The real danger

BY OW E N B E N N E T T-J O N E S | 2/4/2020

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| THE debate in Pakistan about social media platforms and falce news is strikingly different to that in many other countries.People trying to understand what is happening to information and its role in our lives generally start with Tim Berners Lee, the British scientist who invented the World Wide Web in 1989 at the European Particle Physics Laboratory in Geneva. He generated large data files and set about devising a way of sharing them with colleagues quickly. His innovative solution to the problem changed the world.As the web spread, it was seen as a way of distributing knowledge and helping people communicate. But a couple of decades later, doubts set in. There was the emergence of the dark web, enabling criminals to trade drugs and weapons anonymously. Then came the realisation that web-based, giant corporations such as Facebook were gathering information on their users. Mark Zuckerberg, once seen as a talented disruptor started to take on a more sinister air.By 2012, when Tim Berners Lee appeared in the opening ceremony of the London Olympics, he felt the need to remind everyone that his invention could still be viewed through an idealistic prism. `This,` he implored, `is for everyone.` But as he probably realised, good-hearted sentiment was never going to be enough to stem the tide of his inventions` unintended consequences.We still don`t know where the web will lead us, but we already understand that it has had profound negative impacts.All over the world societies have been weakened by culture wars in which conservatives and liberals trade poisonous messages. These are arid exchanges with no winners no one ever changes their mind fought by men and women who revel in the fleeting satisfaction of making a cheap point. Rather than approach the world with rationality and kindness, they revel in the thrill of a mic-drop moment. As they insult each other, the two sides see their social media activity in strikingly similar terms.For the liberals it is a way of resisting right-wing media moguls and authoritarian governments determined to promote their political agenda and corporate interests.The conservatives see the mirror image, believing social media platforms allow ordinary men and women to express themselves in a way that elitist, liberal media editors previously suppressed.As both sides revel in their self-righteousness they are churning out so much contentious information that it`s difficult to know what is true and what isn`t. It`s even reached the point that we now have software that can put words into moving images of politi-THE debate in Pakistan about social media platforms and falce news is strikingly different to that in many other countries.People trying to understand what is happening to information and its role in our lives generally start with Tim Berners Lee, the British scientist who invented the World Wide Web in 1989 at the European Particle Physics Laboratory in Geneva. He generated large data files and set about devising a way of sharing them with colleagues quickly. His innovative solution to the problem changed the world.As the web spread, it was seen as a way of distributing knowledge and helping people communicate. But a couple of decades later, doubts set in. There was the emergence of the dark web, enabling criminals to trade drugs and weapons anonymously. Then came the realisation that web-based, giant corporations such as Facebook were gathering information on their users. 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It turns out that the editors denounced as elitist by the populists performed a rather useful social function: trying to publish only what they thought to be true after diligent fact-checking.That broadly speaking is how most of the world sees information`s changing nature overthe lastthree decades.In Pakistan it`s rather different. Here the term `fifth-generation warfare` has entered mainstream discourse to a greater extent than elsewhere. The army chief has himself used the phrase `hybrid war` and the review petition arguing for his extension cited `fifth-generation war` as a reason he should remain in post. In a country in which the army plays such a prominent role in public and political life, military concerns, elsewhere confined to war colleges, become national concerns. When Pakistani officers worry about fifth-generation warfare the whole country ends up doing the same. But that can obscure where the threats really lie.What`s the greater danger to Pakistan: India running a sophisticated informationcampaign or vicious internal divisions between different groups of Pakistanis determined to undermine each other? Isn`t the most damaging thing that all Pakistanis, irrespective of their political tribe, are uncertainas to what is true and what isn`t? Pakistan isn`t facing these challenges alone. In the UK, the debate over leaving the EU has resulted in Brexiteers and Remainers treating each other with contempt. The high level of consensus that for centuries enabled Britain to manage its politics without even a written constitution is breaking down. Once trusted institutions are now seen as biased and self-interested.In both the UK and Pakistan, there`s nothing positive about these developments.Whether a country has existed for centuries or decades,itstillneedsits citizens to share enough of an understanding of the world to agree on basic facts.It will never be possible to un-invent the World Wide Web. And all over the world societies are grappling with its profound implications. The first step is to identify the precise nature of the problem: the main threat to Pakistan is not foreign powers engage d in fif thgeneration warfare; it`s the increasinginabilityofPakistanis totolerate each other`s differing opinions.The writer is a British journalist. His book The Bhutto Dynasty will be published later this year.  |  |