

# The Nation

News Features



NEWS

NEWS FEATURES

INTERVIEWS

POLITICAL COLUMN

THIS IS MY NATION

MILITARY MATTERS

EDITORIAL

SPORTS

CARTOON

BUSINESS

EYE - FEATURES

LETTERS

EVENTS

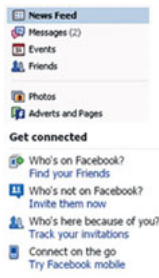
SOUL - YOUTH MAG

KIDS - NATION

ENTERTAINMENT

NATION WORLD

## facebook Bogey or Boon?



Quite recently, President Obama was defeated by Lady Gaga, who outscored Obama in terms of the number of friends.



Facebook users play virtual games such as Barn Buddy and Farmville

Early this year, Facebook lovers were shocked to hear of a possible 'crackdown' of their favourite social networking site, with the consultation of Chinese cyber experts who have already been challenging the Google search engine. A week later, it was reported that the government had ordered the suspension of this project.

Recently, this news has resurfaced in the wake of several incidents of privacy issues reported to the Women & Child Bureau (WCB) of the Police.

According to some electronic news sources, a leading school in Colombo has threatened students using Facebook with punitive measures as serious as expulsion.

As reliable sources report, there is a possibility of this popular social networking site being regulated in the future, and relevant measures are already under way. Unarguably, Facebook is becoming increasingly popular, not only among Sri Lankan youth, but also adults.

In line with global trends, users find it a useful tool to be networked with new friends as well as old classmates whom they would hardly encounter again in real life. Young filmmakers with no capital, find this an indispensable tool for advertising. Even moneyed segments of society are enthusiastic fans of Facebook, as both President Mahinda Rajapaksa and Sarath Fonseka used Facebook for presidential election propaganda. As such, is Facebook that evil? Is it a menace to be cracked down? The Nation decided to look into the matter

By Dinidu Karunanayake

Six years ago, when 20-year-old Harvard undergraduate Mark Zuckerberg made an internal network called Facebook, for students in his dormitory to interact, he may not have imagined it would shortly become one of the most visited sites in cyberspace.

According to the The Time's prediction on May 20, 2010, Facebook has logged its 500 millionth active citizen by now.

As The Time explicates, "If the website were granted terra firma, it would be the world's third largest country by population, two-thirds bigger than the US. More than one in four people who browse the Internet, not only have a Facebook account, but have returned to the site within the past 30 days."

It has tremendously transformed Internet users culturally and socially, and in The Time reporter Dan Fletcher's words, "Facebook has changed our social DNA, making us more accustomed to openness."

It helps share personal information, public activities, events and even emotions. You can "Facebook" to "friend" strangers, and thus it has also redefined linguistics. In effect, it helps keep in touch with friends, to tag photos and to comment on them, to express yourself in "status updates", and even to "poke" others. It creates relationships sans barriers, and more importantly, going beyond the personal sphere, it can play an influential role in the public space too. For this purpose, Facebook is used in mobilising people, for instance, by way of

### Porn sites blocked

By Ishtartha Wellaboda

The most recent attempts by the authorities to control the flow of pornographic material on the internet were followed up with 107 pornographic websites being banned. The Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (TRC) issued these orders to all internet service providers operating in Sri Lanka last Friday, in keeping with a directive given by the Juvenile Court.

The court order was a sequel to a case filed by the Women & Child Protection Bureau (WCPB). To date, the Bureau has identified these 107 web sites containing offensive pictures of Sri Lankan children and women. However, most officials accept that banning porn completely is impractical. A senior police officer commented, "No matter how many websites we ban, they change letters or the punctuations in the name, and start the same website on a different page."

