140 CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF A PURPOSE

Worries and Wonders of Social Media

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To many, '140' is just a number, but mention it to someone young and the immediate response will be 'Twitter'. This popular app—with posts limited, till recently, to 140 characters (now increased to 280 in most languages)—is widely used to convey views and, occasionally, news (true or false). It is an almost perfect metaphor for today's hurried, everything instant, interconnected world, in which brevity is the soul of twit. 'Twit', you might well wonder; well, twit is a good (and brief, even if unfair!) nomenclature for someone who uses Twitter, a twitterer.

Condensing thoughts—reactions or views may be more appropriate terms—to 140, or even 280 characters, is in itself an art. Of course, it necessarily means more statements and assertions, rather than sentences of logical argument. A tweet is basically a statement stripped of all flesh, down to the bare bones. It is sent out in the hope that even if it is not persuasive, it conveys the basic point or has shock value, as is illustrated by the anecdote that follows.

A twitist (a tweeting expert, again abbreviated as twit) walks into a fish shop and asks the owner: 'Do you sell stale fish?' Greatly offended, the owner says, 'Of course not.' 'Then, remove the redundant word "fresh" from your sign outside which says "Fresh fish sold here".' The owner does so and his billboard now reads, 'Fish sold here.' The next day, another twit walks in and asks, 'Do you give your fish free of cost?' The owner points out that he runs a business, not a charitable organisation. 'Then,' says the twit, 'why do you have "sold" in your billboard?' The owner is not quite sure about the comment, but does make the change to his board to read 'Fish here'. Immediately, a third twit walks in and exclaims, 'Your

sign is right outside your shop. Why do you need to say "here"?' And so the sign was abbreviated to just 'Fish'. That might suitably convey the twitterisation of the shopkeeper's billboard, and end the story.

Soon after, an emoji designer walks in with a friend. The former offers to design an appropriate visual—like an emoji—to replace the word 'fish'. Her friend, though, is even more of a minimalist and tells the shopkeeper, 'I can smell your fish from a mile away. You don't need words, or even a sign, to say that there's fish here.' And so, the story ends with a blank billboard outside the shop!

This is indeed a tale about the brevity and minimalist approach on Twitter, but it is also one about a platform (the billboard, in this case) devoid of any meaningful content.

Twitter is but one of a number of apps that comprise 'social media', a new form of communication that has taken the world by storm. E-mail and texting (short messaging service, SMS), the by-now conventional methods of communication, are still very extensively used. However, the new tools—WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter—have seen phenomenal growth in terms of their reach. The figures summarise their story: Facebook has 2.2 billion monthly active users globally, 270 million of them in India; the figures for WhatsApp are 1.5 billion, and 200 million (February 2018); and Twitter has 335 million users worldwide, with 10 million in India.[1]

Social media is used extensively for creating connected groups, based on linkages of one kind or another. They can be based on a specific professional or personal interest, a common hobby, a previous affiliation (e.g., alumni groups), a family connection, or a whole host of other possibilities. Social media, especially through apps such as Facebook and LinkedIn, have helped people to discover long-lost friends and associates; many have reconnected after decades with nearly forgotten classmates, neighbours or colleagues.

The young are almost addicted to one or other of the various social apps and spend a great deal of time on these. Many feel that this is at the cost of face-to-face conversation and bemoan the intermediation of a machine (the mobile phone) in human-to-human communication. If you walk into a restaurant, you are likely to see groups of people with their heads bowed over their mobile phones, rather than talking to each other. You will also see many

of them taking 'selfies'—photographs which are promptly forwarded ('WhatsApped') to all in their group. Some will even be taking and forwarding pictures of the food that they are eating! A considerable amount of content on social media consists of such selfies or endless forwards of jokes. It sometimes seems that these apps are rather like Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (hence, with due acknowledgement and apologies to this Italian playwright, my title for this piece). Here, technologies are in search of meaningful use.

Nevertheless, the power of the social media is not in doubt. US President Donald Trump conveys key decisions and often conducts diplomacy (although one is not sure if that is at all the right word for what he does) through Twitter. The short, abrupt format of Twitterese probably suits his style best. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has over 44 million followers on Twitter, and Rahul Gandhi has eight million, making this a very potent means of political communication.[2] Its economic impact is also visible through such examples as American TV star Kylie Jenner's tweet about Snapchat. Unhappy with the app's redesign (in February 2018), she tweeted, 'Sooo does anyone else not open Snapchat anymore? Or is it just me...ugh, this is so sad.' That tweet, which reached her 24.5 million followers, caused a 7 per cent drop in Snapchat's value, wiping out $1.3 billion off the stock market value of the parent company, Snap.

