

Taking back control? Not really.

Less than 80 days before Britain is due to leave the EU, the future remains as uncertain as ever



VIDYA RAM

Last week, over a million people tuned in to watch *Brexit: The Uncivil War*, a long-awaited television drama on the successful Leave campaign in Britain. In the film, Benedict Cumberbatch stars as Dominic Cummings, the controversial political strategist who masterminded the successful strategy, including the micro-targeted political advertising campaign that has come under scrutiny in recent months. The drama, which attempts to capture the perspectives of both sides, has still unsurprisingly divided public opinion, with many believing it presents too sympathetic a picture of the other. This reflects the highly charged nature of the debate. On the show, even Mr. Cummings, giving evidence to an inquiry, displays his frustration with where things are headed. "It's gone crap," he declares, launching a rambling attack on "flawed people" and the need for a system reboot, which has failed to happen. It's unlikely that even the most ardent supporter of Brexit would disagree with that analysis – less than 80 days before Britain is due to leave the European Union, the future remains as uncertain as ever.

Two significant votes

On Tuesday, MPs are due to vote on Prime Minister Theresa May's controversial Brexit plan, and despite the decks being stacked clearly against her, Mr. May has plodded on, insisting her deal is the right one for Britain. The willingness of MPs from across the political spectrum to vote against her became abundantly clear over the past week, as they came together to defeat the government on two significant, if not game-changing, Brexit votes. First, MPs, including 20 from the Conservative Party, voted in favour of an amendment to the Finance Bill to limit the government's ability to levy taxes if Britain were to crash out without a deal. Second, the (Conservative) Speaker of the House, John Bercow, controversially allowed MPs to pass an amend-



"Britain PM Theresa May is resting her hopes on persuading MPs across the political spectrum to have a last-minute change of heart to avoid exiting the EU without a deal." A public gathering, 'Think Anew, Act Anew: a Convention on Brexit and a People's Vote', in London on January 11. *AP

ment that gives the government three days to come up with a Plan B in the event that Ms. May's proposal is shot down on Tuesday. The amendment caused outrage among Brexiteers and the right-wing tabloids. The Prime Minister said she was "surprised" that Mr. Bercow allowed MPs to vote on the amendment and called on him to explain himself to Parliament. The anger over this highlights the extent to which British politics has descended to the farcical: the amendment merely requires the government to swiftly offer an alternative if, as expected, there is a negative vote on the withdrawal deal. This is what a sensible government would have done in any case in order to avoid a cliff edge.

Garnering support

What has become increasingly clear is that a cliff edge is precisely what the government is counting on to garner support for its deal. With little sign from Europe of any substantial change in the deal, Ms. May is resting her hopes on persuading MPs across the political spectrum to have a last-minute change of heart to avoid exiting without a deal, which, observers agree, would severely damage the

economy and create short-term logistical chaos, including at Britain's main ports and road networks. Labour has accused the government, which delayed the vote from December after it became clear that it was set to lose, of running down the clock in an attempt to force the vote through by focussing on wavering MPs, dissatisfied with the Prime Minister's deal but more anxious of a no-deal exit. Other methods have been deployed to garner support too. *BuzzFeed*, the news website, reported that a government source warned that Conservative MPs who sided with Labour and opposition parties could have their whip withdrawn and be deselected as party candidates at the next election. The veteran Euro sceptic, John Redwood, received a knighthood in the New Year honours list, which led to suspicions that the honours route was being used by Ms. May to drum up support. There is now even talk that the Prime Minister has reached out with more workers' and environmental protections to trade unions, traditionally supporters and allies of Labour, to test whether these concessions will encourage them – and Labour politicians – to back the deal.

Still others within government circles have attempted to persuade their colleagues that not backing Ms. May's deal would thwart Brexit entirely and, as one person warned, even trigger a surge in the far right.

Preparations for a no-deal exit

The government is also making preparations to face the worst. It is attempting to strike a balance between demonstrating its preparedness for a no-deal exit, while making clear the many grievous repercussions of such an exit. For instance, the Health Secretary made a throwaway remark about becoming the world's biggest buyer of fridges as Britain stockpiles several weeks' supply of crucial medicines. There was also a recent test run of a contingency traffic plan to avoid congestions at the port of Dover, which went off well enough for the government to claim success but involved few enough vehicles for the test to be dismissed by the Road Haulage Association. *The Times* reported that thousands of civil servants are being asked to abandon their day jobs this week and prepare for a no deal.

