

FENDING OFF CYBER-SHARKS

Karnika Seth

It was a Monday evening. I was preparing for the hearing the next day in a court case, when the phone began to ring frantically. The voice on the other end was both urgent and nervous – it was a client. She was desperately in need of some legal advice. She said that her phone was being tapped, that she was being persistently harassed by someone writing offensive mails to her.

Law has a term for her situation – she was being cyber-stalked! I gave the young woman an appointment and told her to bring her cell phone and laptop along. Her phone was scanned by our forensic team for spyware. Indeed, keyloggers were found to have infected her mobile. Keylogger installation is a serious issue – it makes every keystroke on the phone visible to the person who sent the spyware. Undoubtedly, all data on the phone and her online activity had been compromised! It was evident that the stalker had been following all online activity on her smartphone. The content of the emails received by her was obscene, with her very personal pictures attached, pictures she had no intention to share with anyone and were only saved on her personal phone.

Scared, clueless about the predator, the woman almost broke down talking of the harrowing time she had been going through. ‘I have not slept for the past four-five days,’ she said, recalling how the invisible stalker had been weighing her down. She was traumatized. The intimidating emails had pushed her into a state of panic – she was on the edge of a nervous breakdown. The young woman feared her reputation was at stake and life in danger. She worried that if the offender was not caught immediately, he could harm her further by creating a fake profile on social media or posting the pictures on adult websites.

Her fears were not unfounded. In many cases that I have handled as a cyberlawyer, the usual modus operandi of the offenders is to hack the phone, stalk, resort to identity theft, and ultimately distort the victim’s image on the internet. Cyber-stalking is an offence under Section 354D of the Indian Penal Code, 1860 – punishable with imprisonment up to three years and fine. Section 509 of the IPC makes any word, gesture, or act intended to insult the modesty of a woman an offence punishable with a term of up to three years and fine. Anyone who follows a woman or contacts her despite her clear indication of disinterest or monitors her use of the internet and content of her emails can be accused of stalking. Hacking is an offence punishable with imprisonment up to three years and fine under Section 66 of the Information Technology Act, 2000; it includes offences such as unauthorized access and copying of any data. Section 507 of the IPC punishes a man with a two-year jail term if he intimidates or threatens a woman by anonymous communication.

In this client’s case, a legal complaint was immediately drafted to report the crime. On our advice, the victim lodged a complaint at the police station nearest to her residence. The police began to investigate the case. The investigators promptly called for the relevant data from the concerned social-media website. The website, in compliance with the law, made

available the required information to the law-enforcement authorities, and in no time, the IP address of the stalker was found. The IP address of a computer identifies its status on the internet and its location. This location happened to be a cyber café in this case, and after a couple of days, the stalker was caught red-handed when he came to use the internet. Knowing he had been caught, he confessed to having stalked our client.

Our client was lucky as the accused was identified and nabbed, but some criminals on the internet can be smarter than this offender. The savvier ones use spoofing tools to hide their real identities and locations. They use software and browsers in private or anonymous mode. The internet has revolutionized communication, razing the silos and bringing the world closer. Entertainment, like any other field of activity, can be a curse when misused. Predators take advantage of the anonymity of cyberspace and its borderless expanse to commit innumerable illegal acts in many countries simultaneously and almost with impunity. Almost – because at times, they get caught. Lawyers like me play a role there. Hackers in China might wreak havoc in Europe or India, Russian jocks pose a serious threat to computer users in the US. In terms of the quantum of damage, a major cyber-attack is equivalent to a seven-day conventional war.

Crimes that once took place on the physical plane – blackmail, defamation, tampering with identity-proof documents, theft of records, intimidation, and even extortion – are now happening in the virtual world. As a lawyer, I have had the experience of dealing with all such crimes, representing the victims before the legal fora of the country.

I recall an interesting case of a woman in the US being harassed online by an ex-friend from years ago. At the time of the incident they were estranged, their relationship having ended long ago. The accused set up a fake website in her name and created several fictitious social-media profiles. He created 15 websites and posted her personal letters, greeting cards she had sent him long ago, photos, her passport details and other sensitive personal data to malign her, destroy her reputation.

This client was an Indian national who had settled in the US with her family. Defamatory information about her on the internet was intended to destroy her reputation as much in India as in the US. She had a large number of relatives, friends and acquaintances in India. Anyone could type her name in the Google search engine and access the 15 defamatory websites created in her name or land up on a fake profile of hers! This was a typical case of identity theft and defamation. Identity theft is an offence under Section 66C of IT Act, 2000 with similar terms of punishment – three years. Defamation is punishable under Section 500 of the IPC with a two-year jail term and fine. In defamation cases, criminal action is instituted and claims for compensation are also filed.

One pertinent point to note here is that the damage caused by defamation online is more extensive than if committed offline, simply because the reach and pace of the internet are phenomenally superior to that of the conventional routes of information dissemination.

THE COMFORT OF OUR DIGITAL ECHO CHAMBER

Saadia Azim

One wintry evening in December, when the temperature in Kolkata had dipped below comfort level, and people excused themselves to hurry home, my 60-year-old chauffeur, Brahmadeo Babu, called to say that he couldn't come to drive me from work. He needed to go home early.

I thought it must be the little chill in the air that had made the elderly man want to scurry home. But it wasn't that. The reason was a post that had gone viral on social media troubling his wife. The harried woman called her husband asking him to come back urgently. When their teenage son in Chennai had seen the video, he had immediately called his mother to warn her that it was provocation enough for violence to erupt in the streets of Kolkata – she'd better call his father to rush back before brawls broke out between the rival groups. The video apparently showed riots going on around the city in the wake of a Calcutta High Court order allowing a 'political Rath Yatra' that the state government had banned.

I had seen the news on television in my office and was hooked on the daily dose of fiery debates around the issue between the political party spokespersons in the news studios. I shared my chauffeur's concerns but decided to reason with him. 'Are you okay with me being caught in the street fight all alone? How will I reach home?' He saw the point and agreed to come over to drive me home. Luckily for us, there was no street violence that night. Kolkata was peaceful. On my way home, I realized more than ever before the immense power and reach of social media. Life is now really on Facebook, I thought.

