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Social Media is no more Social

Sudhir Rinten

Social media is not a mere tool of interaction, with its diverse approaches; it turned into a medium of human interaction from information to leisure. Social media is established as highly interactive mobile and web-based platforms through which individuals share, discuss, and modify user-generated content as part of a collaborative process of content creation. Social networking platforms, Blogs and Micro-Blogs, Vlogs, Reels, Content communities, collaborative content creation projects, and even virtual gaming communities are different social media platforms where a large set of human interactions can be observed.

With growing digitalization efforts by the government institutions and business players, combined with low data prices enabled a significant number of people to use the internet. Data published on 'statista.com' about 'Social network penetration India 2021' reflects that there are 448 million social media users in India. Most of them are using YouTube and Facebook, at nearly 89 percent and 76 percent respectively (as of January 2021). With such a great involvement and rapid penetration (around 45% penetration in the Indian population) internet is being converted into mega business opportunities. Consequently, several experiments and data analytics have been included in the process.

The basic function of social media is to provide a platform to the users for interaction, which has been shifted towards leisure activities along with the

expression of opinions. However, the excess use of social media is affecting the cognition and psychological behaviour of the users.

The proliferation of SNS (Social Networking Sites) has also been matched with an expanding body of research. One area of research has shown that self-reported personality traits are good predictors of SNS usage and are reflected in personal profiles or web pages on SNS.

However, Silvia Casale and Vanessa Banchi, in their report on 'Narcissism and problematic social media use' state that the increased usage of social network sites coincides with the observation that today's emerging adults are increasingly narcissistic. This has caused several adverse impacts on behavioural aspects of the users.

These sites are also working to fetch audiences/users to maximise their use and involvement to deal with the monitory coefficient of the business. The progressions of technology are moving towards providing a new merged environment of virtual reality, Augmented Reality (AR), online gaming, etc. to provide all digital experiences on a single platform. Enhancements of the virtual experiences not only pull more users towards the platforms but also provide different opportunities to get



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involved in the process of using them. This has been revealed in the studies that on average Indian users spend about 2.36 hours on social media daily, which seems to be a great consumption pattern for online business activities. SNS Companies are providing data to the advertisers for their business promotion with great enthusiasm, they are also optimistic about the development of the business with the help of gathered data and AI (Artificial Intelligence).

Howsoever, the data gathered in this format was questioned by the experts on the accuracy and ethical grounds. The claims of data privacy by SNSs are found to be questionable at several junctures in some respect. Their claims about data safety and theft are subject to ethical-legal considerations, but the recent report published on social media today (www.socialmediatoday.com) indicates that the data gathering accuracy of the SNSs is not appropriate at least 1/3 of the time, that's a concern, which could reduce advertising performance. The above report shows that data gathered with the help of machines have certain limitations and this is affecting the process of data analysis and future planning.

Another great experiment that is affecting the process of communication of SNSs is Influencer Marketing, where Social media influencers are used to advertise the brand's products or services in their social media feeds. Marketing strategists are involved to train or educate the influencers and advertisers, influencers create content based on those strategies and trainings. In the whole process of content creation, the benefit of the advertisers is kept in mind. Advertising ethics are ignored by the content creators to pull the audience toward their profiles.

The trends set by the social media influencers are taken up by the next generation of content creators. SNSs do not take any responsibility for the content in front of any ethical-legal institutions and define the content as opinion of the content creators. The content is considered to be the opinion or testimonial by the future content creators. This is a very simple phenomenon that attracts more users to launch their pages and content on the SNSs to reach the desired target audiences with the desire of becoming an influencer in the future. This strategy is helping these sites in two ways, advertising the product and fetching the users. These communications are made in such a way that the responsibility of the content should go to the content creator, not to SNS organizations. In case of any deviation from the law or ethical questions raised by the users, SNS does take action against the user. They make content creator responsible rather than the responsibility of the platform.

The above mentioned factors increase the feed quantity and the attention grabbing co-efficient in the User Generated Content. In absence of any regulatory framework these influencers are using many tricks that can improve the visibility and K factor (growth rate of the website, apps or customer base) of the content but they may ruin the essence of social media.

The K Factor is the viral coefficient which informs you how many viewers are coming to view your content with the help of current viewers. SNSs are starving to increase the K factor of the contents with the help of these influencers. These influencers do not leave a stone unturned to increase it by any means they create 'fake accounts' to

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increase the K factor, utilize 'Grey accounts', 'Bots' etc to achieve the target.