One of the visible changes in society is a redefinition of privacy. It is now commonplace to be a forced listener to high-volume private conversations in public places, carried out over a mobile phone. Thoughts and moments once considered private are now sent out in text or photographic form to large numbers of barely known people via social media. This voluntary sharing of material, once considered intimate and known only to close friends at most, is clearly a reinterpretation of 'private'. While one could attribute this to evolving social norms, one can argue that these new norms have, in fact, been catalysed by technology.

This narrowing of the private domain is, inexplicably, taking place at the same time as a rising new consciousness about the importance of safeguarding privacy. Around the world, new laws and regulations are being introduced for protecting and safeguarding personal data. Europe has recently put in place the

General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), and in India we are amidst a vigorous debate on a draft privacy and data protection law recommended by a government-appointed committee, chaired by Justice B. N. Srikrishna.

On one side of the debate are those who favour minimal restrictions on data: what is collected, where it is stored, and how it is used. The IT industry, and particularly multinational companies (MNCs), favour such an 'open' regime, with few constraints. Opposing this viewpoint are many civil rights organisations and 'Indian' companies which believe that an insistance on data localisation (the mandatory storage of data in India) will level the playing field vis-à-vis MNCs. In this camp are also proponents of the view that 'data is the new oil', and this valuable resource must stay within the country.

It is true that the very large data sets generated in India (thanks to the size of our population, as also rapidly growing online usage) are valuable for a variety of purposes. A major use will be for developing, refining and rolling out applications created through machine learning and artificial intelligence, which depend on the availability of massive databases. However, MNCs too can do this—even if there is a mandatory requirement to store data only in India—by setting up or using data centres in India. Thus, a data localisation policy is not necessarily going to favour Indian companies, as compared to MNCs. It will certainly promote the setting-up of data centres in India, but that is an altogether different aspect.

There are legitimate concerns about data leaks and the misuse of data in many countries (including India) around the world. It is for this reason that many favour laws that require tight data protection and limit the purposes for which an individual's data may be used. This, though, has little to do with where the data is stored. One genuine problem with cross-border storage of data is that of ensuring access for law enforcement purposes. While there are arrangements (such as the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty), these are time-consuming and generally seen as not serving the intended purpose. The issue of state agencies 'informally' accessing data without going through the formal legal process is also a possibility. This is obviously far easier if the data is within the country.

The push towards data localisation is one example of 'Internet schizophrenia'. On the one hand, the Internet has been perceived

and conceptualised as a global, open and free network, accessible to all; on the other, it is being fragmented as a result of social, political and legal (economic, too, in some cases) compulsions of countries. A similar dichotomy is visible between the early hopes of the Internet as a platform that enabled the decentralisation of content creation, of every individual being not just a recipient, but also a creator of content. Instead, the trend is towards large, central and global companies, such as Netflix and Amazon, being the major sources of content.

In this regard, social media has been even more of a disappointment. At the start of this decade, many credited communication technology for the dramatic wave of mass protests that swept North African/Arab countries—the 'Arab Spring'—which began in 2010. These 'technologies of freedom' were also regarded as important drivers for democratisation in countries of Central/Eastern Europe, the 'Colour Revolutions', a decade before the Arab Spring. Despite the not-so-happy ending—with spring quickly turning into scorching totalitarian summers in many countries—one saw the potential of new technologies to mobilise people for positive causes. In India, this potential was translated to ground-level reality in the huge turnouts in New Delhi, protesting the horrendous Nirbhaya rape and murder in December 2012. Yet, in spite of these examples, social media is not the force for good that most thought it would be. Instead of platforms for the exchange of ideas, the broadening of horizons, and civilised debate and dialogue, there is a rapid degeneration into negative forums for inane posts, stereotyping, hate-mail, abuse and trolling, as also for fake news or misinformation.

The tragic impact of the viral spread of rumour sometimes has terrible consequences.[3] Some months ago, in July 2018, one young person was killed by a mob because it suspected him and his three friends—travelling from Bangalore to visit a relative in a nearby village—of kidnapping children. The false news about the kidnappings was already going viral on social media; now photos of the four youngsters were also circulated—as suspects. They were spotted, stopped, and a mob soon collected; beaten mercilessly, one of the four died.[4] Sadly, there are also a number of other reports of lynching and mob violence—aimed particularly against alleged cow smugglers—triggered by the circulation of ill-founded stories

and rumour. Of course, lynching points to a greater and deeper societal malaise; but it does seem that the viral spread of social media posts and its echo-chamber effect generate a great deal of emotional irrationality (even hate), and are, therefore, catalytic factors.