'The mobile is creating all the trouble,' Brahmadeo muttered. 'There has never been so much fear and mistrust.' He shook his head waiting at a traffic light. 'The phone has spoiled everyone – the young are just not afraid of anyone, they don't stop at anything.' He looked up at the sky as if wondering what lay ahead.

The elderly man had rightly guessed that the smartphone was empowerment. In India, the smartphone is 25 years old, Facebook 14, Twitter 12, and Jio just two. Yet it is the toddler Jio that has hustled India into an unprecedented communication frenzy. Instead of jostling for the top end of the market, which is pronouncedly elitist, the upstart new entrant has weaponized vast numbers of underprivileged masses with data calls and data transmission at dirt cheap rates.

In the time of easy communication, this parvenu player radicalized the smartphone market by providing data at practically no cost – that too, for a lifetime. A new passion for easy digital feed is revolutionizing the political and social landscape. About a quarter of 1.25 billion Indians – according to eMarketer, a US digital market research firm – will be on smartphones by the end of 2018. And in the next four years, as speed and rural reach grow, half a billion Indians will use

smartphones to attend to their daily needs. These are exciting times for the business communities, who see this vast smartphone base as an emerging market. A market with immense potential that they need to tap. A whole new army of content generators, search-engine optimization strategists, data analytics miners and social-media specialists has arrived on the scene. And they are determined to win the war. In this era of ‘attention economy’, as media calls it, the battle is for the most valuable present-day resource of people – their attention. And corporates, political parties, policymakers are all vying for that precious attention, to have them hooked on their products. For someone it’s a brand, for another a face of leadership, and for someone else it’s a programme. In this environment, the campaign for data connectivity and data transmission for the masses is once again being re-designed by those who want to monopolize the market. More than subsidies, what is bridging the class gap between the empowered and the marginalized is this rich uninterrupted flow of data.

History, experts say, shows us that ‘how and what we communicate today’ will bring vivid changes in our society tomorrow. A decade and a half into social media and two years of remarkably cheap data in the country, it’s time to ask: Does this time really make a break from the past? Is this shift in our communicating communities lasting and effective for all times?

Recently, my friend, Shoma Ghosh (name changed), of Salt Lake uploaded a new Facebook profile photo from her early 20s – a fun-loving, adventurous, happy-go-lucky youngster flaunting her famous school, her cool neighbourhood and vacations on golden beaches. In the past four years that she has been on the virtual platform, Shoma’s friend list has grown impressively and most of them know her merely virtually. Only a few of us meet her on the ground as well. Most know her as a highflier and social climber active in her community. I think many quietly envy her upscale living. She frequently updates her profile picture and drives traffic to her shared posts. Friends compliment her new looks, and she responds with a quick thank you. When we meet, Shoma makes an honest confession. ‘Facebooking is just my kind of pastime,’ she laughs, explaining her life on social media. ‘It gives me the freedom to be someone I am really not but aspire to be.’

Shoma knows she misleads friends on social-networking sites as she aggressively guards her real life, which is much messier than what the screen shows. She is a masseuse who gives oil massages to women in high-end apartments at a low price. Her unique selling point is the door-to-door service for her clients over the weekend. Her husband does not work and spends his day hanging out with his buddies at teashops. A typical wife beater, the lout blows her money on his bad habits.

‘My little lies are not killing anyone,’ Shoma smiles sadly. Using an app for a perfect picture and making friends with those who would not deign to socialize with her in real life helps the woman deal with her sordid situation. ‘That’s a way of getting out of the mess I am in.’

WORD WAR 2.0: IT'S NOISY ON ALL FRONTS

Dilip Bobb

There is a war out there, and it is being fought without guns, tanks, or aircraft. But it's no less ugly, no less brutal, and it takes no prisoners. The weapons are familiar – a smartphone or a computer and just as powerful and destructive as traditional war weaponry. They are the new armament of politics, what I call 'Word War 2.0', and behind them are anonymous armies – trolls, bots, jocks. Social-media sites are, by definition, interactive Web 2.0 Internet-based applications. Politicians are using social media to build a new narrative via posts, videos and photos of their activities, their views on current issues, and/or trashing opponents. This takes place multiple times in the course of a single day. The twist in the tale comes from the army of right-wing trolls, who support the Prime Minister and the BJP. Like Frankenstein's monster, they set the political agenda and undermine individuals and institutions, alter India's social fabric, and put its democratic and secular credentials at risk. They may not be part of the official social-media cell of the party but are a powerful tool in silencing critics; they're, in short, the collective expression of majoritarian machismo.

Social media started as benign, inane wallpaper for colleagues, classmates, friends and families to exchange greetings, reminders and harmless gossip, along with visual accompaniments. Politicians across the global spectrum – beginning with the US presidential election in 2004 – have now hijacked social media to connect directly with voters and potential supporters and have made it the primary tool for getting their message across. The evening street-corner meetings that were an integral part of Indian politics, have practically been supplanted by powerful platforms such as Twitter, thanks to the frenetic spread of technology and smartphones. President Donald Trump uses Twitter not only as a pulpit for making official policy announcements, but also for spreading his divisive agenda. He is mistrustful and wary of the media, and Twitter allows him to bypass traditional soapboxes. In fact, there are media gurus and serious thinkers who are concerned that governance via social media has cheapened the office of political leaders by substituting hashtag activism for serious policymaking.

Like Barack Obama before him, and Trump now, Prime Minister Modi has used the opportunities of the digital age to maximum political advantage. He used social media to dominate the 2014 elections, wherein he and his party gained a substantial first-mover advantage in the political arena. Before that game-changing election, political dialogue was restricted to what we heard in Parliament, during television debates or electioneering. Today, it is on Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram, all of which provide an open-source platform for breaking news, views, instant reactions, and also abuse and distortions that translate into fake news. It is a space where nothing is sacred, profanity and provocation rule. Like the genie uncorked from the bottle, politicians have taken their cue from trolls in terms of language and hitting below the accepted belt. Indeed, the higher the office, the lower the bar. On 12 November 2018, for

instance, Congress President Rahul Gandhi tweeted, ‘The PM’s latest Demonetisation barf is, “Shell Firms”. Ironically, the only “Shell” firms identified after the great Demonetisation tragedy are: JAY SHAH’S, Temple Enterprises PIYUSH GOYAL’s Flashnet ANIL AMBANI’S Reliance Airports. It takes a thief to know a thief.