The WCPB is currently attempting to identify other sites that contain pornographic material. Police officials at the Bureau said that they will soon be moving to identify and report on websites that contain pornographic material featuring foreigners as well. A senior police officer at the Bureau argued that the availability of adult content has led to many problems within modern Sri Lankan society. He alleged unrestricted access to pornographic material could be a clear cause behind the increasing number of rape cases in Sri Lanka.

political propaganda. Many public figures including politicians, seem eager to open their profiles or fan pages as a measure of supporting the popularity factor. Quite recently, President Obama was defeated by Lady Gaga, who outscored Obama in terms of the number of friends.

However, it is a double-edged sword, as it can be manipulated for “flaming” as well. “Flaming” is a situation in which a person’s privacy is threatened with scandal. The phenomenon of “redefining privacy”, as mentioned by Fletcher, may not be tolerated by some Sri Lankans.

## Privacy at stake?

According to our source at the Women and Child Protection Bureau (WCpB), 10 complaints regarding privacy issues have been received so far, and all by women. In these instances, the Bureau has taken measures to warn the suspects, the source says. The Bureau is much concerned of the privacy issue, and will act against Facebook, if it is supported by authorities.

Simultaneously, the concern for cultural purity is another driving force behind the movement for regulating/censoring Facebook.

As The Nation reported on July 11, 2010, there is an islandwide campaign of cyber censorship, particularly aimed at cracking down on pornography.

It is very likely that censoring Facebook can be a branch project of the ground project, because one can argue that Facebook can harbour pornographic material.

The age restriction for Facebook subscription is 12, but according to a research conducted on Sri Lankan ‘Facebookers’, (which will be quoted later in this article), children tend to manipulate with their age and make profiles with fake information.

This will be the focus of the anti-Facebook movement, as cyber censorship is primarily aimed at “saving the younger generation in Sri Lanka”, while preserving “the cultural purity”, according to the WCpB.

## An artiste/intellectual’s voice



Vivimarie Vander Poorten

Vivimarie Vander Poorten is a poet, linguist, university lecturer and furthermore, a Facebook user. She bases her creative work on the contemporary socio-political context. Therefore, her views as a creative figure plus social critic are noteworthy. Denying the allegation that Facebook is a threat to personal privacy, she states that logging onto Facebook is an individual choice: “You can have your own privacy settings to suit your needs. If you adjust your settings, so that only your friends can see your photographs, and add only people you trust to your friends list, then you don’t have a problem regarding privacy. And anyone who wants to be even temporarily off Facebook, can do so within seconds.”

Sri Lankan adults who are not so familiar with social networking sites, can be confused as to whether Facebook and other social networking sites can be labelled a menace, in relation to the younger generation. Seeing the obvious plus points of Facebook, they may even wonder whether it has any positive influence. From a lecturer/teacher’s perspective, Vivimarie explains: “Nothing can be a menace by itself. It depends on how you use it. It is just a social network, and just another way for people to interact. I don’t think there is such a thing as a ‘positive influence’ with regard to Facebook. Well, I do like using it, and it’s great for young adults and adults to make contacts and meet people and catch up with old school friends etc, but personally, I believe that, if I lived without it until 2007, I could definitely be okay without it now”.

However, as Fletcher says, since Facebook has redefined whole social circles of its users, many find it indispensable. The impact of Facebook is strong to such an extent that it has even invaded real life relations. I have heard Facebook users complaining to their ‘friends’ for not ‘accepting friend requests’. Despite the fact that this is an interesting research-worthy space, very little research is seen in this regard. However, The Nation located a research study on Facebook and its relations with Sri Lankan youth behaviour, and found its findings very significant.

## A researcher’s perspective



Tharindi Udalgama

Tharindi Udalgama, Sociology Honours, University of Colombo, has undertaken her BA dissertation on the use of Facebook among Sri Lankan youth. Covering a sample of young people aged between 18 and 29, she conducted a qualitative research early this year, which promises intriguing findings. As she says, even computer literate kids tend to create accounts by manipulating their age, disregarding Facebook’s age restrictions. She explains sociological reasons for youngsters to be absorbed in this social networking site.