At the same time, new-age tech companies—once the flag bearers and heroes of what seemed like a new golden age—are increasingly being perceived as villains. They are faulted for lax data protection, for collecting extensive personal data and misusing it, and doing little to tackle the menace of hate speech and false news, amongst other things. Those in the dock, at least in public perception, include Facebook, WhatsApp and Google.

While recognising the present negativity surrounding social media, it is equally important to note its numerous positive uses. Many businesses use social media for marketing their products and services, or for staying connected with their customers, employees and business partners. This is particularly invaluable for small and micro businesses, which cannot afford the cost of advertising in conventional media. The new tools also provide them a very low-cost means of reaching out to distant places to tap new customers, without middlemen and their commissions. Thus, a craftsperson in a village in, say, Rajasthan, can now easily and directly promote her products through a website or WhatsApp to potential customers in Europe or the United States. At the other (hyper-local) extreme, neighbourhood-based ironing services or mobile (hand-cart) vegetable vendors find messaging services and WhatApp calls a practically no-cost method of staying connected with their customers. This enables them to provide their services when needed, rather than waste their time on sometimes fruitless visits to each home, a few of which may be locked or not in immediate need of their services.

Social media is also being widely used for learning. Apps that teach English are particularly popular. This is not surprising, given that English is seen as the pathway to upward mobility. The best known of the educational apps is 'Byju's: The Learning App'. This smartphone app, available from 2015 onwards, provides educational content for students of Class IV–XII. The company also trains students for various competitive examinations and entrance tests for educational institutions. It is now reportedly planning to launch an app for students of Classes I–III. Founded in 2011 by

Byju Raveendran, the company began as one person (Byju himself) tutoring students. Today, according to reports, it has 30 million registered students, with two million annual paid subscribers, and is now in the process of expanding into the global market, including the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. Its most recent funding round of $400 million values the company at around $3.6 billion.[5] Clearly, education—more specifically, educational technology—has become a booming business proposition. Technology depends on scale for growth and profitability, and thus new technologies in education are focusing on reaching the massive number of Indians in the lower middle class, whose aspirations value education. Their willingness to spend their hard-earned money on education for their children is a source of income for entrepreneurs. Educational apps, mostly developed by young entrepreneurs and their start-up companies, are proving to be a big boon to those deprived of a good education as a result of geography (small towns, remote and rural areas) or affordability (conventional education in private schools is far more expensive). This is certainly one very positive aspect of how the new communication tools are being used.

The new technologies have led to a social benefit of a different kind. Many people have unexpectedly discovered long-lost friends or former classmates and neighbours through sites such as Facebook or LinkedIn, or through WhatsApp groups or Twitter. This is especially useful for those born before the 1980s, who in their youth could not have had an e-mail ID or a fixed mobile number (possible now, thanks to number portability). As a result, they quickly lost touch with former colleagues and friends as they moved from job to job and city to city (sometimes across countries). Nostalgia now brings them together, after technology has helped them locate one another. For common-interest groups, such as school classmates from decades ago, WhatsApp facilitates an ongoing link, irrespective of city or continent and at next to no cost. Other common-interest groups may be purely functional—those living in the same housing complex, for example—and used for specific utilitarian communication ('the power supply will be off from 3 to 5 pm today'; or 'does anyone know of a good pediatrician nearby?'; or 'a residents' lunch is being organised next Sunday').

These positive examples notwithstanding, the downside of common interest groups has become more prominent of late.

Many of them end up as mere echo-chambers in which people who share a similar perspective (which is the bond that forms the group) exchange messages and 'forwards' that serve only to reinforce their views, often resulting in amplifying stereotypes. This may well be the genesis for mobilising people around a 'hate agenda', culminating in growing lynchmobs of the type mentioned earlier.