To call the prime minister of India a thief would be unthinkable, except in the heat and frenzy of electoral one-upmanship. Now, with social media providing a convenient platform, such provocations are routine and responded to in kind. Modi has consistently used social media and the huge following he commands on Twitter to attack Congress, mocking its preference for ‘one-family’ rule coupled with snide, personal attacks on Sonia and Rahul Gandhi. Taking their cue from him, a range of BJP leaders, from Amit Shah and Arun Jaitley to trigger-happy juniors such as Smriti Irani, Kiren Rijiju and Sambit Patra, have used social media to paint the Congress leadership as ‘anti-national’ or supporters of ‘enemies of the people’. ‘People’, in this case, translates to the government. Led by Rahul, a late bloomer on the social-media scene, Congress leaders have also pulled the Twitter trigger to target the ruling party and its leadership, Shashi Tharoor perhaps being the most active and acidic. In a 26 November 2018 tweet, Tharoor rubs it in with a pinch of scholarly salt: ‘What would Deen Dayal Upadhyaya have made, I wonder, of a PM, who swears by him, saying that this Constitution – very document that Deen Dayal Upadhyaya found fallacious, Westernised, un-Indian & devoid of chiti & virat shakti – is his “holy book”?’

With opposition leaders such as Arvind Kejriwal, Mamata Banerjee, Sitaram Yechury and Omar Abdullah joining in this free-for-all, social media has become a toxic echo-chamber, where sense and sensibility have no place. Speaking at a recent conference on media, KG Suresh, Director General, Indian Institute of Mass Communication, said that he was ‘worried about the aggression in the language of media today. We are calling for war and that is not the true language of media and such language is purely rhetorical and not substantive.’

Social media has created a new measure of political power. Modi, the master of political rhetoric, has depended largely on social media to spread his message of hope, hype and hostility. *The Financial Times* of London called him ‘India’s first social media prime minister’. His only rival then, in terms of followers and frequency of use, was Tharoor. Rahul only took to social media in 2015. With around 45 million followers on Twitter, Modi is well ahead of Rahul (6.77 million followers), but the gap is starting to shrink. Rahul’s aggressive use of social media, frontally taking on Modi, and determinedly undermining the BJP’s anti-corruption claims and the NDA government’s economic record has led to a visible rise in his personal and political stature. From the pretender to the throne, he has now become a credible rival to Modi, and it is largely because of his use of and presence on social media. ‘Now, no serious politician is seen as being able to avoid social media altogether,’ says Tharoor, who until he was overtaken by Modi, was the most-followed Indian politician on Twitter (6.7 million).

AN AVALANCHE OF SHAME

Ankita Anand

I remember about a decade ago I had chanced upon Orkut, now Facebook's prehistoric ancestor. I would spend hours basking in the azure Orkut skies with great delight because it was a chance to reconnect with friends I had lost to IT jobs and their consequent dread of communicating over email after sending emails at work all day, even if to connect with a long-lost friend. A few days into e-socializing, I was warned by well-wishers against putting up my photographs online. They had chosen to replace their own display pictures with white cherubs, celebrities and tulips. Their unsolicited advice stemmed from what they had heard about the misuse of data and pictures online, especially when it came to women. They spoke of morphed pictures, theft and blackmail in the cyberspace.

What they feared was not baseless, but I still chose to live my life – online and otherwise – on my terms, instead of allowing unknown villainous forces to determine my choices. I decided to fight those who stole and misused others' data. It was like marking my own space in the town square with chalk and then going on a stakeout looking for those coming to challenge my right over my spot. I would not give in to the bullies who tried to shrink my world only to my home.

I got a chance to put theory into practice soon enough when, not through Orkut but through Yahoo messenger, an anonymous blackmailer threatened to tell my family that I was dating someone. I was young and taken aback for a moment. But just for a moment. I immediately saw a deep violation of my personal space in that threat. I was outraged by the sick intruding texts. How could a stranger be so bold as to believe that he would have power over me simply because I was flouting a societal norm? I had no intention of handing over my self-respect to him. I denied him what he was looking for – a little attention – and did not respond to his messages. If my family ever received a malicious, anonymous letter, they never spoke about it.

Today – years after the threat – I find the lines of Muriel Rukeyser's long poem resonating with our reality:

*What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?
The world would split open*

Within the #MeToo movement in India, we will find many women outing their sexual abusers online – through Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. The movement is a slap in the face of the annoying adage about a woman being a woman's worst enemy – it has been built on the foundation of female solidarity. Women at the front of the movement have formed a protective wall around those that have shared their horror stories only because they were promised anonymity in the online public space. This has been one of the most heartening examples of a

sisterhood that has always existed but was not adequately acknowledged in the mainstream misogynistic discourse. Through the #MeToo posts, women are changing this discourse – they are now writing back. And these posts will make history. Women are trying to ensure that the survivors, many of whom have had to relive their trauma, get what they need – therapy, legal help, a patient ear. This one hashtag on social media has brought together women across the globe. It has set them free and acted as a trigger for them to retrieve everything they had retreated from.

However, social media has not yet ceased to be the enclosure where women are meant to be abused and psyched out. Sudipti, a school teacher who writes regularly in Hindi both in print and online, told me, ‘As a woman, as long as you are writing on gender and other social issues, you may still be fine. Expand further into religion and politics and be prepared for the backlash. After having written continuously on these issues, I am exhausted of handling the constant whataboutery and prejudice and have stopped.’