To keep in mind the requirement of K Factor the various SNSs are trying to create a balance of the content which may give them virility and greater access. Commissioned content creation is a way to fetch desired content from the users. Challenges and Competitions are designed in a manner so that influencers and users develop content in the area of their choice. A few days ago Pinterest announced to invest an additional \$1.2 million in its Creator Fund in the name of unrepresented groups. They are trying to create specific content in the areas like Fashion/Beauty, Wellness, Lifestyle/Home, Food, etc.

This trend shows very clearly that these days social media is no more a social media; it is being converted into a Media Company with diversified content. It is created by the users keeping in mind the K Factor and the organizational policy. The basic idea of social media; 'communication for all' is blurring. The basic objective of social media is left behind. Pseudo impressions of social media under influencers' influence are reflected as reality. Platforms for all the individuals to raise their voices have been converted into a big nightmare, where a few players of the world may have greater control over concerns of communication. The recent example of the Russia-Ukraine tussle and the inclined response of the SNSs are alarming the societies to take cognizance of the organizational behaviour of these institutions.

It seems to be authentic that the business models of SNSs are very reasonable and it may give virility to the content, Idea, business, and services propagated on the medium. Time and again the research and experiential learning have reflected the biased approach of these networking sites. Many times various ideologies and governments were given an edge over others by these institutions. These sites were criticised for the propagation of lies and propaganda in several instances.

They were apologetic and withdrew the content later, but the damage to the society and the reputation of the medium itself were made.

A recent study conducted by 'The Reporters Collective (TRC) and ad. watch' and published on Al Jazeera revealed that political advertisements are inclined towards a particular ideology or political parties. A total of 5,36,070 advertisements placed on Facebook and Instagram from February 2019 to November 2020 were scrutinized for the purpose

Facebook's "advertising platform has systematically undercut the political competition in the world's largest electoral democracy, giving an unfair advantage to the one political party over its competitors". Similar reports were about the issues placed on the platforms and their algorithmic biases towards the anti-government agenda. Another positive technological advancement is that 'Chat bots' working in India and their market size is increasing significantly. They may be utilised for futuristic communication purposes. Their association with SNSs is going to be the biggest threat to the free, fair, and appropriate information flow. The neo literates will not be able to differentiate the communication between the human and machines.

The voice of the unheard will be still in the background and the techno elites will regulate the medium. This seems very promising when we see an influencer from a remote locality talking about the culture and the international issues on social networking sites, but their participation is being utilized for leisure and being monetized by the organizations. The User Generated Content is useful for organizations rather than users. The medium is not destined for social uses but it has been converted into a business conglomeration for the elites of the industry.

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Overview

Social media and the COVID pandemic: In defence of social media

Pradeep Krishnatray

The misuse of social media during the COVID pandemic has given us a new term, a communication science, as it were. It's called infodemiology. Its central idea is the rapid and uncontrollable spread of misinformation during COVID. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has coined and popularised the term and led an international effort to systematically examine it.

In all fairness, this tends to be a one-sided view. No doubt, there has been too much information, much of it misinformation, spread and shared by too many people. But social media has also been of great benefit to those who contributed to combating not only the infodemic but also the pandemic. Writing in *The Dharavi Model*, Kiran Dighavkar narrates the role media persons played during the pandemic. Not only did Mumbai Police and BMC (Bombay Municipal Corporation) effectively had used their Twitter account but Kiran himself established a WhatsApp 'MCGM Media Info' to communicate directly with journalists covering Dharavi.

The positive role of social media doesn't end with how extensively the administration and the health establishment used it. Patients and their desperate relatives relied on social media to scout around for oxi-meters, oxygen cylinders, Remde-sivir, ambulances, hospitals, etc. NGOs relied on social media to serve food, and water, provide support and comfort and bury the dead.

There was of course always misinformation. Some of it was intentional, as the cigarette manufacturers propagated once in the US. The intention was not to contest



facts about smoking but to raise doubt about them. It was a creative strategy and it worked for a while. Science finally caught up with the lie and the world is a much safer place because of it.

Something similar happened during COVID. The faith-based healers in India did not contest what the epidemiologists and virologists said, but used social media to propound their theories about the spread and cure of the virus.

Then there is the second kind of misinformation, best epitomized by an apocryphal story attributed to US newspaper publisher and war hawk, William Randolph Hearst. The story goes that Hearst sent his artist to Cuba to cover the war. When the artist landed, he found everything quiet. He sent a telegram to Hearst saying, "There will be no war". To which Hearst is said to have responded, "Please remain. You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war."