Of growing concern too is the role of social media in influencing political choices, done through accessing data (often obtained through devious or dubious means). For instance, according to reports, one political party created 8,000 WhatsApp groups to deliver targeted messages for a recent state election in India.[6] This was based on the data of millions of people, segmenting them into interest groups so that specific messages could go to each of them, based on their personal and social characteristics. This requires access to massive databases about individuals, and a strong analytical engine at the back-end. It was an effort of a similar kind that put Facebook in the dock (because it shared its data with Cambridge Analytica). In the United States, accusations of attempted interference and influence (by Russia) in the US presidential election of 2016 are flying thick and fast, with social media giants at the receiving end.[7] Clearly, the huge amount of personal data collected by global social media corporations (as also by others, such as Google and Amazon)—often on the basis of online 'consent' given by users to an endlessly long agreement written in legalese—is liable to misuse, either by intention or through accidental leakages.

Sophisticated data analytics, combined with artificial intelligence and machine learning, along with an analysis of an individual's social media posts and Google searches, is used to model behaviour. Now, models can also predict behaviour and determine how to influence and shape it. Add to this other available data—extracted from credit card transactions—about where and what you ate, where you shopped for which items, your travel details (from location data); top it up with surveillance data (from CCTV cameras installed around cities and in buildings) and there is little about you that stays private. Not only is Big Brother here already, but he is now beginning to guide your behaviour through carefully selected stimuli sent through social media or otherwise.

The government's access to so many details about an individual are often privileging 'security' above freedom, 'law enforcement' above privacy, and moving from the ideal of a welfare state to the surveillance state. Interestingly, it is not only totalitarian regimes that are culprits: many democracies too are on this trajectory, tapping diverse data sets about individuals for 'the greater good'. Fears about terrorism in countries around the globe, greatly heightened and amplified by the media, have led to near paranoia in many countries. This has made it easy for governments everywhere to persuade citizens about the need for a trade-off between privacy and security. As a result, most people are more than willing to sacrifice privacy (and tolerate high and growing levels of surveillance) at the altar of enhanced security (or, rather, the promise of it). Moreover, while there is discussion, and laws for data protection and privacy, direct or indirect provisions are built into regulations to enable access by the government.

At the same time, private companies are collecting ever more data. Some sell it, others analyse and use it themselves. New revelations about data being shared with favoured partners are being made regularly, drawing much ire on the giant new-age companies. Increasingly, large databases and deeper analysis, along with machine learning and artificial intelligence, have now moved beyond merely helping to pop up customised advertisements based on the sites visited or purchases made. It is now possible to predict behaviour with a fair degree of accuracy. The critical input is personal data. Thus, the boon of quick and easy online searches, the convenience of shopping without leaving your home, downloading useful apps, and innocuous postings on social media—these now pose unknown dangers. Taken together, and accessed by any group or organisation that also has a lot of such data about others, the data collected or available from these can model and predict your behaviour. Further analysis can decipher the stimuli which influence you to act in a particular way, opening the way to influencing and shaping your behaviour. This is analogous to hacking into the electronics of a modern car and providing it inputs which can change its speed or direction. Clearly, there are deep and serious implications of such behaviour modelling, based on data that most of us willingly—if unthinkingly—provide: not only to the government, but also to private entities in the country and abroad.

As data which delves into the private lives of individuals becomes a powerful business tool, it is also a means to model, predict and influence behaviour. For India and Indians, this is a special cause of worry. Thanks to new technologies, such as 4G, intense competition (mainly triggered by Reliance Jio in the last two years) and the consequent decline in price of data downloads, Indians are now the biggest mobile data consumers in the world. According to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), in the three years from the end of 2014, the average data consumption increased from 0.26 GB to over 4GB per person, and prices dropped from an average of ₹269 per GB to ₹19 in 2018.[8] The implications of low prices, massive data consumption and 1.2 billion mobile phones hit home when one notes that a large proportion of the content is user-generated, and much of this personal (photographs, videos, views on various topics), providing insights into an individual. Even with content generated elsewhere, its consumption pattern (what is seen, how much and when) conveys a great deal about an individual's tastes and preferences—more data inputs for behaviour modelling. This also provides the necessary information on how to reach the individual with behaviour-influencing stimuli. In this context, it is ironical to recall that these new technologies were expected to help and empower the individual, especially against the might of large corporations and the power of the government; it seems the opposite is happening.

We have, then, these opposing tendencies: on the one hand, the new communication technologies—and, indeed, the Internet itself—bore the promise of liberating, democratising, empowering tools that would help to build a greater balance between the individual and large organisations. Social media was seen as a powerful tool to mobilise people for good causes. Yet, on the other hand, we have witnessed the virtual capture of new technologies by business interests, with a few giant companies establishing near-worldwide monopolies. The mega customer-facing Internet companies, with their peta-bytes of data and tremendous R&D investments in consumer behaviour and modelling, are clearly going to wield great influence. Their capabilities, powered by data provided by you—knowingly or even unknowingly—will provide them insights about you that even your close friends may not have.