Digital footprints are easier to track than physical ones. Women have been taking action against abuse by offering proof in the form of emails and screenshots, thanks to social media making it easier to save and reproduce these. Even those who are not too tech savvy are recognizing the advantages of social media. Niranjani Iyer, for instance, made her Facebook profile under peer pressure without meaning to be active. She is not amongst those who check their Facebook feed before going to bed every night. However, when the #MeToo wave turned into a mighty tide, she woke up to the site’s massive possibilities. ‘I never thought I would say this, but I am so glad that social media exists,’ she says. ‘I would still say Twitter can be noisy, but with Instagram, you can reach so many ... This movement has not yet swamped theatre. But it has made people rethink power equations. The kind of things people in power have got [ten] away with ... I don’t think it’s possible now. The potential for women to come out with their stories is huge.’ She talks about the shame imposed on women, which led them to feel guilty about what was done to them. ‘Now women are speaking up and saying, “You did this”.’

In journalism, theatre, writing, music, films, art spaces, it is sometimes easier to gaslight victims because the abusers have politically correct, progressive masks. The wordplay they employ to defend themselves can also be that much more brazen and preposterous. Take the case of an accused, poet CP Surendran, trying to defend himself in his statement: ‘I believe sexism is an intellectual and physical reality ... I choose not to think in given categories.’

Abusers, too, can use social media to their advantage by creating an easy space for their sanctimonious declamations that contradict their acts of violation, so that the victims hesitate – questioning themselves. The aura the offenders create around themselves fills the survivors’ friends and prospective supporters with doubts and dilemma. Based on a carefully curated image, embellished with enticing details, they announce book deals.

FROM 'ME TOO' TO #METOO

Karen Gabriel

In 2006, Tarana Burke, an African-American civil rights activist from Harlem, launched a movement to aid underprivileged women of colour who were affected by sexual abuse. She coined the bold and declarative phrase 'Me Too' on MySpace, as a survivor statement that announced, 'I'm not ashamed' and 'I'm not alone'. It is, as she observed, a statement from one survivor to another, which says, 'I see you, I hear you, I understand you and I'm here for you or I get it.' It was a movement that, Burke said, came from the 'deepest, darkest place in my soul'. What she was referring to was the origin story of Me Too that happened in 1996, when Burke was a youth camp director and a young girl asked to speak with her privately.

'For the next several minutes, this child, Heaven, struggled to tell me about her "stepdaddy", or rather her mother's boyfriend, who was doing all sorts of monstrous things to her developing body ... I was horrified by her words ... I listened until I literally could not take it anymore... which turned out to be less than five minutes. Then, right in the middle of her sharing her pain with me, I cut her off and immediately directed her to another female counsellor who could "help her better".'

A sexual assault survivor herself, Burke goes on to write, 'The shock of being rejected, the pain of opening a wound only to have it abruptly forced closed again – it was all on her face ... I couldn't help her release her shame or impress upon her that nothing that happened to her was her fault. I could not find the strength to say out loud the words that were ringing in my head over and over again as she tried to tell me what she had endured ... I watched her walk away from me as she tried to recapture her secrets and tuck them back into their hiding place. I watched her put her mask back on and go back into the world like she was all alone, and I couldn't even bring myself to whisper ... me too.'

'Me Too' then was born as a movement to help women and girls of colour speak out without shame and in solidarity, about the sexual misconduct they had survived. It was born out of the awareness that the yearning for disclosure, the need to break the silence, was an overwhelming one. It was born out of the understanding that despite the need to shatter the silence around sexual violence, the taboo, distrust, and prejudice around the speech of women – especially women victims – were enormous. It was born out of the need to hold abusers, and not the survivors, accountable for what had happened – to help survivors and to prevent sexual violence.

In 2016, 10 years after Tarana Burke's 'Me Too', a Hollywood actress, Alyssa Milano, tweeted, 'If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write "me too" as a reply to this tweet.' In response to this, the 'Me Too' campaign went viral as #MeToo on Twitter, various social platforms such as Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram and other blogging sites, which were then to

become sites of empowering empathy. It is in this mass mobilization of empathy that the #MeToo movement achieved what the sexual harassment laws hadn't managed to.

The campaign moved from whisper networks onto social networks and into feminist networks and the mainstream. With #MeToo, the movement of survivors and advocates, which had originally started to help underprivileged women of colour now extended to all people, but especially women, who had been sexually harassed or assaulted, whether in their workplace or otherwise. And even if the people who were called out did not get punished, the women survivors got some closure for what had happened to them. Both 'Me Too' and #MeToo became ways to radicalize healing. But Tarana Burke is very clear that 'Me Too', even in its hashtag avatar (#MeToo), is not a moment but a movement and needs to have the embedded feet, rigorous organizational work, and intense stamina that all movements need. In this context, she has spoken about her deep exhaustion at the quantum of work, the number of incidents, the overwhelming silence around sexual violence and the need to continue to break the enforced silence.

Despite the noise that #MeToo raised, several problems persisted. To begin with, who was willing to speak up about sexual abuse? Even now, women who speak about the sexual abuse that they have suffered are frequently disbelieved, discouraged, derogated, accused of dishonesty, socially despised, and often punished. How was it then possible to speak about sexual abuse without shame, self-blame, hesitation and fear of retaliation? How was it possible to speak of sexual abuse without serious repercussions? In the case of Bhanwari Devi, the repercussions lasted for decades.

Bhanwari Devi, a low-caste woman in Bhatari village on the outskirts of Jaipur, was hired in 1985 as a *saathin*, a grassroots worker, by the Government of Rajasthan for its Women's Development Project (WDP). In 1992, as part of her work, she had to intervene to prevent the marriage of a nine-month-old Gujjar girl. The infant was eventually married off and Bhanwari Devi gangraped by five Gujjar men as punishment for her *insubordination* and interference in the affairs of a caste above hers. When she went to file an FIR, she was humiliated by the policemen, who went on to botch up the investigation. 'Her medical test was conducted 52 hours later, when it should have been done within 24 hours, her scratches and bruises were not recorded, her complaints of physical discomfort were ignored,' a BBC report said, quoting Dr Pritam Pal, who headed the Women's Development Project. Recognizing the intent to cover up, Justice NM Tibrewal of the Rajasthan High Court denied the accused bail in December 1993. He noted: 'I am convinced that Bhanwari Devi was gangraped in revenge for attempting to stop the marriage of [one of the accused] Ramkaran's daughter, a minor.' Unfortunately, and eventually, after five judges were changed, the accused were acquitted of rape and convicted of much lesser crimes.