Something similar happened during COVID. A maverick medical researcher, Judy Merkovitz, appeared in a video on youtube and claimed, "If you ever had a flu vaccine, you were injected with

The faith-based healers in India did not contest what the epidemiologists and virologists said, but used social media to propound their theories about the spread and cure of the virus.

coronavirus”. A blatant lie, the video garnered a million views before better sense prevailed and youtube pulled down the video.

Then there is another, far more potent, reason that gives rise to misinformation: The absence of credible knowledge. Scientifically validated, (almost) universally accepted, and systematically disseminated knowledge takes time. Institutions have to work toward it, mechanisms have to be developed, processes have to be set, and experts have to come around to accept and implement them. This again takes time. To be sure, all this has happened with remarkable alacrity during COVID.

We shouldn't ignore this remarkable feat. When the last pandemic hit us (Spanish flu toward the end of the second decade of the 20th century), we lacked the technological wherewithal, the institutions, and the knowledge to decipher what was it that brought about such untold misery and death. Some estimates put the death toll close to 50 million — that's twice the number of deaths that happened during the First World War. It took the world almost 80 years to offer a scientific explanation for the flu. That is how science worked then. At last, we had a rational and cogent explanation for the pandemic. But it was too late to remove the misplaced epithet, the Spanish Flu.

The media had a field day. Back then, it did what it has done now. It was labelled the pandemic, the Spanish flu, although Spain was in no way responsible for its origin or spread. The Indian media, especially the ones based in Bombay and Calcutta, questioned the colonial government's apathy and neglect, praised voluntary efforts and offered sane advice to authorities who cared to listen. It constructed its editorial stance as a part

of anti-colonial rhetoric that was closely monitored by the British. There were no media then but rumours and misinformation abounded. Reason: Same as now — Lack of correct and credible knowledge.

However, some things have changed and changed rather dramatically. Today, knowledge production isn't that time-consuming. Genome sequencing has brought about wonders. It has hastened search and analysis. For instance, the French took less than a week to sequence coronavirus (Compare it to 80 years to understand the mystery of another virus) — an important step to understanding how viruses spread and what interventions are necessary to counter their spread. It took less than two years to develop a vaccine when the normal period until then was upwards of 5 years. But, from the point of view of generating knowledge, it did something far more important. It answered some basic questions: Where did the pandemic start? Why did it take off? How did it start? Over time, we found answers to other troubling questions: Why does it spread so quickly and unevenly? When does it peak? Is there more than one peak?

When knowledge production accelerated, the place for misinformation should have logically narrowed, if not eliminated. We haven't seen this happen. If anything, it may seem that it has grown manifold. This is partly because of at least two fundamental shifts that have occurred between the two pandemics. The first is the proliferation of media technology. Earlier, the colonial government controlled the levers of media through acts such as the Indian Press Act of 1910. After independence, the media increasingly became dependent on government support and the reading public got to know about events that the

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press considered worthwhile or important to report. It essentially set the agenda and told the public what to think and think about. Social media decreased this important role of intermediation. The existing dichotomy between the author and the receiver changed. Alvin Toffler referred to this phenomenon when he pointed to the dissipation of the dichotomy between the producer and consumer of information. The two roles merged into one. He even coined a term for this new being: prosumer. We became prosumers on social media.

The second shift that has happened is the individual and societal response to an emergency. Covid 19 showed us what a lack of correct and verifiable knowledge can do. It left people confused and bewildered. Some experts claimed that hydroxychloroquine is prophylactic. Others argued that it is not. Some said healthy people should wear masks. Others said it was not necessary. Then some said once that masks were not necessary but later changed their opinion. With some, the mantra was, 'test, test, test'. Others did not agree. The ever-present media did not help either. It focused on those 5 percent who were in hospital or had died; not on those 80 percent who had self-resolved. At least for a few months, messaging was neither clear nor consistent. This left many ordinary people confused.

Human beings are wired not to live with such cognitive dissonance for long. The natural tendency is to search for answers and explanations. Social media filled this information gap. The knowledge gap was compensated with a variety of opinions, some offering hope, some offering instant relief, if not ready explanation.

In the absence of any relief, the alleged cure peddled on social media addressed the perceived probability of infection and promised efficacy if the person followed the recommended action (usually

traditional medicine). Its content often preyed on fear and created Frankenstein out of individuals or institutions. Devoid of scientific jargon, the promised relief was accessible for easy interpretation. It did not require cognitive elaboration. The 'message' was often suffused with emotional content. The simpler it's logic the easier it was to accept it. For example, a post asked people to hold their breath without coughing for 10 seconds. If they failed to do so, then it showed that they had coronavirus. The scientists challenged each of the unproven assertions, but they had little to offer in terms of relief and cure. When you have a straw to clutch onto, you don't expect prayers to save your life.