Governments will use data about you—collected with or without your knowledge—ostensibly to protect you against terrorism, but potentially also to keep dissidence and dissidents in check. Privacy is lost and, in more than one country, democracy is no longer synonymous with freedom. At the same time, social media, instead of being a force for good—for dialogue, for understanding and for mobilising around a positive agenda—has become the purveyor of false news and misinformation. Viral posts of malicious 'news' and views have exacerbated divisions and differences, and egged people on to violence.

The poison of viral posts and their potential to stir violence has led governments to shut down the Internet in certain areas for varying periods of time, and to ask social media platforms for information on user accounts (to trace the source of various posts). One presumes that this is to prevent the promotion of hatred and violence. However, it can equally be used to disrupt mobilisation and trace 'inconvenient' dissenters. Surprisingly, the United States and India stand first and second for most 'information requests' from Facebook about user accounts.[9] Also, India was at the number one spot in terms of maximum shutdowns of the Internet in 2018.[10] While this must have taken place to prevent riots and hate crimes, one worries about the ramifications of this on free speech, quite apart from the inconvenience and economic loss of Internet shutdowns. One report puts the loss at ₹16, 590 crore during 2012–2017.[11]

Between these contradictory trends—akin to the classic Hegelian dialectic of thesis and antithesis—is a synthesis, a middle (or different) path, likely, or possible? What will it take to ensure the dominance of positive uses: for education, digital payments, rural applications, health; or for creating communities with a positive agenda and mobilising people for good causes; or for creating dialogue and understanding between diverse viewpoints? Can we bring to fruition the original dream of new technologies being a liberal, liberating and empowering force? The technological vector has its own speed and direction; however, it is for us to determine how it is used, and even—through regulations and incentives—influence its pace and direction. The answer lies not in abjuring new technologies, but in putting them to the productive service of humans, with a sense of community, caring and compassion. The other alternative, the path that we seem to be heading down,

is leading into a dark and frightening tunnel. Instead, let us assert our humanity and mould technology to take forward our progressive civilisational heritage.

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NOTES

1. Figures are from *Statista*. 2018. Number of monthly active Facebook users worldwide as of 2nd quarter 2018. Retrieved from https:// www.statista.com/ statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-activefacebook-users-worldwide/Leading countries based on number of Facebook users as of July 2018. Retrieved from https://www.statista. com/statistics/268136/top-15-countries-based-on-number-offacebook-users/.

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2. Figures of Twitter followers are from the infographics in 'How Rahul Beat Modi in the Social Media Battle', *The Times of India* (Pune), 19 December 2018.
3. For one example of the terrible effects of these rumours, see *IndiaSpend*, 'Child-lifting Rumours Caused 69 Mob Attacks, 33 Deaths in last 18 Months', July 2018. Retrieved from https://www.business-standard.com/article/ current-affairs/69-mobattacks-on-child-lifting-rumours-since-jan-17-only-onebeforethat-118070900081_1.html.
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5. Details of Byju's and its valuation are from 'Byju's Starts a New Chapter, Valuation Swells to $3.6 B', *The Economic Times* (New Delhi), 12 December 2018.
6. See 'How to Game Elections', *The Times of India* (New Delhi), 29 November 2018.
7. This has been widely reported in the media. See, for example, 'Tech Cos Dragged Feet on Russian Interference Data', *The Times of India* (Pune), 19 December 2018.
8. Data from PTI (2018). 'India Becomes Largest Consumer of Mobile Data, Ranks 109th Globally in Mobile Download Speeds.' Retrieved from https://www. dnaindia.com/business/report-india-becomeslargest-consumer-of-mobile-data-ranks-109thglobally-in-mobiledownload-speeds-2597890.

See also P. Doval. 2018. 'Indians Gorging on Mobile Data, Usage Goes up 15 Times in 3 Years.' Retrieved from https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/ business/ indiabusiness/indians-gorging-on-mobile-data-usagegoes-up-15-times-in-3-yrs/ articleshow/64432913.cms.

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9. See 'Spike in Government Requests to Facebook for Information, User Accounts', *The Indian Express* (New Delhi), 17 November 2018.
10. See 'India Tops World with Most Net Shutdowns This Year', *The Times of India* (New Delhi), 2 November 2018.
11. *Ibid.*

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