The Bureau had previously held many rounds of talks with the TRC as well as all the major internet services providers. During these discussions, all parties had agreed to support the ban on pornographic content on computers as well as mobile phones.

The officer added, “I feel that the internet has done more harm than good. Though most argue that the internet is a great educational tool, studies have shown that, only 25% of it actually contains educational material, while 40% percent of it is dedicated to gambling and pornography.”

The WCPB has been pushing very hard for a complete censorship of the internet. However, the TRC has been sceptical of their requests.

According to Director General- TRC, Anusha Palpita, they will do their utmost to ban pornographic material that is harmful, as long as it does not affect the overall internet speed. He added that the TRC has already ordered the internet providers to ban the identified 107 sites according to the court order. Meanwhile, the TRC has taken a strong stand, saying that they will not agree to any restrictions on the net that will hinder Sri Lanka’s internet speed.

Palpita suggested that it would be more appropriate to provide individuals with special software that would restrict the access of pornographic material from their computers.

When asked whether there will be moves to block sites such as Facebook, following reports of abuse using the site, both officials agreed that, though there have been such reports, there is little provisions to block the widely accepted social networking site.

Last month, the WCPB reported that they had received over 50 complaints regarding abuse on social networking sites such as Facebook. There were also reports where photos of individuals copied from Facebook had been altered to harm their reputation. With these developments, reports surfaced alleging moves to prevent access to Facebook. Though speculation has been rife, regarding the ban of internet porn in Sri Lanka, this was the first time that such a full scale operation was launched into accessing porn sites.

Accordingly, the phenomenon of 'hyper-reality' is a driving force behind constant 'Facebooking'. Explaining this fact, she says: "Facebook users play virtual games such as Barn Buddy and Farmville. They send hearts and give hugs. They do these things for a simulation of reality. We live in a post-modern world, and we tend to make reality of what is not there. It's a way of escaping from real life. They make Facebook activities part of their lives. For example, Barn Buddies is a big thing for them. They talk about it when they meet. Thus it becomes part of their reality."

The Facebook trend has another layer, which is impacted by cultural constraints in Sri Lanka, as Udalagama points out: "In our culture, boys cannot meet girls. They cannot hold hands in public, or go out dating. But these things can be done on Facebook. In this way, it is basically a mode of escapism into a world they yearn for. So, Facebook becomes an alternative reality for them". As her research study illustrates, Facebook is an economically sound, psychological need for young adults to build relationships.

## In the face of a possible crackdown



Sanjana Hattotuwa

Censorship is not so alien to Sri Lankans, and some of the films censored on grounds of cultural issues in the recent past, have already become part of unspoken history. Against this backdrop, what will be the situation of a possible crackdown on Facebook? While it will be a nightmarish experience for most Facebook lovers, the mere hint of it has enraged many. Vivimarie is very critical: "My view is that, no government has the right to ban anything on the internet. It is the responsibility of parents of young children and teenagers to regulate their offspring's use of the internet. That is not the responsibility of the State. I am completely and totally against censorship of any kind." Arguing against the purists' claim of immorality and depravity associated with Facebook, she is critical of the current social context: "If you want to listen to immoral stuff and depravity, I think you could just go to certain politician's election-time meetings and just be in the audience. Some of the things that I recently saw/heard a certain politician say in public, on a stage, revolted me more than anything I have ever seen on the internet. And the people in the audience applauded. The politician I am referring to is very home-grown. Does that mean that he is representative of our 'pure culture'? Should he be banned? I wonder."

Sanjana Hattotuwa, writer, senior researcher and TED Global Fellow is similarly critical of any suggestion of cyber censorship. In his words: "I certainly agree with the fact that we need to protect our children from pornography, but it does not really tell us how the government is going to do this. It is an incredible technical challenge to do this. It could also be pornography today, but the same technology can be used to create what is called the Great Firewall of China."