Covid 19 created a hierarchy of paradoxes. You wanted to meet friends and neighbours, but they were not enthusiastic about it. You wanted to know, but sources of information, several of them actually, had dried up. You felt starved for information. First, you wanted more, then you wanted better, and then you wanted real or recent. The more you sought, the less credible it became. You yearned for clarity and certainty, but it only got more confusing. This was the case at least until the first wave subsided. It was an information deficit situation.

When everything became un-social, social media provided a semblance of sanity. It played an important role in filling up the different kinds of needs we have; needs that we had taken for granted...needs so fundamental that we never realised that we would be deprived of them. The need to connect, share, socialize, to know. When humanness became a casualty, technology came to our rescue. Social media became a tool for conversation.

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Social Media literacy can address misinformation

Annu Anand

In June 2018, two Assam youths, an audio engineer and a digital artist, were killed brutally in a mob lynching while they were heading for a vacation, due to a misleading social media post. Local people believed a post about child kidnappers moving in the region, and thought that the two were kidnappers. This wasn't an isolated case. The rumors about child abduction spread through WhatsApp messages were connected to at least 17 murders across India in 2018. Such lynching incidents in several parts of the country due to social media posts shook the nation and demonstrated the devastating impacts of misinformation.

During the pandemic social media has emerged as a major source of misinformation. India emerged as the biggest source of COVID misinformation as one out of six posts about the pandemic is based on fake information, according to a study by the University of Alberta. It found that social media is the biggest producer of misinformation accounting for nearly 85% of it. Internet-based sources make up 91% of all COVID-related fake news. Among the countries, India was found the biggest source of misinformation (18%) followed by Brazil 9% and the USA 8.6%. The amount of misinformation was also the highest in India.

Indian social media is more vulnerable

In fact, misinformation is the emerging problem in the media landscape dominated by social media in India. More than 400 million Indians have access to the internet on digital devices like smart-phones. People with affordable phone and broadband connections have access to news and information flowing from different digital sources but are not

equipped to assess the veracity of claims usually made in these messages.

As per the latest data, Indians on average spend about 2.36 hours on social media every day. The number of

social media users in the country has grown due to deep penetration of internet connectivity. The number of Internet users has grown to 658 million which is roughly 47% of the total population. of this, mobile internet users are about 600 million. The falling price of smartphones has driven the massive increase in the usage of mobile phones. The availability of internet connections at very low prices is another factor for a large scale rise in internet subscribers.

The country's higher internet penetration rate, increasing social media consumption and users lack of digital literacy and regulation has led to an increase the vulnerability of social media misinformation. The pandemic has amplified the circulation of unverified information — both unwitting (misinformation) and deliberate (disinformation).

More vulnerability, more impact

The spread of misinformation poses a considerable threat to the life and lifestyle of the common people as evident from various studies. During the pandemic, misinformation related to false cures and conspiracy theories caused panic, anxiety, false hope, mental trauma and fear as the virus was spreading. Due to the spread of health misinformation, the business of fake healthcare services and



fake medicines also increased. The most prevalent impact of misinformation that was seen during and after the lockdown-suffered a different kind of socio-psychological impact in different parts of the country. Multi-language and the diverse socio-cultural environment have made it more critical to address the problem.

A top World Health Organization official during August month noted that misinformation about COVID-19 and vaccines is keeping people from getting the shots, driving an increase in cases around the world.

Digital media literacy is one way to help internet users in India identify and disregard misinformation and disinformation, especially in regional languages and rural areas.

One such media literacy training program run by the FactShala India Media Literacy Network was conducted across 28 states of the country. In early 2021 the Centre for Media Studies (CMS), an independent social and media research think tank, conducted a comprehensive impact evaluation of FactShala's training program. This evaluation study also tried to find out the impacts of the misinformation floating on social media.

Many respondents in the study recalled how misinformation impacted their health and communal harmony in some parts of the country and also generated fear, anxiety and false hope among many of them. The spread of misinformation makes many people feel anxious, depressed, or emotionally exhausted. The respondents cited examples of posts that impacted their physical and mental health due to believing in wrong information on social media.

