

Bill Gates now top target of coronavirus conspiracy theories



LONDON: Bill Gates is the new target for coronavirus misinformation according to Zignal Labs, a company that analyses media sources. This is while social media is still combating the conspiracy theory that links 5G mobile telecommunications masts to the spread of coronavirus, which has been dismissed as false by politicians and medical professionals. Apple and Google team up on virus 'contact tracing' through smartphones. Conspiracy theories linking Gates with the

virus were mentioned about 1.2 million times on TV and social media from February to April. This is 33% more often than the 2nd most popular conspiracy theory linking 5G with Covid-19, spiking at 18,000 mentions a day in April, according to data. Facebook and Twitter are flooded with Gates-coronavirus posts, The New York Times found 16,000 posts on Facebook this year that were liked and commented on nearly 900,000 times. Youtube videos with false information about Gates and the virus were viewed almost

five million times in March and April. Stranded Indian parents watch son's funeral on Facebook. One thing that struck a chord with people was Bill Gates's speech from 2015, in which he warns that the biggest threat to mankind is infectious disease and not nuclear war this interview was viewed over 25 million times. Anti-vaxxers, right-wing pundits, and members of the conspiracy group QAnon video is evidence of Gates' plans to use a pandemic for his personal gains, suggests The New

York Times. "Distressing that there are people spreading misinformation when we should all be looking for ways to collaborate and save lives," said Mark Suzman, chief executive of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Gates has also been in the news for openly criticising the Trump administration saying "There's no question the United States missed the opportunity to get ahead of the novel coronavirus." This article originally published on The Verge. —*The Business Report*

Netflix making a selection of documentaries free on YouTube



At the behest of teachers, Netflix has made a selection of documentary features and series available on YouTube. "For many years, Netflix has allowed teachers to screen documentaries in their classrooms. However, this isn't possible with schools closed. So at their request, we have made a selection of our documentary features and series available on the Netflix US YouTube channel." Currently available only in English, each title also has educational resources available, which can be used by both students and teachers and Netflix will be including Q&As with some of the creators behind these projects so further facilitate learning. Netflix hope this will, in a small way, help teachers around the world. Subtitles in more than a dozen languages will be available later this week. However, parents and teachers should check the ratings to make informed choices for students and children. The list includes several of Netflix's nature documentaries, including the critically acclaimed Our Planet and Babies. In this Covid-19 era, families live-stream funerals on Facebook Netflix adds \$50 million to relief fund for production workers. At present there are 10 documentaries available for free: 13th, Abstract, Babies, Chasing Coral, Explained, Knock Down the House, Our Planet, Period. End of a Sentence, The White Helmets, and Zion. Further educational resources for each documentary can be found on Netflix's blog and are currently available in the English language, however the company is working on adding more subtitles in a dozen documentaries. —*Agencies*

Coronavirus forces detour for homecoming astronauts



ALMATY: NASA astronauts Andrew Morgan and Jessica Meir will take an unusual - and more exhausting - route home after safely landing in the Kazakh steppe on Friday, a Russian healthcare official said, because of lockdowns caused by the novel coronavirus. A capsule carrying Morgan, Meir and Russian cosmonaut Oleg Skripochka touched down southeast of the Kazakh town of Dzhezkazgan at 1117 local time, as scheduled, after nine months on the International Space Station. But because all of Kazakhstan's provinces are in coronavirus lockdown, search and rescue teams could not set up base in Dzhezkazgan or provincial centre Karaganda, said Vyacheslav Rogozhnikov, deputy head of Russia's Federal Medical Biological Agency. Instead, the Baikonur cosmodrome located in Kazakhstan and rented by Russia was used as a base and the crew of the Soyuz MS-15 spacecraft will head there after being extracted from the capsule, Rogozhnikov said in an interview broadcast online by Russian space agency Roscosmos. From Baikonur, U.S. astronauts will take a 300km (186 miles) drive to the city of Kyzylorda, where they will board a NASA aircraft, he said, adding hours of exhausting land travel after 205 days in space, 3,280 orbits of Earth and a trip of 86.9 million miles. —*Reuters*

Why online education?