Bhanwari Devi's case is significant for a number of reasons: (a) it highlights the vulnerability of women at the workplace and the need to remedy that; (b) it rocked Indian society and Parliament, fuelling the landmark Vishakha Guidelines, which became the basis for a 2013 law enacted by Parliament to prevent sexual harassment of women at the workplace (POSH).

FAME? JUST A CLICK AWAY

Nikhita Nair

The '90s kid' is a great tag to get attached to. Though the decade of the 90s is remembered for the 'end of history' with the collapse of the Soviet empire and Eastern Bloc, for millennials like me, it was the time when the virtual world was created with the invention of the internet. The seemingly unassuming invention of interconnected communication network (the world learnt within a few years), in terms of impact, was as profoundly radical as the discovery of the wheel thousands of years ago. It was just appropriate then that soon after the Berlin Wall was razed to the ground and the Cold War ended, the internet connected the whole world. It spread a sense of unprecedented freedom around the world with an effective riposte to the artificial concrete barrier that had stood for 28 years since 1961 as the foremost symbol of political division. The openness of the new world was as stunning as had been the layered segregations along the ideological lines since the Second World War. Within a year of the Wall's demolition in 1990, the net unshackled us of controls and restrictions with the invention of the World Wide Web. Yes, it was a decade of those young people for whom the growth and evolution of the internet was the first and biggest experience of their lives.

Those like me – born after what economist Francis Fukuyama clairvoyantly called 'end of history' – are now young professionals trying to make a mark in different fields. The tentative forays into the virtual world in the early 90s have by now consolidated into a parallel universe. Google is not just a search engine anymore, it's a metaphor for the 21st-century life. We entered the new millennium as citizens of two worlds – the old familiar one and the exciting alternate globe Google ushers you into. For me, at a certain age, Google was only an indispensable companion for doing school work, and Facebook the new language for a group of friends to communicate.

The seismic wave of the social-media turbulence crashed on the shore of culture when an obscure Canadian singer-songwriter Justin Bieber became almost as popular as Michael Jackson, and Mark Zuckerberg presented the cooler version of MySpace as Facebook. Bieber was a YouTuber who had gained massive popularity because of his videos. Radio stations playing his tracks every hour of the day throughout 2010 was a global phenomenon that would not have happened without YouTube. For the first time in recorded history, very ordinary people turned into overnight celebrities – completely bypassing the structures of the establishment, its opaque rules and intricate webs.

YouTube Revolution, a documentary by the National Geographic channel, captures the many dimensions of the behemoth that has revolutionized communication, entertainment, and the free flow of information, making the clumsy old rules redundant. Like YouTube itself, the story of its

discovery was equally unpretentious. Three friends and co-workers at PayPal – Steve Chen, Jawad Karim, and Chad Hurley, all in their twenties – sat in a garage in Silicon Valley one day in 2005, brainstorming to come up with a brilliant idea for a start-up. The idea was simple and, at that point, seemed utterly ludicrous – creating something that would make sharing of personal videos easier. Like Edison, they too did not succeed in their first attempt at formulating that idea. The eureka moment was still far away. The very first video that found its way to people’s computers was shot by the founders themselves. Karim uploaded his own video shot at the San Diego Zoo on 23 April 2005. Chen uploaded his cat’s video. It’s one of the earliest cat videos in YouTube history.

YouTube’s rise was massive in scale and phenomenal in its impact. Every minute, 300 hours of videos are uploaded on YouTube. Assessing this steady rise in their small office in San Mateo, California, Chen knew they would need a bigger place to resolve the storage issue. Google bought YouTube for \$1.65 billion. Today, YouTube’s estimated value is \$70-80 billion. YouTube now owns a bigger office at San Bruno in California. It has also invested in a studio in Los Angeles, where individuals can shoot videos.

Sharing content has now become as easy as sharing food. But what kind of content do they share? Social-media marketers seem to be guided by Aristotle’s ‘ethical strategy’ for effective persuasion – that the communicator must sound credible, be able to evoke emotions in their audience, and come across as sensible. Authenticity and emotional vibe attracted viewers to the early YouTube celebrities. Howard Davies-Carr uploaded a video of his sons on YouTube on 22 May 2007. This most-viewed YouTube video, known as ‘Charlie Bit My Finger’, shows Howard’s elder son Harry (aged three at that time) with his one-year-old brother Charlie. Howard filmed Harry being bitten by Charlie when Harry put his finger into the latter’s mouth. As Harry cries in pain, Charlie grins innocently. This video, an unabashed celebration of ordinary life, won hearts. Its runaway success is evident in the fact that it was found in the video collection of the dreaded Al Qaeda emir Osama Bin Laden. Joys of innocent childhood seem to leave marks even on the most blackened of hearts! As for Davies-Carr and his family, they have made lots of money, and the boys grew up to be global celebrities.

Apart from the neurological activity in the ventral striatum region of the brain, according to Stanford neuroeconomist Brian Knutson’s study, what else gives birth to the phenomenon of virals? Conforming to its medical connotation, a video going viral means that it has garnered many views. University of Pennsylvania professor Jonah Berger makes a penetrating observation, in his book *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*, that sharing something interesting and unheard of gives one ‘social points’. In 2005, EpyBird (the chemist duo) uploaded a video about a Coke and Mentos chain reaction experiment climaxing into a miniature Bellagio fountain. It hit 12.5 million views on YouTube. In addition to boosting EpyBird’s careers, the video resulted in increased sales for both Coke and Mentos. These are the unscripted success stories coming out of nowhere, without the grammar and roadmaps business schools offer for crucial promotional strategies.

Scooter (Scott Samuel) Braun, an American talent manager and entertainment executive, has found an ingenious way of spotting talent – on YouTube. His uncanny skill in spotting talent comes through in his decision to take Justin Bieber and PSY’s videos to the global platform.