A young woman explained that she didn't isolate herself for many days even after testing positive for Covid-19 because she read a post claiming that 'if you can hold your breath for 30 seconds you aren't Covid positive.' The study found many such cases where either the treatment or the preventive measures were delayed or stopped after reading misinformation or

disinformation appeared on social media. Many posts were spreading information against vaccination. Few respondents admitted that they had read the posts that one can die also after vaccination. It created fear among some people and boosted vaccine hesitancy.

Communal disharmony was the other major impact reported by respondents from Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh. Posts carrying misinformation related to employment or cancellation of exams or promotion of next class created false hope and anxiety among students and job seekers. After reading and believing the post appeared on different platforms of social media many people suffered financial loss. During the interviews many respondents admitted that they were duped and suffered financial loss after reading the posts about money laundering or cheap tickets for the flights.

Need for digital media literacy

As there is so much information on social media and online in general, identifying useful and accurate sources is deceptively difficult for average users. Media literacy interventions have an important role as citizens are not checking online information for accuracy and authenticity, largely because of the sheer volume of messages and low levels of awareness about misinformation-and disinformation and, fact-checking.

Small, standalone interventions targeting school students or institutions exist but they tend to focus either on fact-checking and verification training, or critical thinking. To make people knowledgeable and secure online an effective mechanism for increasing information literacy and building resilience to misinformation and disinformation within communities is required.

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The article was first published in Pioneer on 16 April, 2022

The Social relevance of Social Media

Alok Srivastava

Social Media is a collective term for websites and applications that focus on communication, community-based input, interaction, content-sharing, and collaboration. People use social media to stay in touch and interact with friends, family, and various communities. Businesses use social applications to market and promote their products and track customer concerns. (Source: <https://whatis.tech-target.com>).

According to Merriam-webster, social media could be defined as forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content, such as videos.

Usage of Social media increased in last decade:

The reach of mobile phones to the remotest locations has been unprecedented. To add to it, the ownership of smartphones is increasing by leaps and bounds. Though COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions increased the usage of mobile phones and in particular online platforms by many times as compared to the pre-COVID period but as a matter of fact, the usage of social media platforms has shown an upward trend since the beginning of the last decade. For instance, India witnessed a revolutionary use of networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter in public mobilization. In 2011, the country saw the use of these social media tools during Anna Hazare's fast for Lokpal Bill and later on after the gruesome gang rape on December 6th in Delhi to mobilize citizens to put pressure on the government for visible action. The

recent use of social media platforms to spread information or misinformation has increased many folds in the last 5-6 years due to more and more people getting hooked to these social media platforms.



Status Symbol and ease of access and transparency

Having subscribed to various social media platforms has become a kind of status symbol and to add to this 'addiction' is the efforts being made by social media users to take pride in having a large number of 'followers' and 'friends', even though many of these followers and friends are influenced by herd mentality or herd behaviour, which is more due to emotional rather than rational reasons.

No doubt, not only the government but citizens too are in favor of digitalization of public services for ease of access and transparency. With simple-to-use software applications becoming available on mobile phones, it is being used not only to disseminate information and create awareness about government programs but also to bring in more transparency and accountability in the service delivery system. According to telecom regulator TRAI, the total number of internet subscribers in India is more than 833 million (October 2021).

With mobile-based web applications including SMS and MMS gaining base, common citizens' use of social media platforms as a means to play a more active role in building a responsive government and transparent governance, is expected.

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With every passing day, social media platforms are not only used for sharing views and opinions on matters of national or local concerns but on developments in any part of the world, many times based on the available information on social media platforms itself.

Manipulation through algorithm

The technical aspects like the algorithm base of these social media platforms lead to social media users being bombarded with news and information (dis-information) based on the users’ access history of posts on similar topics. Particularly users, who are not aware of such practices adapted by the admin departments of social media platforms get restricted to limited posts/topics or are exposed to those views and opinion that matches with their ideas or views expressed in the comments or through their likes and dislikes. This, in turn, makes the users believe that their line of thought is similar to a larger audience as well, without realizing that it is not so but due to their ‘exposure limits’ decided by the social media platforms.

Authenticity of fans or followers

Apart from the content access and authenticity of the information made available on these social media platforms, the number of followers shown for some of the accounts also raises the question about the technicalities and the process that is followed by these platforms. Many times it is observed that some followers who aren’t very active otherwise in posting or sharing their viewpoint on the

platforms are found frequently liking or forwarding/reposting any of the posts shared by someone else.

An increase in the number of likes and resending/reposting or forwarding any post or information creates a false image in terms of approval of the ‘genuineness’ of the information or news posted.

