

OPINION

We should rethink our approach to online political discussions

The pervasive nature of social media has made it easier for individuals to demonise those with whom they disagree, often framing opposing viewpoints as threats to their identity or values. This binary thinking is detrimental to society and undermines the very principles of democracy.

AZRA HUMAYRA

I was thirteen years old when I secretly set up my first Facebook account, with my incentive driven more by the fear of being left out than by any sense of rebellion. Back then, I viewed the world in simpler terms – believing that sharing my thoughts in public discussions was a way to contribute.

One particular exchange that has stuck with me was with a man who claimed that if women just covered up, the problem of eve-teasing would be alleviated. I'd seen enough to know that wasn't true – I'd witnessed women in burqas and hijabs being harassed as well. I said as much. The response – swift and vicious – included an onslaught of personal attacks and misogyny that left my thirteen-year-old self bruised and bewildered. My idealism, so eager to join the conversation, came up against the sharp edge of a world that wasn't ready to listen. But has it changed after ten years?

Political discussions today often devolve into verbal battlegrounds, where the goal seems less about understanding and more about winning. Social media, creating echo chambers and shrinking attention spans, amplifies this by rewarding outrage and oversimplification over nuance and depth. The result is extreme polarisation, a weakening of democratic processes, and a gradual erosion of social cohesion.

If I have learnt anything from lectures on politics, it's that

at the heart of any functional democracy lies the concept of constructive dialogue. People have diverse backgrounds, interests, and perspectives; it is not just inevitable but necessary to have different opinions. However, the manner in which we handle these differences determines whether our discourse will be productive or destructive.

Platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter) and Facebook often amplify outrage, reducing complex issues to bite-sized information. This brevity encourages impulsive reactions rather than thoughtful responses. Users are not simply discussing politics, they are also defending their beliefs which leads to a toxic environment where constructive dialogue becomes a rarity. As an example, we can take into account how a Hindu family in Bhola was under house arrest over an alleged controversial Facebook post in 2021.

A key component of constructive dialogue is the ability to navigate differences of opinion. It is essential to recognise that opposing views are not inherently malicious. Rather, they stem from different experiences and beliefs. Engaging with these differences requires a willingness to listen and empathise rather than to rebut and dismiss. When online discussions devolve into name-calling or personal attacks, they not only fail to advance understanding but also entrench divisions.

When individuals retreat into ideological silos, the potential for collaborative problem-solving diminishes. Bangladesh, for instance, has witnessed a dramatic rise in partisan hostility where members of opposing political parties view each other with increasing animosity.

We must, however, account for the atrocities that each party inflicted

on opposition members during their time in power which exacerbated the tension between them. This polarisation is intensified by algorithms that curate content based on users' preferences – reinforcing existing beliefs and isolating them from dissenting viewpoints. The case of Abrar Fahad still bears witness to how intolerant some are to opposing viewpoints.

The pervasive nature of social media has made it easier for individuals to demonise those with whom they disagree, often framing opposing viewpoints as threats to their identity or values. This binary thinking is detrimental to society and undermines the very principles of democracy. Completely dismissing opposing views have made it nearly impossible to engage in meaningful discussions on serious topics. It's important to remember that these have real life consequences. The recent cases of Utsab Mandal and communal violence demonstrate this phenomenon.

Contrary to the popular notion that consensus is always desirable, disagreement is often the true catalyst of change. Some of the most profound social changes have been driven by dissidents who challenged the status quo. From civil rights movements in the United States to anti-colonial movements in India and Africa, voices that deviated from mainstream thought were crucial in shifting the moral arc of societies. The history of Bangladesh proves this time after time.

In these tumultuous times, we must start by building a culture of tolerance – both in terms of tolerating opposing ideas and, more importantly, acknowledging that no single ideology has a monopoly on truth. This doesn't mean silencing criticism or failing to hold others accountable but rejecting the belief that those who disagree with us are inherently evil or unworthy of respect. Tolerance is not about passivity – it's about restraint and empathy, understanding that real democracy is messy, and disagreements are inevitable, even healthy. We must also resist the temptation of simplifying complex issues into black-and-white narratives that villainise the other side.

Moreover, telling people to "just read more books" in the middle of an argument is indeed like throwing a self-help manual at someone drowning. What could work is sharing your viewpoint without being disrespectful. Think of it like explaining something to a friend who's too stubborn to read the instructions. You don't need to drop Dostoevsky on them. Just be clear, concise, and, above all, not a know-it-all.

The importance of constructive political dialogue cannot be overstated. It is through listening, engaging respectfully, and learning to tolerate – not necessarily agreeing with – differing views that enables us to protect our democratic values and ensure a future where diverse voices can coexist peacefully.

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ILLUSTRATION: SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

Navigating life as an only child

ALLIN MOHANA BISWAS

Growing up as an only child, I often found myself daydreaming about having a sibling. I'd imagine the laughter, the shared secrets, and the sibling rivalry. My parents would smile knowingly when I would ask about having a brother or sister. Their answer was always the same: "You're enough for us." And so, I learned to navigate life as a party of one.

