

## Technology

# Tech dream still alive at TED despite Facebook debacle

## Speakers remained upbeat over the numerous prospects

**VANCOUVER:** A month after news of the data fiasco at Facebook dampened enthusiasm for the idea that innovation can cure all ills, the tech dream was still alive at the big-ideas TED Conference this week. TED attendees were keenly aware of recent tech troubles, from Facebook being called before Congress over user privacy to a self-driving Uber car's accident that killed a woman pushing a bicycle across a street.

"The beautiful story we told ourselves that if we just connected the world together everything would get better is not working out," TED curator Chris Anderson told the gathering which ended yesterday. But even if the dream has been shaken, it is not broken, according to many of those attending the week-long deep-thinker conference.

"Our situation with technology is complicated, but the big picture is rather simple."

Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Max Tegmark said in a TED talk. "We can either be complacent about the future, drift in a rudderless ship to our own obsolescence or be ambitious and think of how we want to steer our technology to an age of amazement."

Jaron Lanier, an author and technologist credited with pioneering virtual reality, contended that it was clear decades ago that "we were facing a knife-edge future" where the technology we love could be our undoing. "We have a challenge," Lanier said during a talk on the TED stage. "We have to create a culture around technology that is so beautiful, so meaningful, so deeply filled with infinite potential that it draws us away from committing mass suicide." Even amid the gloom of recent weeks, some TED speakers remained upbeat

over the prospects for artificial intelligence to help improve the democratic process; for satellite technology to save marine life; and medical tech that delivers new mechanical limbs and organs.

### Free model in question

Lanier said there needs to be more discussion on the current model of the internet in which free social networks and search engines rely on advertising, with targeting techniques growing increasingly precise. "What started out as advertising became behavior modification," Lanier said. "I can't call these things social networks anymore; I call them behavior modification empires."

Lanier and others at TED saw promise in titans such as Facebook and Google shifting to subscription models that have proven successful for Netflix and Amazon, with subsidies for those who need them. He advocated a subscription model with financially strapped people provided subsidies and all users paid for personal data that could be valuable to technology firms. "I am certain that the Googles and the Facebooks would do better in this world," Lanier said.

There was strong support for the idea of a "digital bill of rights" enshrining in law how people and their data should be treated in a technology-driven world. Keen attention was being paid to a new data protection standard, the General Data Protection Regulation, set to take effect in May in Europe, with a hope it would blaze a path for others. The standard gives web users much greater control over how their personal information is stored and used, with big fines for companies that break the rules.

“ Behavior modification empires ”



VANCOUVER: TED content director Kelly Stoetzel and curator Chris Anderson kick off a session at the big-ideas conference. —AFP

### The upbeat view

Steven Pinker, a Harvard professor who has gained notoriety for an upbeat view of progress in the world, told the conference that feelings of gloom about the fate of humanity are misguided. "You can always fool yourself comparing dramatic headlines of the present with rose-tinted views of the past," said Pinker, whose recent book

"Enlightenment Now" makes the case that prosperity and other measures of well-being are on the rise, in large part due to technological innovation. "During the decades when the world has gotten happier and healthier, news has gotten darker," Pinker said. "The unsolved problems facing the world today are gargantuan, but we must see them as problems to be solved and not inevitable outcomes." —AFP

## Stiff new license fees threaten Tanzanian blogs

**NAIROBI:** Tanzanians have to pay \$900 for a permit to blog, a staggering amount for many in the country, say critics who see the fee as a further bid by President John Magufuli to gag dissident voices. A sweeping new law covering a broad range of online activity was signed in mid-March. Under it, the operators of online platforms such as blogs, podcasts and live streaming services will have to pay stiff fees to operate.