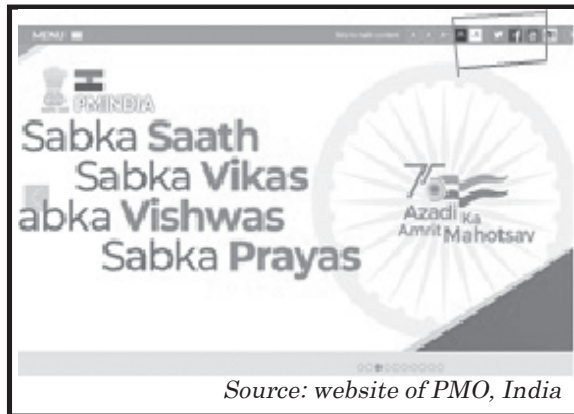
The checks and restrain from the administrators of these social media platforms are limited and more dependent on artificial intelligence (AI) based control of posts, which are profanity, abusive, vulgar, illegal, and offensive.

No doubt with the use of social media platforms increasing so fast, it is a daunting task to keep a watch over all the posts, more so when the posts or information are put in languages other than English. In the Indian context, it becomes very critical and relevant. The extent of effectiveness of AI can be gauged by its performance in critically verifying vernacular posts on parameters of don’ts. Currently, it leaves a lot to be done in this regard. The recently introduced law by the Indian government, The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021, aims to take outposts within 36 hours of receiving notice, to trace and verify users to curb fake and anonymous posting on social media. These are expected by the government of the day to have a major impact on the way social media platforms are regulated and governed in India. With every user being an author, editor, and promoter of his/her posts, the fear of deliberate or disguised ignorance of the post being not authentic or genuine is expected to increase many folds. With social media platforms associating the

usage and popularity of a post with the revenue generation model for its users, one can expect that the problem of misuse of the platforms will escalate further in near future too.

Usage of social media by the government and public offices

The use of social media platforms by the public figures to reach out to more people through their private account also have created embarrassment for them many times in the past when either their account was hacked and offensive posts were posted or blocked by the platforms themselves for one or another reason.



Indeed, it is surprising how these government Ministries, departments, ministers, and officials get 'trapped' in the popularity race and keep on posting official information at frequent intervals, either themselves or through their social media team. It raises the question, therefore, that when the government logo on the advertisements of corporate and business houses or picture of any minister or officials without prior permission isn't allowed otherwise is considered an issue of impropriety, why putting the account details on social media platforms on Ministry or public offices' website are seen many times? Aren't we not giving these private social media platforms the leverage of being on an official platform

and recognition, just because it is easy to open, access and avail?

What if in the future, we have many social media platforms? How public offices will discrete between them?

Moreover, the biggest disadvantage is that these public offices, by default, are at the discretion of the private platforms to allow their posts or block them at their whims and wishes. On the other hand, irrespective of taking sides in the Russia-Ukraine war, who gave these private social media platforms the right to allow the posting of messages or support groups with offensive and threatening the sovereignty of a nation, which is very much against their guidelines and ethos to block offensive messages (see box).

Russia's media regulator had already restricted access to Facebook and blocked Instagram after Meta said it would allow social media users in Ukraine to post messages urging violence against President Vladimir Putin in light of the invasion of Ukraine. Earlier this month, Meta had announced that its platforms would allow such statements as "death to Russian invaders," if they were posted from Ukraine, but not credible threats against civilians.
[source: <https://frontline.thehindu.com>]

As a private entity, the social media platforms should remain neutral and at the same time ensure their platforms are not being used by any vested group, whether government or private, to plan a ploy and harm any other nation, adversaries, or section of the society.

Most of the social media platforms are relatively new in existence as compared to mass media, be print or electronic and to add to it put very limited accountability on the users. This is very challenging for the stakeholders, to ensure the social media platforms continue without lowering their credibility and do not get lost in just counting the number of users and followers, something similar to the infamous TRP (television rating points) race.

Director CMS Social

Access to digital media in rural India: Case study of Mudunuru village

*Observation Post
Dr. N. Bhaskara Rao

Digital media is changing the face of the rural areas and the lifestyle of villagers. Life in the villages is no longer film or television-driven as was observed in the previous decades. With the wider access of mobile phones in rural areas, it is being used as a gadget for multiple communication and transactional tool.

With access to a range of applications, the mobile phone has become a single source for multipurpose applications, including interaction, networking, business transactions, branding, and product promotion. The availability and access to low-rate data has turned the digital media into a boom for enterprising villagers and it has opened the gates for business activities with new meanings.

Much has been talked about the waves digital or new media is making. However, it has now become a phenomenon, even in many villages of the country. This comes out of my observations over the last couple of years during my prolonged stay for several weeks in my village, Mudunuru.