As I've stepped into adulthood, I've realised that my upbringing without a sibling has shaped how I approach relationships. Without siblings, I leaned heavily on my friendships, which became my chosen family. The absence of siblings did not make me lonely. Instead, it taught me to value deep, meaningful connections with those I allow in my life.

Without the constant negotiation and compromise that comes with having siblings, I developed a strong sense of independence and self-reliance. This allowed me to make decisions without needing approval from others. However, it also presented challenges when forming deep connections with people who are more accustomed to an interdependent lifestyle. Sometimes, my strong sense of independence can be misinterpreted as detachment, when really, it's just the way I've learned to cope.

A common misconception is that children who grow up without siblings are more likely to be introverted. That is not always the case. While some may prefer solitude, others are highly extroverted and enjoy social settings. I've found that the adaptability to toggle between solitude and social interaction is one of the hidden strengths of growing up without siblings.

There's also the sobering side of being an only child, which becomes more apparent as parents age. Without siblings to share the load, the responsibility of caring for ageing parents falls solely on your shoulders. This can bring about a unique form of loneliness, as you navigate difficult decisions and responsibilities on your own. While friends can offer support, there's no one else who shares that exact same bond with your parents – no one to truly share the weight of that responsibility.

But then there's the fun side. Peace and quiet were the norm in my childhood home, a state I've come to appreciate even more as an adult. Without the constant noise and chaos that often comes with siblings, I had more time to focus on my own interests and hobbies. I was free to develop a deep sense of self, uninfluenced by the presence of a sibling. And let's be honest, I never had to share my toys, clothes, or my room.

There are moments when I wonder what it would have been like to have a sibling to share the ups and downs of life. But being an only child has made me who I am today – someone who values independence, cherishes deep connections, and finds joy in the little things.

So, sure, it sometimes gets lonely. But at least I don't have to share my chocolate with anyone else.



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

Being nice is underrated

SILWAT QUADER

"She is the nicest person I have ever met. I don't know how she can be nice to even the meanest girl in our class". This was the conversation my younger sister and her friend, both of whom are in seventh grade, were having about one of their friends. And it made me think what an achievement it would be to have someone describe you as the "nicest person they have ever met". While we continuously chase compliments on our looks, success, skills, and abilities, we often overlook the impact of being nice or kind on people, including ourselves. We fail to realise the weight of what it truly means to be kind and nice.

We learn the meaning of these words as early as kindergarten but it takes longer for many of us to truly live by them. Somehow, they become diluted, even undervalued. It is natural for us to comprehend and appreciate the significance or necessity of something only when we go through the experience ourselves because it is often difficult for us to picture ourselves in someone else's shoes.

We expect our friends and family to understand our feelings, sympathise with us, and be there when we need them. Likewise, they expect the same from us. To genuinely connect with others and meet these needs of theirs, we should be able to put ourselves in

their place. While sympathy helps us express concern and sorrow, empathy goes a step further by allowing us to step into the person's world and share in their experience. In doing so, we make them feel seen and heard. Empathy is an emotional bridge that connects us to others and it is one of the most impactful aspects of emotional intelligence.

Being kind is especially important when it comes to building meaningful friendships and relationships. We expect our friends to give us a little space on a bad day, or ignore our rudeness when we are not in the best mood. Every relationship should have room for these small missteps; we should try not to take a friend's temporary grumpiness or silence personally but understand that everyone has off days and we need to give them the space they need. We can achieve this by nurturing empathy within ourselves. It is also important for empathy to be a two-way street. We cannot expect our loved ones to continuously extend patience and grace during our tough times without reciprocating that understanding when they need it.

In our society, being "nice" and "kind" are sometimes viewed as soft or secondary traits. They are considered less significant compared to qualities like being confident, clever, and ambitious. Yet, if we think about it, being kind is one of the most powerful qualities a person

can have. Being kind is not only about being polite but about being genuinely nice and empathetic, even in difficult situations and towards people who do not reciprocate.

While we constantly celebrate the go-getter, the winner, the person who stands out, we think being kind and gentle means letting our guard down and being weak in the face of the fast-tracked, competitive world. However, does kindness mean letting people walk all over you? Certainly not. It is a common misconception that kindness translates into suppressing your own needs. Rather, kindness means not allowing disrespect but holding onto your values even when others do not. You can make the conscious choice to maintain your boundaries while still showing compassion.

It takes quite a lot of courage to always choose kindness, especially in the face of negativity or indifference. So, maybe, being the "nicest person" is not a small achievement after all but rather a badge of honour. If even seventh graders can see that being genuinely nice and kind sets someone apart, maybe all of us should too. Next time someone describes you as "nice", take a moment before brushing it off. It might just be the highest compliment you could receive.

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ILLUSTRATION: ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM