

## **The Stolen Decade**

It has never been easy to reminisce the past and pinpoint the events that could have or in many cases, did change the course of human history. The demarcations between cynicism and realism appear blurred, if one analyses the past decade in such a way. The question is not whether it was the golden period of human civilization or a garbage phase of catastrophes, since a largely capitalist globe automatically removes the fairy tale notions of existence of only the good side. What needs to be addressed is the balance achieved between gains and losses, if at all the scales existed in the first place.

It was not the best of arrivals. 2008 saw the worst financial crisis hitting the American economy, and consequently the whole globe, which speaks of the pitfall of globalisation in itself. Trillions of dollars lost, millions misplaced and thousands of businesses closing down, all because of the unyielding greed of few and absence of regulation. Research tells us that a few countries like Greece may never recover from the effects of the Financial Crisis. It is at points like these, one wonders about the economic growth of nations. Eventually, growth comes at what cost? Have humans been reduced to mere statistics in the game of financial development? The concept of humanity being reduced to numbers was further strengthened by the arguably the biggest phenomenon of the last decade, the social media. While platforms like Orkut, Facebook etc were already functional, social media truly went global in 2009. Neda Agha-Soltan, only 26 years old, was shot dead on June 20, 2009. The philosophy student was on her way to watch the protests against the victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the Iranian presidential election when she was struck by a single bullet, believed to have been fired by security forces. An act that was captured by a shaking cell-phone camera and uploaded to Facebook and YouTube. The video quickly went viral on Twitter, and soon media outlets like the BBC and CNN began broadcasting versions, turning Agha-Soltan into the face of the Green Movement in Iran and drawing attention to clashes between the Iranian people and their government. Never before had citizens in crisis been able to disseminate their stories so easily to millions of strangers around the world. This marked the change in perception of social media- from socialising platforms to instruments of change. But humanity did not know about the dangerous path it was treading on. A fundamentally insane species with stupendous level of self awareness will never get satisfied. The next 5 years would see social media becoming a scalpel, wielded by the powerful, with morality lying on the operating table.

Numerous incidents have time and again revealed the dark side of Internet. The Boston Marathon bombings in 2013 saw one of the biggest manhunts launched in the country's history to nab the suspects. But along with the highly trained and competent security forces, there was one more watchdog operating in its ignorant confines, the social media. False accusations on Reddit led to vicious attacks on fake suspects. Not to mention that the only basis on which the accusations were made was racial profiling. If this was not enough, the biggest ever surveillance scandal hit the world in the same year. An NSA analyst and CIA employee, Edward Snowden leaked highly classified documents in a Hong Kong hotel room, to 3 prominent journalists. When the story hit the stands, the lid was blown over the US government's global surveillance program. A program which saw the government tapping into the private data of citizens through monitoring their online data. Unbeknownst to some of its allies, United States was monitoring data related to millions of people in foreign soils too. Snowden became an overnight personality and sparked a cultural debate about surveillance and national security. However, as it happens with whistle-blowers, his own life was turned upside down with many branding him as a traitor. He has been living in Russia under asylum since then. The Internet has given birth to numerous cultural abominations too. Trash culture, which refers to anything with no inherent cultural value but filled with vulgarity themes and subjects

voluntary chosen to attract audiences through shoddy, low quality and culturally impoverished content, found its voice through Internet. When a billion people are given platforms to voice their opinions with no mechanism to monitor the accuracy of the content being circulated, menaces such as fake news are born. Not to mention that art has taken a big hit with the rise of “Instagram” literature. The notion of popularity associated with how serious that work must be taken is one of the most flawed ones out there. When one caters to the lowest common denominator, quality or relevance takes a backseat.

In 2018, another scandal hit the social media world where it was revealed that Cambridge Analytica, a data science firm, had harvested the personal data of millions of peoples’ Facebook profiles without consent and used for political advertising. Cambridge Analytica had influenced election in numerous countries via this operation. One would think that upon revelation of information like this, where courses of nations can be influenced through social media data harvesting, the platforms would be put under strictest scrutiny possible and people booked for human rights violation. Unfortunately, the platforms are still going strong without an iota of change. There have been congressional hearings with the CEOs with tech giants regarding the power their creations possess, but nothing substantial has come out of them. Apart from the morning headlines worthy scandals, social media has also given birth to phenomenon such as trash culture, “Instagram’ literature, influencers’ game and what not. It is left for the readers to decide the level of contributions such divine activities have made to our civilization.

It would be unfair to not point out the positive side of the argument. Social media has undoubtedly brought the world closer, given a new dimension to branding and entrepreneurship, provided an opportunity to the layman to achieve fame and success, rendered circumstantial opportunities much less powerful and given a voice to millions who were unheard. After all, who was not a fan of Late Honourable ex Foreign Minister of India, Mrs. Sushma Swaraj’s Twitter interactions with those who needed help o foreign soil! But one wonders whether strides in communication are worth the demons that have been created on the way. A million voices also mean consumption of fake content by millions. Society has not been more disconnected and polarized at the same time in modern history. The past decade has seen social media change entire industries and the way things are perceived, and not necessarily for the better. Only time would tell whether the way we are headed towards would borne. But if history is any good of a teacher, an uncontrolled instrument of power has never been a good news for the fundamentally insane species that we, Homo Sapiens, are. Especially if that instrument can be wielded by the most powerful and stupidest alike.