The government can count on one thing, however: for all its struggles to garner support, there is no other position that can claim outright certainty either. While it appears that most MPs agree that they don't want to crash out without a deal, neither of the two leading political parties support the option of a second referendum. In a speech last week, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn made it clear that his priority remains securing a fresh election, which, if his party won, would enable it to hold talks anew with Europe, in the hopes of a new deal. However, there is little hope of a new election (a two-thirds majority of Parliament would be required to hold an election before 2022 and neither the Conservatives nor their allies, the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland, would vote to jeopardise their already vulnerable political position). This of course increases the risk of Britain crashing out, with nothing else agreed on. The ignominious process is a long way from the message of "taking back control" that the real Mr. Cummings ingeniously, if deceptively, sold the country.

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FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

Reflections from within

Two books provide insights into the changing media landscape



A.S. PANNEERSELVAN

Literature festivals are democratic sites to discuss ideas. They grapple with a whole gamut of issues and they use books, not violence or intimidation, as entry points to unpack complex realities and understand our societies better. Veteran journalist Arun Shourie declared at *The Hindu Lit for Life*: "There is a darkening cloud of intolerance. Persons have been killed, prosecuted and cases have been filed for what they have written or their views." For most participants, the sense that space for the media is shrinking was real. A young researcher asked, if the freedom of expression is under such severe attack, what are the responses from within the journalistic fraternity?

Understanding tectonic shifts

Two recent books look at contemporary media, its relationship with commerce and what it means for freedom and democracy. Written by journalists who carved a name for themselves in the media as fine reporters, these books provide insights into the reality today of a digitally disrupted media environment and a changing public culture. Pamela Philpote, Public Editor of *The Wire*, in her book *Media's Shifting Terrain: Five Years that Transformed the Way India Communicates*, tries to explain the changes using some crucial media-led, or rather media-fed, mobilisations. These include the 2011 India Against Corruption protests, the spontaneous demonstrations of public outrage over the gang rape of a young student in a bus in Delhi in December 2012, the arrival of the Aam Aadmi Party in 2013, and the 2014 general election that saw the Bharatiya Janata Party emerge with a massive and unprecedented majority. The focus of her study is to document "the deceptively discreet way in which media has brought about tectonic shifts in our lives."

She establishes how the very "fabric of human-to-human interaction is increasingly woven on the looms of communication technology". Most significantly, she captures the sequence of events that led to the activism of the "politics of anti-politics". Going through

the details of various scams that marked the two terms of the United Progressive Alliance – the Commonwealth Games, the coal block allocation, the 2G spectrum allocation, and the murky real estate deals concerning Adarsh Cooperative Housing Society – Ms. Philpote argues that none of these were directly broken by the mainstream media. They were "largely the outcome of leaked reports from the offices of the Comptroller and Auditor General or the Chief Vigilance Commissioner, and information gathered by activists through RTI applications".

Restoring trust

Sukumar Muralidharan, a journalist and an advocate of press freedom, has come up with a comprehensive study titled *Freedom, Civility, Commerce: Contemporary Media and the Public*. In the hardcover book that is just shy of 500 pages, Mr. Muralidharan covers a vast domain. He looks at the philosophical foundations of free speech, the theories of journalism, and the practice of journalism from the early years of print media to television, the Internet, and social media. He situates journalism in a wider political context and looks at the manner in which nationalism, global politics and the rise of corporate power in the media are addressed. In the complex interlocking of the right to free speech, the media as an industry and its regulation as a public utility, he tries to understand the importance of the ethics of journalism and its future as a part of democratic discourse.

Mr. Muralidharan looks closely at the legal framework that made journalism different from other professions. He examines the contestation of the Working Journalists Act of 1955, which was significantly amended in 1973, by the newspaper industry in the Supreme Court as a dilution of the Press Commission doctrine that the newspaper is a "public utility". Asking for a reaffirmation of core values, Mr. Muralidharan reminds us that though there has never been a golden age of journalism, we should be aware of the difficult realities of today. He points out that information overload has not led to more democratic access to information. Instead, information overload points to a future of robotic forms of information aggregation and dissemination that could serve little else than corporates. He rightly places emphasis on the importance of restoring public trust in journalism.