Earlier not only did I have apprehensions about the process of diffusion of digital media but also about their adaption at the grassroots level. My village Mudunuru is located 40 kilometers away from Vijayawada city, in the Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh, having a population of around 4000 people with around 2000 mobile phones. Few households have more than one mobile with women also invariably having one such instrument.

The mobile phone has become a unique level player that is used by cutting across the caste, community, and occupation. Though more than five percent of mobile phone users can't read or write. In fact, in one of the self-help groups DWCR, comprising 1200 members more than ten percent cannot read and write. I feel that access to such digital devices, comprising

the digital Apps has been much faster in the last few years and such digital media has double-edged potential as compared to the conventional mass media.

While digital media have several benefits to expect, application, technology-driven content creation platforms like Reels, vlogs, and networking platforms would have some adverse implications also.

I remember in 1955 when I was in 10th class in my Mudunuru village a male student took a photo of a girl in the classroom hiding a box camera in between books for which he was reprimanded when he brought back the print of that photo.

No such incident has been heard in the last couple of years in the village since the proliferation of mobile phones with in-built cameras. Perhaps because thoughtfully mobile phones are prohibited in the classroom of schools and colleges. I'm also surprised that contrary to what I was apprehending there have been no instances of young using mobile phones for pornography as a menace.

A few examples of the kind of change that has been facilitated through social media include bringing people together with common interests or requiring similar responses or forming WhatsApp groups of people having similar interests. Multiple such groups have emerged in Mudunuru too.

Acting like nerves of civil society, these groups encourage, motivate or activate those people who are considered to be otherwise passive or introverted or leading a secluded life. A few examples of such vibrant groups include college students of the Mudunuru village, who





have formed the groups as per the subjects they are learning. Few groups are also formed based on the interest of the individuals. There must be more than a dozen such groups, I have observed in this village.

One such group called Mudunuru Snehitula Sangham has 160 members including those located far away from the village. It has a local administrator who keeps on posting regularly about the different happenings of interest in the village. Last month it not successfully mobilised over a million rupees within a week to help a villager who was admitted to the hospital with a brain hemorrhage but also ensured that he reaches home safely. I was impressed by such kind of power this network facilitates.

These groups are also providing the individual identity to the young and old residents of the village that was otherwise hidden. More than a dozen of unemployed drop-out youths have started the food-carts that has a facility for online payment through QR code. As per one of the estimates these young food sellers get three times more revenue than that a village panchayat.

Many street vendors while going around the streets use mobile phones connected to a loudspeaker that is fitted to a cycle and play a pre-recorded message to sell their products or services instead of shouting a high pitch to sell their products. Most of them provide the facility of Google Pay, and Paytm pay and

display such transaction QR codes significantly.

Interestingly, neither the panchayat nor the revenue department or the *sachivalay* that collects annual taxes from local households, have such a facility. Neither of these offices in the village has a networking facility despite claims and proliferation of these offices in the village.

As compared to these self-motivated citizens and local vendors, the school systems haven't yet been active in availing such digital media facilities although some government departments pompously claim and advocate for using of these digital media platforms at primary and secondary schools.

The administrator, Satya Narayana of a WhatsApp group in the village periodically reminds all the members of the group to abide by decency norms and the prime objective of the group. He even ensures it by pointing occasionally threat of debarring such members who will violate the rules of the group.

The social impact of digital media on the lifestyle of the rural population is far more visible and irreversible as compared to others. It has motivated the young generation to explore new avenues of interacting, expressing, earning, and raising their voice for their rights.

Observation- Post is a micro level initiative where one tries to understand the process of diffusion-adaption and ripple-linkages. As an independent experiment, it offers perspectives unlikely to be captured in a structured research.

Why call it Social Media?

On March 27 Tesla's Elon Mask was reported on a Tweet that he was critical of the social media platform and its priorities and policies, hence considering a new platform 'where free speech will be given priority and where propaganda will be minimal'. Elon Mask has reported that Twitter company was "undermining democracy by failing to adhere to free speech principles". To his tweet query whether people believe Twitter adheres to free speech, 70 percent said "no". Finally, someone, a global icon, has come out what is bothering many of misnomer of "social media". I now think that I'm not alone in questioning the use of the word Social for all kinds of media platforms.

I have no hesitation in saying that labelling these platforms as 'Social Media' isn't relevant and appropriate. All such platforms or channels of communications do have options to use the medium to engage in social activities or content as they do on any other context or topic. However, it should not entitle them to describe as social media unless distinguish from other contexts or truly engaged in free speech and are devoted to social relationships across and between identified individuals and on mutually agreeable terms.

