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FACEBOOK'S DIPLOMACY: COMPASSION OR CONSPIRACY

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In a highly globalised world, social media has become the modern means of communication among people. The advent of social media platforms combined with smart phone technologies and internet have facilitated a nomadic communication culture with the potential to change world events as was evident during Arab Spring. Such a powerful medium with the ability to influence the masses in the shortest time possible would be the platform of information warfare in the future. This facility is used not only by state actors but also by the non-state actors for their respective intentions. In such a situation, the importance of this platform - social media websites and mobile applications - gains prominence. There is a need for these medium of communication to be unbiased and neutral in nature and its allegiance to any one player during a conflict could have a huge impact on the turn of events.

In this background, Facebook - an online platform which started off as a campus website

11 years ago by a small group of college students - has now become the face of global online communications. It has a monthly active user count of more than 1.44 billion and a revenue amount of more than \$3.54 billion for just one financial quarter of a year.¹ The co-founder, Chairman and the Chief Executive of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, is one of the 100 wealthiest and most influential people of the world since 2010 according to Time magazine.²

With a mission to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected³, Facebook has so far been a success story in support of people who have wished for a social change. It should be noted that Facebook was one of the prominent platforms used during the 'Arab Spring' by the protestors to garner support, share their grievances/ information with the rest of the world in order to gain international support, and to coordinate their mass protests. It is being used as a platform by a number of whistleblowers to expose various

scams across the world irrespective of its magnitude. It is also being effectively used by political parties, organizations, institutions and individuals to their advantage to create awareness and to bring the attention of the people on various social issues.

In spite of the above mentioned credentials, the future ambitions of Facebook, which has been openly publicising it for some time, brings in a sort of suspicion on the intention of this social media giant. On August 20, 2013, Mark Zuckerberg launched Internet.org, a project led by Facebook, aiming to bring together technology leaders, non-profits and local communities to connect the two-thirds of the world that doesn't have Internet access. The initiative was rechristened as 'Free Basics' in September 2015. At the outset it might exhibit a compassionate feeling of this social media giant towards the have-nots of the all pervasive internet, but a closer look into the bigger picture would actually explain a conspiracy being knitted around the world internet community.

The rapid growth of Facebook into the internet world has not been without conspiracies. In 2013, when Edward Snowden revealed the US Prism programme of mass online surveillance, it emerged that Facebook was one of the 11 internet service providing companies which have pledged to share all their data with the US government. This act of Facebook was considered as a breach of trust towards its customers.

Again in 2014, Facebook was in the limelight for purchasing a mobile based messaging application called 'WhatsApp' for a jaw dropping sum of \$19 billion. WhatsApp is the most globally used messaging service, with more than 600 million monthly active users from Europe to South America to Asia.⁴ Although WhatsApp is the leading messaging service in the world, the need for Facebook to purchase a mobile application for a whopping sum of \$19 billion is an unanswered mystery as the amount of this deal is more than the GDP of many small countries of the world and is equivalent to the GDP of Nepal in 2014.⁵

In view of the above facts, as per the recent issue of Internet.org/ Free basics, Facebook wants all to believe that their intention is just to spread the access of internet to unprivileged people around the world, and whose lives can be empowered much better with internet. And what they do not want the people to know is much more than their ambitious business goals.

First, Internet.org/ Free basics creates imbalance to net neutrality. There was open criticism for Internet.org/ Free basics from Indian internet community, which openly voiced their support for net neutrality in the virtual world in the first half of 2015. More than 750,000 e-mails were sent in favour of net neutrality to regulators and Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) in April 2015 when the country was debating over the concept of net neutrality. This was a big blow for Facebook in India as many

internet services like Cleartrip, NewsHunt, NDTV and IndiaTimes that were earlier part of Internet.org left the initiative due to increasing opposition.

Second, the initiatives like Internet.org/free basics and Airtel's Zero would, on a longer run, create two classes of internet: internet for the rich and internet for the poor, thereby exporting the evil of class difference in the virtual world too.

Third, by naming their initiative trickily as Internet.org/ free basics and by targeting the economically poor people, Facebook is trying to become the synonym of internet or the gateway for internet in the longer run as the people who use their services would not be aware of the global internet and the ocean of information available in it. Therefore, at one point in time, Facebook would want to see itself as the monopoly of internet.

Over time, initiatives like these, when they become successful, could become a source of propaganda by the people who have control over these services. Facebook is planning to launch a satellite in partnership with a French-based provider Eutelsat in 2016.⁶ Through this satellite, Facebook is aiming to provide access to remote parts of Africa which are no doubt impoverished regions; however, their need for access to basic facilities like food and water supplies is far greater than their need for the internet.

There is also another possibility of 'targeted internet blackouts'. In future, the platforms like Facebook would react to world events depending on their allegiance to the parties involved in the conflict. For instance, as discussed earlier, during 'Arab Spring', Facebook (open and neutral) was used extensively by the protestors, but a future date, when companies like Facebook monopolise the operations of internet, if there is an agitation against a party which is close to the company, then all that they have to do is unplug the service for that particular region to stop the flow of information when people would need it the most. On the other hand, these companies might also willingly volunteer their allegiance to some party and help in spreading misinformation, as they have the ability to create and circulate large volumes of information, in order to create chaos in the society.

While platforms like Facebook are not ready to openly accept the business intentions behind initiatives like Intrnet.org and want to stand up defending their rhetoric of compassion towards the have-nots, it is left to the countries of the world to defend their citizens' virtual freedom. Facebook being a signatory of net neutrality in the US, has not started the same initiative in its home country where 12%⁷ of its population is still not connected to internet. The company has made very little progress to venture into China, in spite of being the largest populated country in the world and more than

50.7⁸ percent of the population are not using internet, due to the strict filtering and monitoring practises by the authoritative communist regime. Moreover, Facebook is majorly banned in China and the company is not able to properly kick start its business in this communist country. However, India, Africa and few South American Countries are important targets for Facebook as these countries not only provide a suitable turf for them to play their politics due to business friendly governments but also it is these regions that, when combined, have the largest chunk of population that can be attracted with ease.

With Mark Zuckerberg recently visiting India on October 28, 2015 and having an interaction with the students of IIT Delhi on value of Social Media, his business intentions are clear. Now it is up to the decision makers of the governments of the countries across the world to decide how much of free hand can be given to internet based companies like Facebook in influencing global politics. This debate again boils down to the debate on global internet governance, which when addressed in an appropriate manner, would sort out many of the issues that exist now in the virtual world.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ “Facebook Reports First quarter 2015 Reports”, Menlo Park, California, April 22, 2015.

² “The All-Time TIME 100 of All-Time”, *TIME*, April 18, 2012, http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2111975_2112269_2112278,00.html, accessed on 01 November 2015.

³ No.01, p. 02

⁴ “Facebook closes \$19 billion Whatsapp Deal”, *Forbes*, October 06, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/parmyolson/2014/10/06/facebook-closes-19-billion-whatsapp-deal/>, accessed on 02 November 2015.

⁵ “Countrywise GDP”, *The World Fact Book*, Central Intelligence Agency, United States of America.

⁶ Dave Lee, “Facebook Plans satellite ‘in 2016’”, *BBC*, October 06, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-34451081>, accessed on 02 November 2015.

⁷ “Internet Users (per 100 people), *The World Bank*, 2015, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2>, accessed on 03 November 2015.

⁸ Ibid.