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SINGLE FILE

For whom the TikToks

Indian companies are unable to hold their own against the Chinese in the content-centric app market

G. SAMPATH



Chinese apps are making huge inroads in the Indian market. According to the tech news portal FactorDaily, two of the top 10 mobile apps in India in December 2017 were Chinese-owned; this increased to five as of December 2018. And leading the charge is TikTok, an addictive viral video app owned by ByteDance, a \$75 billion cash-rich behemoth.

The app, which allows users to make short videos of up to 60 seconds, is a rage among teenagers not just in India but around the world. TikTok seems to have cracked the code of combining stickiness, sociality, and user-generated content better than any of the Silicon Valley giants. It is already being spoken of as something that could render YouTube irrelevant, thanks to the algorithmic superiority of its video-making/video-sharing interface. Some believe it could make Instagram obsolete, given its more aggressive indulgence of users' craving for selfie-powered micro-celebrity. In terms of the audio-visual genre, TikTok is unabashedly meme-driven. As for its USP, it has positioned itself as the first port of call for adolescent self-expression, knowing well that if this demographic cares for anything at all, it is fun-filled, creative self-expression meant to impress one's peer group, and the more problematic the manner of self-expression, the more likely they are to embrace it.

A user who downloads the app and opens it for the first time is instantly greeted by an endless avalanche of snazzy videos that, if you are not careful, can turn your brain to mush before you can say "TikTok". The videos, by and large, fall into three categories: comedic skits, lip-synch songs or dialogues, and teens dancing suggestively to popular music. Many videos feature just one person, and are evidently shot in the user's home, often the bedroom. The teen-heavy user base either doesn't understand privacy or doesn't care for it.

TikTok has drawn flak in many countries, including Australia, France, Hong Kong and the U.S., for its laxity in privacy protection and enforcement of minimum age norms. Parents have flagged the danger of paedophiles contacting minors on the platform. In India, PMK leader S. Ramadoss recently called for a ban on TikTok on the grounds that the app was causing "cultural degradation" by allowing youngsters to upload "suggestive sexual dance choreography".

There is little doubt that TikTok raises the burden of parental anxiety, especially at a time when their wards are least likely to be appreciative of parental supervision. But the app's mass popularity among India's youth is something that begs for serious analysis, not just among sociologists and cultural critics, but also the ubiquitous advocates of Digital India who must answer how, soon after the abject surrender in the smartphone sector, even in the content-centric app market, Indian companies are unable to hold their own against the Chinese onslaught.

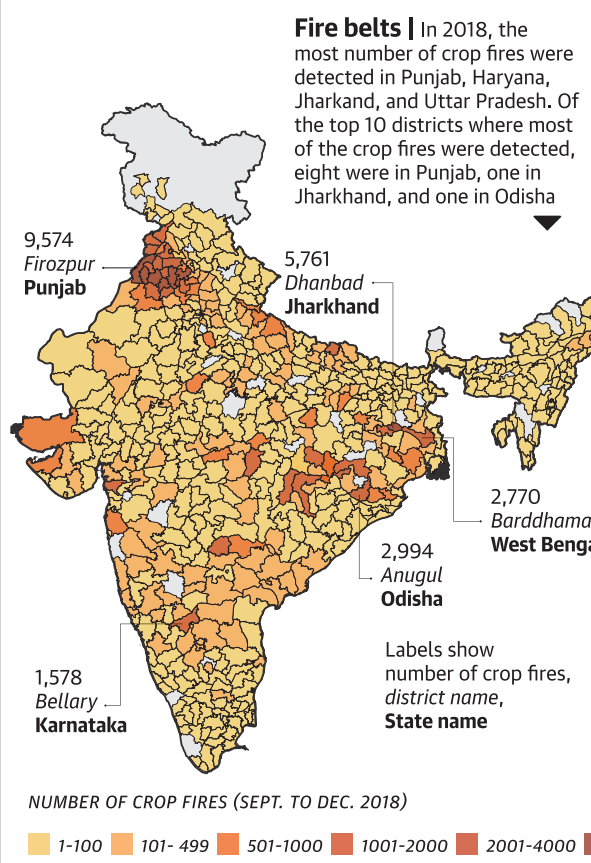
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DATA POINT

