corrupt. If the supposed backbone of the nation is lofty, made to stand on false promises, as students, what can we hope for, if anything at all?

Meritocracy and perseverance—while lauded by institutions—simply do not have a place in the system anymore. Rather, what gets precedence and thus, opportunities are connections, mostly with the corrupt. In a report by this daily, it was revealed that a syndicate involving officials and employees of the Public Service Commission (PSC) had leaked question papers for government recruitment tests, including those for the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) exams, at least 30 times over the last 12 years.

While investigators believe that the syndicate has been active for about two decades now, I can't help but wonder when this practice will come to a halt. Without much scrutiny, who is to say that the government officials who attained a position through the leaked question papers won't indulge in the same practices? After all, they themselves got in through unfair means. The possibility that these officials will allow future examinees to sit for the test without tampering with the outcome is slim. If this is the cycle that persists, who stops it? More importantly, can anyone stop it?

With momentum on the students' side, the quota reform movement has continued to stride forward and make its demands known. However, not even a united body of students across the nation, fighting for what is rightfully theirs, is enough to call for reform. Rather, it is being vilified and thwarted. If the students are unable to amplify their voices, what is our education being reduced to? When we are taught in classrooms, must we only learn to be obedient, even in the face of injustice? Must we submit with blind devotion to the powers that be? If so, then we all must be left to wonder what the real value of our education is. If we are unable to apply what we have learnt, think critically about a situation, and make changes that benefit the masses and not only the few, then we are only commodities helping the order remain in place—

not enlightened, educated citizens. Yet, this shortcoming cannot be attributed to the education we undertake, but rather to the system that allows it to remain in place.

Ambitions, dare we have any, are more often than not rooted in change. Despite all the hurdles and bureaucratic inefficiencies of government jobs, I would like to

believe that there are a handful of recruits who did make it based solely on their hard work and merit. Yet, it would be wishful thinking to assume that a handful of individuals

can enact change. It seems awfully defeating that not even entering the realm of government jobs can help alter the status quo. They are, like most of us, at the mercy of the system, perhaps to an even greater extent. Even if someone were to take steps to eradicate corruption, who is to say that they won't be stopped, penalised, or worse?

All of this is to say that once the current student body graduates and joins the workforce, they will hope to see change or undertake it themselves. The vigour of youth

emerges because they have not been disillusioned into accepting the deficiencies of the present. It is all the more important for us because these deficiencies pose a risk to our future. The persistence of the status quo is an attack on our aspirations because it undermines the role of education. Should we expect the next generation of the workforce to

undertake transformations in the system? Absolutely. But whether it will happen or not will be determined by the actions of the present.

If the cycle is to be broken, the

students' demands have to be met. Otherwise, we will risk being stuck in the same vicious cycle of perpetuating corruption and disparaging our brightest minds. More importantly, the onus will then fall on the next generation to fix the foundations of a rotten system, when it is really down to the system to not only rectify such issues but also

enable the next crop of leaders to build on their progress. For the time being, though, we are a long way from talking about progress or even stagnation.

When students are taught in classrooms, must they only learn to be obedient, even in the face of injustice? The photo was taken in Chattogram on July 16, 2024. FILE PHOTO: **STAR**