To launch a blog, for example, a user must pay over two million Tanzanian shillings (\$900, 750 euros) in fees to get a license. A renewal fee of over \$400 is due every three years thereafter. "The simple creation of a platform represents several months' salary for a blogger," said Arnaud Froger of the press freedom watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF). "Tanzanian authorities want to get rid of the blogosphere and they couldn't have chosen a better way to do it," he said in a statement. "The climate of fear and self-censorship that has already affected traditional media is now reaching online media, where many journalists found refuge."

Tanzania has a vibrant blogging community, whose members report or comment extensively on news, entertainment and music, as well as sport, lifestyle and travel. Under the new law, a blogger can face fines of up to \$2,200 for publishing content considered "indecent, obscene (or) hate speech", or even just for causing "annoyance". The legislation broadly defines a blog as "a website containing a writer's or group of writers' own: experiences, observations, opinions including current news, events, journals, advertisements and images, video clips and links to other websites".

### Getting rid of critics

Magufuli, 58, took office in 2015 as a corruption-fighting "man of the people". But he has earned criticism for his authoritarian leadership style, with detractors saying he has clamped down on opposition and freedom of expression. Under his rule, numerous opposition members have been arrested or jailed, critical media shut down and people arrested for perceived "insults" to the president.

On February 26, a Tanzanian court handed two five-month jail terms to two opponents of the regime, including a lawmaker, for allegedly defaming the president. A new law introduced in 2016 required journalists to register themselves as such, seen as a further bid to curtail the media. In March police arrested a driver and a farmer accused of calling for anti-government protests on social media.

For many in the online media fraternity, the latest law governing web content is just another nail in the coffin of media freedom. "Most bloggers will not be able to find this money. But the problem is bigger than the financial aspect," said Maxence Melo, founder of the Jamii Media blog who has previously been taken to court for refusing to reveal the identity of a critical contributor to his site. "The government's objective is to get rid of sites which are already considered critical. Because paying a fee doesn't mean you will have a licence, the relevant government department can still refuse this permit."

During a public discussion last week over the new law, the secretary general of the Tanzania Bloggers Network, Frantz Mwantepete, said many would struggle to "fulfill the conditions in the law". "The fees that we are supposed to pay for licenses far surpasses the revenues of many bloggers," he said. Mike Mushi, who also works for Jamii Media, asked why the government was imposing fees when it is not the owner of the internet as a means of publication. When it comes to traditional radio and television "we know that the government is the owner of the frequencies they use. But is the government the owner of the internet?" —AFP

## EU senses Facebook scandal shifts privacy tide towards its favor

**BRUSSELS:** Sensing the Facebook scandal has shifted the transatlantic winds, the EU is asserting itself as a forward-looking regulator rather than a retrograde bulwark against Silicon Valley's innovative might. After years of mounting concern, the European Union will introduce tough new data protection rules next month, which Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg himself has welcomed in the face of the latest scandals. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which comes into force on May 25, gives web users much greater control over how their personal information is stored and used, with big fines for companies that break the rules.

"I was really desperate about thinking how to make the best possible campaign for GDPR so now this is well done, so thank you Mr Zuckerberg," the EU's justice and consumer affairs commissioner Vera Jourova told reporters in Brussels this week. "His declaration that they want to expand our European rules globally, it's only good news, it sounds very nice to me."

The GDPR is not the only EU action that has triggered accusations of protectionism against the new digital economy. It has also drawn fire over its massive anti-trust fines against Google and Apple as well as plans to tax internet giants. During questioning by US senators on Tuesday over the Cambridge Analytica scandal, Zuckerberg said Facebook was "committed to rolling out the controls and the affirmative consent" required by the new EU rules "around the world".

Under the new rules, companies will need explicit consent from users to share their data with third parties and people will have the right to know what personal information is stored about them and to ask for it to be deleted. Breaches can lead to heavy fines—up to four percent of a company's global turnover. Zuckerberg said he took personal responsibility for the fact that 87 million people's personal data was improperly shared with Cambridge Analytica, a firm which worked for Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential campaign.