A burning issue

Stubble burning is a pan-Indian problem but is most acute in Punjab and Haryana, which together account for 46% of the crop fires in the country. In 2018, stubble burning picked up in November after a six-year low in October in these two States. **Vignesh Radhakrishnan** and **Varun B. Krishnan** analyse the data processed from satellite images



Fire belts | In 2018, the most number of crop fires were detected in Punjab, Haryana, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh. Of the top 10 districts where most of the crop fires were detected, eight were in Punjab, one in Jharkhand, and one in Odisha

Low and high | The table shows the number of crop fires detected in Punjab and Haryana over the last six years. The darker the shade, the higher the number of fires detected

Month	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Jan.	496	373	335	354	322	562
Feb.	472	507	518	878	820	588
Mar.	871	387	404	422	503	624
Apr.	21565	23075	18711	14126	17039	20166
May	1097	599	751	5917	1896	1679
June	230	962	419	411	458	612
July	43	86	28	28	91	70
Aug.	59	33	23	18	41	29
Sep.	577	1027	314	544	342	151
Oct.	31932	29642	24763	41545	34557	21353
Nov.	38506	50709	46278	58136	33271	44256
Dec.	818	522	690	890	950	881

■ Crop fires initially peak in April, when Rabi crops are harvested and Kharif crops are sown

■ The second peak is in Oct.-Nov., when Kharif crops are harvested and Rabi crops are sown. There was a dip in the no. of fires in Oct. 2018

■ However, the number spiked in Nov. 2018, bringing the two-month total to almost the same as the previous periods

FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 14, 1969

Delhi student to be released in exchange for Pakistani

Trilok Chandra, 17-year-old Delhi student, who is in an internment camp in Pakistan after serving a two-year sentence, is to be released in the next few days, it was officially learnt here [New Delhi] to-day [January 13]. He will be exchanged for a Pakistani national, Gulzar Hussain Shah, who has just completed his term of imprisonment in India. The release of Trilok Chandra, who strayed into Pakistan on the Wagah border in January 1966, follows protracted efforts on the part of the Government to secure his return to India. The Governments of India and Pakistan have agreed to exchange these two persons at the Wagah border on a date yet to be decided. Trilok Chandra was sentenced for alleged spying. His term expired last year, but Pakistan refused to release him until India agreed to release a Pakistani of its choice sentenced to jail in India.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 13, 1919.

Mr. S. Kasturi Ranga Iyengar. Arrival in Madras

Mr. S. Kasturi Ranga Aiyangar, leaving Dhanushkodi last evening [Jan. 10], stayed at Ramnad in the night as the guest of the Hon'ble the Rajah of Ramnad and resumed his journey this morning by Boat Mail for Madras. He passed through Madura this afternoon when a very large number of prominent gentlemen of the town were present on the station platform to meet the distinguished editor, now returning from England. The train steamed in at 2.15 and as soon as it stopped, the crowd rushed to his carriage, cheered him and shouted Vandemataram. Mr. George Joseph and the Hon'ble Mr. K. Rama Aiyangar exchanged greetings with Mr. Aiyangar and extended to him a hearty welcome on behalf of those present. Mr. T.S. Sankaranarayana Aiyar garlanded him, after which he was taken in a motor car to the Victoria Edward Hall where a reception had been arranged by the citizens of this place in his honour.

CONCEPTUAL Hayflick limit

BIOLOGY

Also known as the Hayflick phenomenon, this refers to the natural limit that exists on the number of times a normal human cell population divides before cell division stops. After each cell division, the telomeres at the ends of the cell decrease in length slightly. This process continues until the cell becomes so short that it cannot divide further. The phenomenon is named after American anatomist Leonard Hayflick who first proposed the idea after conducting a study of human fetal cells in 1961. It was earlier believed that cells can divide forever and are thus immortal. The Hayflick limit differs across various organisms with the human cell dividing about 50 to 70 times over its lifespan.

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Andy Murray from then to now: career highlights

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