POSTS OF UPRISING

MK Alam Khan

In the summer of 2014, the fiercely brutal Islamist militants of Boko Haram kidnapped more than 200 schoolgirls in Nigeria to use them as pawns to have some of their demands conceded. Ultraconservative in their outlook, the group is opposed to girls going to school. Given the government's level of efficiency and state of preparedness, no breakthrough was in sight. The outside world appeared indifferent to the fate of such a large number of children taken hostage by the fundamentalist outfit. Then Oby Ezekwesili, vice president of the World Bank for Africa, made a moving speech asking the Nigerian government to 'bring back our girls'. Her call resonated all around the world, with users tweeting with the hashtag 'BringBackOurGirls' to launch an effective campaign for interventions by the big powers in a seemingly hopeless situation. For rescuing the children, the world needed to step in. The impact was electrifying. The Nigerian government woke from its slumber, announcing a hefty \$300,000 reward for the rescue of the girls and agreeing to accept international help. The US and the UK responded to the crisis by stepping in with aid. US President Barack Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron sent specialist teams to Nigeria to help rescue the girls. US First Lady Michelle Obama expressed concern over the fate of the kidnapped children.

The hashtag used on the internet to draw attention to the brewing crisis in Nigeria is now part of history – a major milestone in the movement for using social media to free open more spaces for public intervention. It has turned into a symbol of an initiative for civil society to have a greater say in affairs often mishandled by government agencies. Along with the gutsy Ezekwesili, #BringBackOurGirls, too, has acquired an enviable status in a world in which social media matters more than the clumsy officialdom. Thousands of people around the world posted their pictures holding placards with #BringBackOurGirls written on them – on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Michelle Obama was amongst them.

Writing in *The Guardian*, Matt Collins points to the emergence of the new continent of social media – alert, omnipresent, and being increasingly heard. Despite not being a real substitute for street action, Collins says, its reach and impact are immense. 'But world governments listen, and act, when enough people speak,' he says. 'Social media is the most shareable, durable and global collection of voices the world has ever seen, one which is increasingly difficult to ignore.' The Nigerian campaign was a turning point for the Twitter hashtag as well. It told the world that 'social media is more than just pictures of meals and cocktails'.

From the Nigerian capital of Abuja to Istanbul is a distance of more than 6,500 km, from the heart of Africa to the meeting point of Europe and Asia. But both are equally connected to the masses by the live wire of social media. In the summer of 2013, protests erupted in Istanbul over the government's decision to flatten a popular city park to construct a shopping mall. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's regime resorted to brutal police action to repel the protesters. The

barbarity of police action stunned the nation, raising questions about the character of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. Even Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç deplored the police excesses against ordinary people who were protesting to save a park. Significantly, the ruling AKP had repressed the mainstream media to such an extent that their audience had already migrated to Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. By the time protests took over the capital city, spreading to Ankara and Izmir, Turkish media had effectively been sanitized. While CNN International covered the waves of angry protests on the city streets, CNN Türk, the network's Turkish channel, broadcast a documentary about penguins nuzzling around icy waters. Twitter played a crucial role in mobilizing the participants and sustaining the protests. In a macabre move, Erdoğan praised the police action against the protests. His insensitivity acted as an extreme provocation – angry, battered, betrayed, the people in no time turned what was simply a protest to save a park into an anti-Erdoğan movement. It is another matter that the ruthless man still won the next elections.

Journalist Servet Yanatma quotes Esra Dogramaci, a digital consultant in Turkey, to highlight the grip social media has over the country's urban areas. In the cities and amongst professional classes, social media is very popular, its influence growing. Students and political activists are taking to Twitter in ever-increasing numbers. Twitter and Facebook are popular platforms for sharing everything and disseminating information. They are the vehicles news rides on. However, Dogramaci points out, while out of an entire population of 77 million people, 35 million have access to the internet, and the number of Facebook users is around 30 million, only six million (or eight per cent of the population) use Twitter. Amongst the Twitter users, the majority are in the cities.

That was perhaps the reason Erdoğan's hold over the countryside did not wane, despite his autocratic ways and repressive tactics. Unlike some of the dictators in the Arab world, he won the next elections and further consolidated his position.

In light of Erdoğan's comfortable victory in the general elections in June 2018, experts questioned the power of social media in hastening the fall of despots. It must be kept in mind that the protests that erupted in Istanbul were prompted by the government's decision to wipe out a park. Only later did the movement shift its focus to the strongman. But two years before the Istanbul uprising, social media – more specifically, forces unleashed by internet – triggered an upheaval in the unlikely territory of the Middle East. This event has gone down in history as the Arab Spring.

In reality, it was nothing short of a massive desert storm that uprooted the political totems and upset long-held political certitudes in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya – giving the power to the people.

INEXORABILITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Asha Mishra Upadhyay

My name is Bana. I'm 7 years old. I am talking to the world now live from East #Aleppo.

This is my last moment to either live or die. – Bana'

The tweet dated 13 December 2016 from the little girl trapped inside the war-ravaged Syria shook the world's conscience with its stark simplicity and poignancy, unmatched since Anne Frank's diary detailing her life in hiding during the darkest days of Hitler's Holocaust. As Bana's microblog travelled across the continents, there was an outpouring of sympathy for her. With rockets raining down on Aleppo, Bana, her brother and her parents boarded a crowded bus, setting out on a journey that finally took them to Turkey. By the time she arrived in New York to visit the United Nations headquarters, she was already a child ambassador of peace and a celebrity.

Known as the Anne Frank of Syria, Bana did not have to meet the same fate as the 12-year-old in the German-occupied Netherlands, who had died in a Nazi concentration camp. Why? Because social media offered her a lifeline. Indeed, many disasters have been averted, lives saved, famines fought, epidemics contained with the effective intervention of powerful e-platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. In vast swathes of land across Asia and Africa, aid workers and activists have taken to Twitter to communicate to the targeted groups, affected people, and to each other.

Let's follow the conversation that has been going on between the youths and the health workers in Uganda.

What do you consider when you decide where 2 get SRH (sexual reproductive health) services? A. Distance B. Cost C. Type of service D. Friendly staff E. Privacy F. Flexible working hours G. Other-tell us.'

'Youth-friendly service providers should be familiar with adolescent dev't, have counselling skills, know appropriate medical options 4 adolescents based on age & maturity.'

'The facility should have clear & visible information about youth clinic hours, location, displays of information & health education materials related to SRH.'