In his views, this is a way of controlling and curtaining the freedom of expression online. Hattotuwa quotes Evgeny Morozov, the Foreign Policy magazine's new Net Policy blog's chief contributor in furthering his opinion: "...the Chinese are using the 'pornography' excuse — a government-sanctioned effort to crack down on online vulgarity — to shut down several sites offering highly critical opinions on political and social issues in modern China (the most prominent of them was an edgy Chinese group blog, bullog.cn). Now, other countries are getting the hang of China's tricks. News site Menassat reports on a recent "anti-porn" campaign in Bahrain being used to target a wide spectrum of groups, including those working on human rights issues. Even more disturbingly, the campaign has now spread to social media sites such as Facebook."

Likewise, researcher Udalagama is against any regulations being imposed upon Facebook. As she says, the best thing adults should do is train children to handle social networking sites wisely. If regulated, it is a violation of their freedom of expression, she adds.

The Nation also spoke to several 'Facebookers' of the younger generation.

Nilanga Jayawickrama, a graduate says: "Banning Facebook in Sri Lanka would be horrible, because most of us actually do use it to reconnect with and stay connected to old friends and family, whom we don't get to see often. It is a current social phenomenon, and banning it is NOT a solution to handling the few depraved and sick people that are unfortunately a part of all societies". Importantly, her answer encapsulates the gist of the feedback of most of the respondents who are collectively against cyber censorship.

In terms of legal procedure, Telecommunication Regulatory Commission Director-General Anusha Pelpita, who is in charge of initiating technological censorship, states that Facebook cannot be regulated or censored. If so, Yahoo and MSN also have to be censored, he argues.

This is something even extremists cannot contain, he says.

Denying the media reports that quoted him saying there was a possibility of imposing sanctions and restrictions, he expresses his ignorance of the Chinese cyber technicians' team. The commission has not yet received any complaint, he says, and will take action by looking at the gravity of the issues, if reported.

Even though it is obvious that there is an anti-Facebook movement determined to 'quell the threat' of Facebook, members of the movement and the officials seem to tactfully evade the foreground.

Unarguably, this is becoming an issue of the youth. With a legacy of a democratic history, Sri Lanka cannot follow China or Burma in web censorship. By no means can Sri Lanka turn a Nelsonian eye to the constantly evolving cyber technology. As Fletcher reports, "Facebook has become a kind of virtual pacemaker, setting the rhythms of our online lives, letting us ramp up both the silly socialising and the serious career networking". Furthermore, with 48 billion unique images, Facebook houses the world's largest photo collection.

As such, instead of castigating it as a menace, there is a need to look at Facebook with a wider perspective. Cyber crimes are inevitable, and privacy can be at stake all the time, when using the Internet. However, complete eradication of the service will not be the solution for this situation. As Vivimarie says: "The point is not about shutting down and blocking websites and networks, but educating people about how to use it responsibly and without violating other people's fundamental rights. I personally don't think that school kids should be on Facebook, because it may be too much of a distraction, and kids should be at least 16, to be able to make judgments about privacy and things like that. Until then, they are perhaps too vulnerable to be on a social networking site as vast as Facebook. But that is up to the parents, and if there are parents who have young children on Facebook, they need to have a close relationship with their kids and openly talk to them. I don't think that the State should interfere with people's private lives by deciding how and when they can talk to other people etc."

Quite interestingly, having invented the all-inclusive social mechanism, Zuckerberg stays away from the social aspect of the site as a "geek", as other Facebookers cannot track him on Facebook.

Nevertheless, this favourite social networking site is being modified every moment. According to Fletcher, Zuckerberg's next goal is to make Facebook a kind of second nervous system that's rapid-firing more of our thoughts and feelings over the Web. Whether Sri Lanka is ready to experience the next stage of Facebook is a question that needs to be addressed pronto.

