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Opinion

Jio-FB deal — will it monopolise minds?

M Muneer | Updated on June 09, 2020 | Published on June 09, 2020

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Monopolising informatics and digital communication could lead to just that. Why target just the Chinese?

According to technology experts, by 2024, capitalistic conglomerates that straddle media, telecom, digital data and e-commerce can easily control a majority of Indian minds. The just-inked Jio-Facebook deal may have stated objectives of helping Indian small businesses and individuals find new opportunities in the post-corona world, but its possible unstated aims are what consumers, partners, competitors and government should be wary of.

Perhaps the latest development of Google taking a stake in Vodafone-Idea and Amazon-Airtel partnership may help dilute this threat.

Does the new partnership nurture a secret ambition to directly control Indians, through digital India? Despite the current oil crisis and a burgeoning \$47-billion debt, why would Reliance bet big on e-commerce, which has not yet proven to be profitable to even Amazon?



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With about 300 million Facebook users, 400 million WhatsApp users and 390 million Jio subscribers, this new partnership probably will have direct access to about 650

million Indian minds as of now, assuming some inactive or duplicate users across the three. Add to that the indirect and direct control across several competing media houses and content, diversionary net neutrality, tech infrastructure, and political backing from more-than-willing policy makers, and you will see the power to monopolise not just industries, but more critically, our minds!

Will Indians trust their data with a company having “maximising shareholder value” at its core objective? Meek noises that Facebook makes and the muted tokenism it exhibits everytime there is a charge of fake content or privacy breach should be cause of extreme concern.

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In the Indian context, this approach can be of immense advantage to the agenda-driven news “creators” of the ruling dispensation. It perhaps augurs well for these two partners, and the government they support, but not for anyone else.

Undue power

Monopolising informatics and digital communication will lead to monopolising minds, and if unregulated, could be the biggest fallout of this new venture. With media and content control, censoring and muting adverse content, development of new tech to know our thinking while we read a message, huge data analytics and AI to know what we do at any time and predict our responses, and the ability to change minds with subliminal messaging, this behemoth can be a Frankenstein.

We have already seen how quickly Indian minds can be diverted in the last few years. The stories that went viral for balcony clapping and *diya* lighting during lockdown are legends in the making!



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Investigate which media houses were responsible for bringing Islamophobia to the forefront of a pandemic, and we may find interesting answers.

The Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT), with its 70 million traders and 40,000 trade associations, has expressed its concerns about the use of consumer data. Facebook has been known to violate domestic laws. With data comes the power to create new products and services, and that is clearly an undue competitive advantage that will be created by this alliance.

It is surprising that the government shut an eye to this deal while granting FDI approval. The question is whether the government gives auto-approval for everything concerning one major Indian business house. How come the paranoia that was manifested in the case of suspect “Chinese” takeover of India was completely absent when it came to this FDI?

No resistance

Without a strong civil society, a bold fourth estate, a determined Opposition, impartial constitutional authorities, a sound justice system, and a coalition of competitors from related industries, the threat of data privacy breach, net non-neutrality, and building monopolies will not be averted. Why are competitors, civil society and clean politicians not pushing for stringent data privacy laws and lobbying against cross-ownership in competing media houses?

The business ecosystem will brave the turmoil to some extent, but many competitors will fade away, as we have seen in the telecom sector post-Jio launch. The indicators are of a duopoly, as we see in most developed economies in various sectors from telecom to healthcare and e-commerce. Others will be marginalised to special niches.

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We can predict with reasonable accuracy that this covert takeover will be eventually replicated in countless other realms: infrastructure, thriving public sector entities, entertainment, defence, etc. A willing government will always find subservient partners, but it also will do well to remember that such monopolies can make or break governments, too.

Ayn Rand wouldn't have known today's mega Indian and foreign conglomerates when she wrote on how the capitalism had lost its soul, but it is most relevant for the post-corona India.

The writer is co-founder and chief evangelist of the non-profit Medici Institute, driving social change and helping governments deliver promises

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A letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

The coronavirus crisis has changed the world completely in the last few months. All of us have been locked into our homes, economic activity has come to a near standstill. Everyone has been impacted.

Including your favourite business and financial newspaper. Our printing and distribution chains have been severely disrupted across the country, leaving readers without access to newspapers. Newspaper delivery agents have also been unable to service their customers because of multiple restrictions.

In these difficult times, we, at BusinessLine have been working continuously every day so that you are informed about all the developments – whether on the pandemic, on policy responses, or the impact on the world of business and finance. Our team has been working round the clock to keep track of developments so that you – the reader – gets accurate information and actionable insights so that you can protect your jobs, businesses, finances and investments.

We are trying our best to ensure the newspaper reaches your hands every day. We have also ensured that even if your paper is not delivered, you can access BusinessLine in the e-paper format – just as it appears in print. Our website and apps too, are updated every minute, so that you can access the information you want anywhere, anytime.

But all this comes at a heavy cost. As you are aware, the lockdowns have wiped out almost all our entire revenue stream. Sustaining our quality journalism has become extremely challenging. That we have managed so far is thanks to your support. I thank all our subscribers – print and digital – for your support.

I appeal to all our readers to help us navigate these challenging times and help sustain one of the truly independent and credible voices in the world of Indian journalism. Doing so is easy. You can help us enormously simply by subscribing to our digital or e-paper editions. We offer several affordable subscription plans for our website, which includes Portfolio, our investment advisory section that offers rich investment advice from our highly qualified, in-house Research Bureau, the only such team in the Indian newspaper industry.

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