The texts – both questions and answers – are friendly and informal. Exchanged on 2 November 2018, they are important inputs for the database crucial to the success of the healthcare programme in that country. The free SMS service launched in 2011 with the UNICEF support involves these young people in a campaign aimed at safe sex, reproductive health and childcare. The initiative is intended to give ordinary people a role in decision-making and policy-framing,

in addition to ensuring transparency and accountability at the grassroots. The programme, which has now grown into a full-fledged movement, engages over 145,000 active U-reporters and is spreading to newer areas with support from the UNICEF, NGOs, youth organizations, faith-based outfits and corporates. Today, U-report is available in 54 countries, including India, and has more than six million users.

The UN has played an important role in systematizing the feedback process to the government. Simple in conception, the UNICEF's U-report was transformative in impact. The UNICEF set up a group of students and youths, handed them smartphones (if they did not have one already), and linked them to an easy programme where they had to provide a simple yes or no answer on the availability of basic services such as water, presence of teachers and condition of roads. The data was collected and shared with Uganda's ministries of youth, health and education as well as its lawmakers. This provided direct and unmediated feedback to the government ministers and officials, without them having to take hours of journey, away from their desks, to visit the field. The result was swift and startling. The local government realized the importance of the 'U-report' when they started hearing directly from the upper echelons. This successful use of the digital platform resulted in its rapid percolation through the organization, globally. The UNICEF set up an innovation centre in Kampala, headed by Dr Sharad Sapra, to ensure that this success was replicated and amplified through its global operations.

Africa has for a long time been a focus area for the UN agencies. In Sierra Leone, during the mudflow of August 2014, the UNICEF and the government used the data from the U-report media to identify where contaminations were happening and deliver safe water to those most in need.

'The information I receive is useful,' says Daniel who lives in Freetown. 'I received an alert of information on cholera. I was alerted not to drink water that is contaminated. Since we received that information, not a single case of cholera has been found.' He is grateful for the vital information transmitted through U-report. 'I joined U-report in July this year. I like it. I was able to confirm I received my cash transfer [from the government] through U-report,' he said.

Interestingly, much of the opinion and responses generated through the SMS campaign finds its way to Facebook and Twitter. The reach, penetration and easy acceptability of these e-platforms are good reasons for the aid industry to adopt social media as a route to the masses. A very convenient tool for connecting with friends around the world, I discovered with awe its phenomenal power to take messages to the targeted social groups and back.

No wonder then that citizens across the globe – more so in the developed countries, with better response and support systems – have come to appreciate and trust the power of social media. According to a survey of 1,058 adults by American Red Cross, 18 per cent would turn to digital social media to seek help if calls to the emergency number 911 were unsuccessful. Significantly, aid agencies are increasingly using digital technology and social-media tools such as Facebook and Twitter to monitor and respond to events and collaborate with partners during emergencies.

THE TWITTER POWERHOUSE

Saurabh Sharma

Remember #MyChoice? This turned into a phenomenon in 2015. Shot in deceptively mellow black and white, featuring 99 women – Deepika Padukone amongst them – the spectral women in the mime give no hint of soft lyricism but make an unabashedly bold statement about an approaching mutiny, about their determination to break free of the patriarchal stranglehold. Directed by Homi Adajania, the Vogue Empower campaign video announces the arrival of the new woman with a chilling effect. It declares her freedom of choice, that her mind is as unfettered as her body.

I was in my third year of college. I recall the video being played on Delhi Metro, as part of television debates, college teachers talking about it, soft-skills trainers telling us to analyse the video in case it came up in internship interviews. Deepika, who had made public her lonely battle with depression a while ago, was also trending. The timing of the video was just right to impact its audience. The talented actor seemed to have embodied the new mood, putting you on the razor's edge: freedom or bondage, for or against Deepika?

If we do not get down to think about why this 155-second video received such an overwhelming response, turning the hashtag into an obvious topic for discussion ahead of other pressing issues, we will never get to unravel the conundrum of online communication – what it's all about and how it works. What made the viewers watch and share it? Did the video gain massive viewership by leveraging Deepika's depression? Did people think that empathizing with the young actor in her distress would be like supporting a good cause? How did the video go viral? Because its content was relevant, easy to grasp?

Videos like #MyChoice, and some tweets that become hugely successful, possess some elements of 'engagement essentials'. The success of #MyChoice can be traced to its ability to spark a conversation across cultural boundaries. It challenged the certitudes by raising questions about choices women have or are denied and set the stage for an investigation into the hidebound social mores that limit women's space and curb their freedom. Are they actually free and empowered to exercise some of the choices that men simply take for granted? This video, no doubt, was a big online moment.

A similar virtual surge was experienced when a massive sense of outrage swept over the country in the wake of the Nirbhaya gangrape in 2012. The conversations that had started on social media did not stop just at calling for the rapists' death by hanging but went on to unfold a charter of changes, both legal and societal. The tidal wave of anger splashing over social media fuelled the fight against the sloppy legal system. The previous year a similar upsurge had been seen in

favour of a campaign for the Jan Lokpal Bill to end corruption in public life. An estimated 3.2 million internet users participated in the campaign that ultimately resulted in Parliament passing a resolution on 27 August 2011 adopting the Bill. This was a rare social-media triumph, and it triggered an optimism that made people believe that corruption could be wiped out. It was social media that networked the equally concerned segments of civil society, rallying them behind a cause.

Interestingly, more and more social and political discourses are migrating to the virtual world from the streets. An effective social-media campaign can be more impactful than a massive rally on the ground, because it is interactive and borderless. An 18-year-old Astha Sarmah took on President Trump on the sensitive issue of climate change. When temperature dipped to -2 degrees in Washington DC on 21 November last year, Trump seized on it to trash concerns over global warming. He tweeted: ‘BRUTAL and EXTENDED COLD BLAST could shatter ALL RECORDS. Whatever happened to GLOBAL WARMING.’

Sarmah, a resident of Jorhat, Assam, spiritedly retorted, ‘I am 54 years younger than you. I just finished high school with average marks. But even I can tell you WEATHER IS NOT CLIMATE. If you want help understanding that, I can lend you my encyclopedia from when I was in 2nd grade. It has pictures and everything.’ This tweet got over 27,000 likes and retweeted over 7,000 times.