TARIQ BANURI

These are perilous times. The entire human race is in a state of war against an invisible, implacable, and lethal enemy. There is no cure in sight. Health systems in many places are overwhelmed. The toll of infection as well as mortality is rising exponentially. Not only has the pandemic placed our life and health in jeopardy, it has what Henry Kissinger calls "society-dissolving effects". Our supply lines are cut, our production and distribution systems locked down, policy processes interrupted, schools and universities closed, and our very ability to respond to the crisis compromised. While the task of reversing the spread of the virus is urgent and hopefully temporary, the societal impacts are likely to last for generations. It is a battle on two fronts. On the one hand, people need to isolate themselves to halt the spread of the virus. On the other hand, people need to re-emerge and reassemble as rapidly as possible to restart stalled systems.

Universities reflect this dilemma. They bring thousands of people together every day, which makes them exceptionally vulnerable to the spread of the disease. Closing down campuses is an important step to control the spread. But universities also bring knowledge together, and are the places where solutions will be found. No society can risk keeping universities closed for too long. Pakistani society has already paid a high price because of past disruptions in academic activities.

Since the advent of the crisis, policies of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) have been driven by these two imperatives. Support the government's efforts to halt the spread of the disease, and start the effort to minimise academic disruption. Fortunately, online interaction provides a vehicle for doing so. Accordingly, HEC has asked universities to prepare themselves to transition to online classes and online interaction as quickly as possible.

There are other reasons for the urgency as well. We do not know how long the crisis will last. Some studies on epidemic curve modeling estimate that the lockdowns may last anywhere until September, including in countries with similar virus trajectories and lockdown dates as ours. The current lockdown of universities is in place until May 31, but no one can tell how long it will be needed for. If it extends beyond May 31, students will risk losing their semester. Also, the current pandemic is likely to lead to a fundamental restructuring of the global economy, similar to those that took place after world wars, depressions, or earlier pandemics. While it is not possible to predict the precise shape of the future economy, there is near unanimity over the central role that information technology and virtual interaction will play in it.

The decision to shift to online classes has come under a lot of criticism. Some argue that students should be promoted without studying or evaluation. Others complain about the quality of the courses and connectivity challenges faced by students from remote areas. Yet others want to enjoy a vacation. There may also be an undercurrent of anxiety about a new mode of interaction. One can understand, and even forgive, the desire of some people to stay out of this struggle. However, the vast majority of students and faculty members are eager to make good use of their time, continue with the education, and contribute to national efforts. HEC has been working hard to try to find such solutions.

At this point, only the best universities and the most committed and dynamic vice

chancellors will be able to launch a few high-quality online courses. But if preparations are taken in hand right away, others will be able to catch up by June. HEC is assisting universities in a number of ways, including arranging software and connectivity packages, curating online materials and training programmes, building a data repository, providing guidance on quality enhancement, and setting up and adapting monitoring and evaluation systems.

Quality issues: It is true that the quality of many online courses being offered currently is quite mediocre. If nothing is done about them right away, they will remain in this state even after June. To make a start on the question of quality, HEC has introduced the concept of "online readiness". Vice chancellors have been requested to proceed with online classes if and only if they can certify personally that six key elements are "online ready": (a) University Readiness, i.e., an effective and operational learning management system (LMS) as well as an oversight body responsible for certifying courses as online ready; (b) Faculty Readiness, i.e., faculty members have gone through training in online teaching before allowed to teach such a course; (c) Course Readiness i.e., all key information about a course is available on the LMS; (d) Library Readiness i.e., all course readings and assignments are available through online means; (e) Technology Readiness i.e., the technology needed for delivering online classes is ready for deployment; and (f) Student Readiness i.e., students are assisted in overcoming any obstacles they may have in accessing the classes and materials.

Connectivity: HEC has introduced a 4-point programme to address connectivity: (1) Taleem Bundle is being negotiated with Telcos to arrange subsidised internet access for students; (2) Delivery Modes to cater to diverse needs of students, including shorter duration classes, data-light options, and both synchronous and asynchronous modes (i.e., placement of all course content on the internet); (3) Offline Mode

i.e., a system under which course materials can be distributed locally through CDs or other storage mediums; and (4) Student Facilitation Committees at each university to address connectivity problems faced by students from remote areas. Today, a digital device, be it a computer, a tablet, or a smart phone, is no longer a luxury, but a necessity. Universities have to make these a requirement, and for those who cannot afford one, arrange scholarships or student loans to enable them to do so. As the old saying goes, one should hope for the best and be prepared for the worst. If lockdown restrictions are lifted by early June, universities can return to business as usual, but if there are further delays, there will be no choice except either to switch to online education or to abandon the semester (and probably more).

