

Living in the Matrix: *The Matrix* and its real-world legacies

Manipulation on the internet — reminiscent of how the machines control humans in the Matrix [10]

- Simplicity over correctness
 - Appeals to the masses — easier to spread too
 - Sensationalism over accuracy
 - More viral than nuanced explanations
- Misinformation and fake news
 - Spreading propaganda and slander
 - Eg. COVID-19 — accusations, cures, anti-vaxers
- Tribal Bubbles and Polarization
 - News feed aligned with one's views/ideologies
 - Cancel culture — call-out and exile opposing views
 - The rise of social-media *influencers* [11]

Facebook in Myanmar: A Case Study

- Superfast Digitalization (early 2010s)
 - Facebook would come preloaded on phones [9]
 - *"For many in Myanmar, Facebook is the internet."* [8]
- Hate speech against Rohingya Muslims not moderated [7]
 - Issue: local languages (Burmese, Rakhine, etc.)
 - *"We must fight them the way Hitler did the Jews."*
 - *"Pour fuel and set fire so that they can meet Allah faster."*
- Persecution of up to 10,000 Rohingyas in the late 2010s
 - Myanmar's military launched a crackdown in Rakhine after Rohingya militants attacked police posts (2017)
 - Human rights abuses, killings, rapes, land being burnt
- UN accused Facebook — "slow and ineffective" (2018)

Disillusionment: the internet as an alternate reality

The Blue Whale Challenge: A Case Study (c. 2013 - c. 2018)

- A global internet phenomena where participants were assigned tasks for 50 days, starting with mundane tasks (eg. watch a horror movie) and ending in suicide [2]
- Indian media reports Blue Whale as cause of many self-harm and suicide cases (2017)
- The Supreme Court asked the Central govt. to ban the game
- The govt. responded that it couldn't ban Blue Whale as it wasn't an application
- A govt. investigation found no evidence to link Blue Whale to the reported suicides (2018)
- "People join narratives to explain their experiences" — Dr. Achal Bhagat, psychiatrist [6]
- Blue Whale was probably a sensationalized hoax, but that only shows how fast panic can spread on and due to the “digital” world and its activities — and its impact on society

“How do you wake up from the Matrix when you don't know you're in the Matrix?” [1]

Social media and mental health

- Cyberbullying
 - Hurtful comments, embarrassing rumours, unsolicited explicit photos, threats, cyberstalking
 - Stats: 59% of US teens and 41% of US adults have faced some form of internet harassment [3]
 - Top platforms: Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat
- Gen-Z show higher rates of anxiety, depression [12]
- FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) exacerbated [5]
- Self-doubt (particularly of appearances) worsened — people often showcase curated moments online
- Addiction — Feeds are designed to engage users

*“The body cannot live without the mind” —
Morpheus, The Matrix*

“We curate our lives around this perceived sense of perfection, because we get rewarded in these short term signals: hearts, likes, thumbs up. We conflate that with value, and we conflate it with truth, and instead, what it really is is fake, brittle popularity; that's short term and leaves you even more vacant and empty before you did it.” [4]

Opinions

- **Living on the internet** *has* empowered humanity
 - Seamless communication across continents
 - High-quality, accessible education resources
 - Many small- and medium-scale industries thrive on the internet — wide-reach and rapid feedback
 - Increased awareness about issues — communities where people are accepted for who they are
 - Outlet for creativity and self-expression
- At the same time, the unexpected consequences are deeply distressing
 - At the heart of it all is the scale of social media
 - A network with a billion nodes — unprecedented
- Public debate and discussion is pivotal
- Big tech companies — analyze the impact of their technologies — interdisciplinary knowledge needed

References

- [1] Tristan Harris, *The Social Dilemma* (2020) [\[link\]](#)
- [2] *Blue Whale Challenge*, Wikipedia [\[link\]](#)
- [3] Heidi Finigan, *Cyberbullying Statistics* [\[link\]](#)
- [4] Chamath Palihapitiya, Sean Parker, *Chamath Palihapitiya - Facebook is 'Ripping Apart Society'*, Youtube [\[link\]](#)
- [5] Lawrence Robinson and Melinda Smith, *Social Media and Mental Health* [\[link\]](#)
- [6] Aparna Alluri, *Why is 'Blue Whale' hysteria gripping India?*, BBC News, Delhi [\[link\]](#)
- [7] James Clayton, *Rohingya sue Facebook for \$150bn over Myanmar hate speech*, BBC [\[link\]](#)
- [8] Nick Beake, *Facebook admits it was used to 'incite offline violence' in Myanmar*, BBC [\[link\]](#)
- [9] Myanmar coup: How Facebook became the 'digital tea shop' [\[link\]](#)
- [10] *Internet Manipulation*, Wikipedia [\[link\]](#)
- [11] Damon Centola, *Why Social Media Makes Us More Polarized and How to Fix It*, Scientific American [\[link\]](#)
- [12] Geoff McMaster, *Millennials and Gen Z are more anxious than previous generations: here's why*, Folio [\[link\]](#)