### 'Wake-up call'

The Facebook chief "had always said the opposite, that it was going to kill the internet," said Viviane Reding, the centre-right European Parliament member who initiated

## Hundreds rally for US science

**WASHINGTON:** Gesturing towards the White House, home to President Donald Trump who has called himself "a very stable genius," Isaac Newton begged to differ. "Knowing many geniuses, and being one myself, I would venture to say that was rather a boastful claim on his part," said "Newton," actually Dean Howarth, a Virginia high school physics teacher in period dress.

Howarth was among hundreds of people who turned out to a "March for Science" Saturday in Washington to "create tangible change and call for greater accountability of public officials to enact evidence-based policy," according to organizers. That was the formal message of the rally, one of more than 200 events being carried out around the world. But as keynote speaker Sheila Jasanoff said, the signs carried by people like Howarth told a more direct and simple story.

Many of those messages, while more restrained than Howarth's, carried implicit criticism of Trump, who withdrew from the global Paris Agreement on climate change, has defended coal-fired power plants,



BEIJING: This photo illustration taken on March 23, 2018 shows Facebook logos on a computer screen. —AFP

the GDPR when she was a European commissioner in 2012. "Now our regulation is seen as a positive step for the internet's future development," she said.

Reding said the Cambridge Analytica scandal was a "wake-up call" to the United States in the same way that whistleblower Edward Snowden's revelations about mass US intelligence surveillance was to Europe.

The US senators who questioned Zuckerberg "studied closely the European legislation," Reding said. "They understood that this model is not an internet killer, but the basis for its balanced development." European Parliament member Maria Joao Rodrigues, a Portuguese socialist, said times have changed, recalling how even some European governments had initially opposed the GDPR. "US congressmen are contacting us at the European Parliament to learn about our experience," Rodrigues said.

Jan Albrecht, a German MEP from the Greens party, said Europeans have demonstrated they have taken a "necessary step" to protect data, not stall the economy.

seeks to roll back environmental regulations, and has yet to name his top science advisor. "Make America Smart Again," said a placard carried by one demonstrator, giving an alternative take on Trump's "Make America Great Again" pledge. "We're here because no one wants to be led by the gut feelings of our elected officials," Jasanoff, a Professor of Science and Technology Studies at Harvard, said in her opening address without specifically referring to Trump's widely-reported tendency to govern by instinct rather than analysis.

"Good science depends on good democracy. Let me repeat: good science needs good democracy," she said. David Titley, a retired rear admiral who led the US Navy's task force on climate change, told the crowd that science shows we need to "take actions now to avoid the worst of the risks we know are highly likely to appear." Many in the crowd listened under the shade of cherry blossom trees beneath the Washington Monument on the first summer-like Saturday of the year. "Science is what separates facts from fallacies, falsehoods and fanaticism," Titley said. "If we ignore and denigrate science we do so at our own peril."

Suzelle Fiedler, 44, a former laboratory worker, told AFP she attended the rally because of the administration's desire to cut research funding, and "they're dis-

"The far-sightedness that the EU has shown is confirmed," Albrecht said, recalling those who said "we must not create any hurdles for the digital economy".

### 'Extremely proud'

He said Europeans should stop doubting themselves and "be extremely proud" that they are leading the way and that their market is big enough to "set standards" for the rest of the world. "The US Congress has failed to do so for years and left legislative initiatives untreated," Albrecht said. Guillermo Beltra, a legal expert with the European consumers association BEUC, said the GDPR is a great example of the EU showing industry where "innovation should go towards", with society demanding citizen privacy first. "What the EU does is try to make technology developments adapt to society's social values, as opposed to the society having to adapt its values to accept the new technology," Beltra said. —AFP



WASHINGTON: Demonstrators take part in the March for Science. —AFP

missing a lot of scientific facts like climate change." Steven Schrader's sign proclaimed that he is not a "mad scientist. I'm furious." Schrader, 66, told AFP the administration "is trying to essentially take science out of decision making." —AFP