This is needed not only for the short-run response to the virus but also the long-run response to the disruption that will follow. The objective is not only to cope with the current exigency, however long it lasts, but to harness the energies and passions of our youth to address and overcome the challenges we will face after the crisis has subsided. To give them the tools and the experiences that will enable them to survive in, and indeed, thrive in the economy that emerges from the ashes of this one. It is a noble cause and we hope that our younger generation will lead us in achieving it.

The writer is chairman of Higher Education Commission

Rwanda uses drones to help catch lockdown transgressors

KIGALI: Tech-savvy Rwanda is using drones to keep residents of the capital Kigali informed of coronavirus lockdown measures - and help catch those who abuse them.

While police stop cars and pedestrians on streets to ask why they are out, two drones buzz above them, one loudly broadcasting instructions and the other monitoring movements. "Drones are flying in areas where checkpoints are not mounted and where patrols could not be there," said police spokesman John Bosco Kabera.

Apple and Google team up on virus 'contact tracing' through smartphones. Among culprits have been a pastor who pretended to be on her way to give a radio interview when in fact she was heading to church despite the ban on public gatherings. She was arrested and held for several days. In another case, a man with permission to supply food was found transporting liquor instead, Kabera said. "Just stay at home. That's what we are enforcing." Like many African nations, Rwanda has relatively few coronavirus cases so far - just 138 confirmed, with no deaths - but

there are fears the pandemic could do far worse damage in the world's poorest continent in the coming months. Rwanda began a major lockdown on March 21, with residents only allowed to leave their homes to buy food or medicine and travel between cities and districts forbidden. On Friday, those measures were extended until April 30. Rwanda has long aspired to be a regional technology hub, but its use of drones to combat the coronavirus is not unique. From Indian slums to the English countryside, a host of nations are deploying drones to publicize rules, check movements and even spray disinfectant. Stranded Indian parents watch son's funeral on Facebook.

Rehema Kanyana, a 50-year old Rwandan mother of four, said she had only left home once since the lockdown came into effect on March 21, to withdraw cash to take one of her children to the hospital, but was struck by the strict enforcement. "On the way to the hospital, police stopped us like four or five times," she said. Staying at home was tough for many, who were short of food, she added, though state handouts were helping. —*Reuters*



Atomic bombs and whale sharks: How to calculate age of world's largest fish



WASHINGTON: Scientists have figured out how to calculate the age of whale sharks - Earth's largest fish - with some guidance from the radioactive fallout spawned by Cold War-era atomic bomb testing.

By measuring levels of carbon-14, a naturally occurring radioactive element that also is a by-product of nuclear explosions, the researchers determined that distinct bands present inside the shark's cartilaginous vertebrae are formed annually, like a tree's growth rings. It was already known that these bands existed and increased in number as a shark aged. But it was unclear whether new rings appeared yearly or every six months. The researchers compared carbon-14 levels in the rings to data on fluctuations in its global presence during the busy years of atmospheric nuclear tests in the 1950s and 1960s.

"These elevated levels of carbon-14 first saturated the atmosphere, then oceans and moved through food webs into animals, producing elevated levels in structures such as the vertebrae of whale sharks," said marine ecologist Joyce Ong of Rutgers University in New Jersey, lead author of the study published this week in the journal *Frontiers in Marine Science*. Scientists now will be able to calculate a whale shark's age after its death - one ring equals one year. But just as importantly the study established that these endangered marine giants possess a very slow

growth rate. "For the management of any marine species, knowledge of growth rate is critical as it determines the resilience of populations to threats such as fishing. Fast-growing species have fast rates of replacement and can withstand relatively high losses, whereas slow-growing species have low rates of replacement and are much less resilient," said marine biologist and study co-author Mark Meekan of the Australian Institute of Marine Science in Perth.

Whale sharks are filter feeders, swimming great distances through the world's tropical oceans to find enough plankton to sustain themselves. They have a brownish-grey color on the back and sides with white spots, with a white underside.

The researchers tested carbon-14 levels in long-dead whale sharks whose remains were stored in laboratories. The oldest one tested, stored in Pakistan, had lived 50 years.

"We thought that it was possible that they could reach ages of as much as 100 years, but we weren't really sure as we had no validated data on age," Meekan said. "We still can't say for certain if these sharks live to be 100 years old, but it now seems much more likely given that our largest shark was 50 years old at 10 meters (33 feet) in length and it is well documented that these sharks can get almost double this size, to around 18 meters (59 feet) in length." —*Reuters*