A celebrity tweet going viral is understandable. Deepika Padukone, Amitabh Bachchan, Shobhaa De, Virat Kohli – their tweets are endorsed with thousands of likes. But Astha? This is the social-media magic, which can turn a plain Jane into a star – overnight.

The ‘why’ behind the popularity of posts by unknown people can be explained by ‘engagement essentials’, a term that qualifies the quality of interaction. Any post, video, instastory, short film, or open letter needs to have one or more of the following essential elements to come under this bracket:

- i. Easy to access, market and consume
- ii. Offering good content
- iii. Having ‘star value’
- iv. Possessing a high emotional quotient
- v. Addressing pain-point(s)
- vi. Being topical
- vii. Having a ‘curiosity quotient’ – what’s next?

Keeping these pointers in mind, it is now clear how one post, instastory, blog, or video captures the fancy of the netizens, making them feel that this was exactly what they wanted to say.

END OF HATE

Sanjay Jha

Denigrating an ancient religion? What sacrilege! Must be hanged from the nearest tree...

this disgusting bitch!’

Sweta was quite used to abuses on Twitter. Cuss words flowed freely on a platform supposed to promote urbane conversations. But she didn’t expect this man’s language to turn so volatile, so viciously morbid. From his profile, she knew Saket had gone to an elite college and, later, a famed management school. A junior executive in a multinational company – and what dark rage boiled inside him! Such an accomplished young man harboured so much of bigotry and hate? Unthinkable. She had been dealing with the riffraff of the monkey brigade ever since she joined Twitter. Trolls had targeted her with sadistic delight. In their eyes, her crime was worse than murder or rape – she pleaded for sanity, for a conversation to settle disputes; she questioned fake news and false propaganda; she rejected chauvinism. This, for the faith watchdogs, was more horrible than all the seven deadly sins put together. And they bayed for her blood; raped and mutilated her. All this, of course, inside the dark crevices of their sick minds – and on Twitter. Since they took control of Satta Fort a few years ago, the ochre soldiers had run amok. ‘Look ochre, think ochre, speak ochre,’ their new war cry. Sweta smiled reading another tweet. ‘The whole country will be ochre one day,’ she said to herself, rather amused by their shallow thoughts expressed in bare, broken language, which nonetheless reeked of violence.

But Saket was not one of those hoodlums – some of his tweets spoke of his interest in classical Hollywood and Gothic architecture. He admired Richard Burton and Dustin Hoffman. ‘Then how could he unleash such mayhem, call me a bitch, decide to hang me?’ She knew that for the faith soldiers, her peace talk was an act of betrayal. *A doe who does not mind the eaters of banned meat raping her serially.* The provocation was her critique of the alarm raised over the so-called ‘love jihad’ that had been blown out of all proportion. An elderly man – seemingly a retired bank employee – who flaunted his rabid patriotism using maces and tridents as his profile picture on Twitter, had said ominously, ‘If the whore does not mind being violated by the circumcised, send her to the terror camps across the border.’ Yes, she was the traitor Saket wanted to kill. Sweta was keen to understand the mind of the young man who breathed such violence.

At first, she decided to ignore the intimidation, the brutality of Saket’s words. Then, she thought of probing his mind further – layers of darkness spawning hate and vengeance for perceived wrongs. It was almost midnight, but she was still awake. ‘So, which tree will you hang the “bitch” from – mango or neem? Will you do it yourself or ask the goons from the brotherhood to finish off this infidel?’

There was no immediate response. Sweta switched off the bedside lamp in an attempt to catch some sleep. She felt a strange agitation in her heart. *Does the man – his thick black hair slicked back, wire-rimmed glasses hinting at a long reading habit – belong to the faith brigade? A vigilante? He will hang me, impale me with a trident, but first of all, he will rape me.* Her eyes twitched. Were they getting teary? She wondered why he had not replied. *Because he has nothing more to say. After promising death, what more could he do? How easily they hand down death sentences, warrants for mutilation of female bodies.* Sweta had joined Twitter to expand her cultural territory – to converse with interesting people, those with ideas. Now, she wanted to quit.

‘I only said people like you, the heretics deserve to be killed.’ Early in the morning, Saket’s reply was sitting there in the message box, like shrapnel in grass. ‘Change your views or somebody will indeed kill you one day.’

‘So you won’t hang me from a tree yourself? Don’t have the courage, eh!’ Sweta tweeted. While typing, she noticed her hands were shaking, a lump forming in her throat. ‘Still, you scream murder. Why? To impress the ochre gang that you can be the hangman you really aren’t?’ A second tweet.

Before she could move on, the reply came: ‘I am not a killer, I only wanted to warn you.’

Sweta tweeted: ‘Killing an innocent girl – is that good or bad? Should somebody be killed for holding a particular view?’

Saket did not reply at once. A little rattled? After all, he was not a criminal. This hesitation, this dithering – a sure sign of his conscience, that he was human. Her lips curved into a subtle smile.

A while later, he defended himself: ‘Innocent? Defaming a great religion is innocence? Why do you run down the idol worshippers?’

Sweta laughed, punching the air. The bully was softening. ‘I never defamed them. I am one of them. My problem is with those who are giving this faith a bad name. The world thinks we are no different from the Taliban.’

While Saket seemed to be in a dilemma, the army of trolls rained abuses on Sweta. Every part of her body was called for mutilation. *She is a tart sleeping with the underworld dons, the enemy within. At a time when brave jawans are fighting on the border against terror attacks, this misguided young woman is spewing nonsense. An errant child whose parents failed to give her good values, drill some sense of patriotism into her.*

The abusive roar went on.

Saket usually relished the sharp barbs and invectives people showered on secular intellectuals and activists, gleefully retweeting the feed. *If we can stand up for our religion, then why can’t they?* The question had always raged inside him. Still – he somehow did not like the savage attack on Sweta today. He had always detested her prim certitude, her sanctimonious insolence. But now that all the ochre soldiers were clamouring for her blood and bits of her flesh, he felt queasy. A tinge of sadness flit through his mind as he left for work, wondering if he had made a mistake posting the tweet.