What is being described as social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc, have the potential for social linkages or networks, but most of them are also being used more for political, business, branding, promotional, or image-building purposes. Often at the cost of social purposes. This is what Elon Mask hinted at.

It is apt to describe such outlets as "Alternate media" or "Global media". Together, even more aptly, they are the "new media," as enterprises are constantly adopting newer technologies or devices. Also, 'new' because very little or nothing is known or in the public domain about their management, investor interests, and even the source of their contents.

The platforms which become primarily propagandistic or hidden persuaders, cannot be described in a misleading and even an unfair way as social media. Getting away from being questioned so far should not mean that social media labels should continue. Mask, I think, is exploring that as an opportunity.

Social media are expected to be more transparent, not manipulative or misleading, or camouflaged. Social media could be those engaged in promoting relationships between people and communities, not in divisive or dismantling relations or as a polarising pursuit. That is, it may be fair and more appropriate to call outlets and platforms of, free speech of, by, and for community and civil society as social media.

Recent revelations about preoccupations of the outlets being described as "social media" call for reconsideration and restating or repositioning such a way that they remain as potential media of the time.

"New media" on the other is neutral and less pretentious. And not know about origins, sources, intentions, pursuit, etc. This is fair treatment of all people or the gullible public that they are not taken for a ride. Media and its users themselves evolve their concerns and carve out such a way that user discretion becomes possible and could be moderated transparently.

By describing themselves as social media they are deriving certain credibility, positioning advantage for private or corporate advantage certainly not social or societal. If any, it is incidental or unintended. On the contrary, the ones being described as social media now are often found engaged in non-social or even anti-social and divisive preoccupation to the extent of defamatory of social relationships and standing and stigmatising free speech and democratic norms.

It is now nearly two decades since the nomenclature of social media has been in use. It is time to move forward and discriminate against media in public purview by their origins, outcomes, control, and intentions. If mass media have become marketing media, social media should come out of their true colour. It may be time to consider "new media" as distinct from social media. Social media is more appropriate to limit societal or civic society confined, voluntary in scope and indiscreet, and a lot more openly interactive.

Dr. N.B. Rao

Scientists find that the impact of social media on wellbeing varies across adolescence

Girls and boys might be more vulnerable to the negative effects of social media use at different times during their adolescence, say an international team of scientists.

In a study published today in *Nature Communications*, the researchers show that, in UK data, girls experience a negative link between social media use and life satisfaction when they are 11-13 years old and boys when they are 14-15 years old. Increased social media use again predicts lower life satisfaction at age 19 years. At other times the link was not statistically significant.

In just over a decade, social media has fundamentally changed how we spend our time, share information about ourselves, and talk to others. This has led to widespread concern about its potential negative impact, both on individuals and on the wider society. Yet, even after years of research, there is still considerable uncertainty about how social media use relates to wellbeing.

A team of scientists including psychologists, neuroscientists and modellers analysed two UK datasets comprising some 84,000 individuals between the ages of 10 and 80 years old. These included longitudinal data — that is, data that tracks individuals over a period of time — on 17,400 young people aged 10-21 years old. The researchers are from the University of Cambridge, University of Oxford, and the Donders

Institute for Brain, Cognition and Behaviour.

The team looked for a connection between estimated social media use and reported life satisfaction and found key periods of adolescence where social media use was associated with a decrease in life satisfaction 12 months later. In the opposite direction, the researchers also found that teens who have lower than average life satisfaction use more social media one year later.

In girls, social media use between the ages of 11 and 13 years was associated with a decrease in life satisfaction one year later, whereas in boys this occurred between the ages of 14 and 15 years. The differences suggest that sensitivity to social media use might be linked to developmental changes, possibly changes in the structure of the brain, or to puberty, which occurs later in boys than in girls. This requires further research.

In both females and males, social media use at the age of 19 years was again associated with a decrease in life satisfaction a year later. At this age, say the researchers, it is possible that social changes — such as leaving home or starting work — may make us particularly vulnerable. Again, this requires further research.

At other times, the link between social media use and life satisfaction one year later was not statistically significant. Decreases in life satisfaction also

In just over a decade, social media has fundamentally changed how we spend our time, share information about ourselves, and talk to others. This has led to widespread concern about its potential negative impact, both on individuals and on the wider society.

predicted increases in social media use one year later; however this does not change across age and or differ between the sexes.

Dr Amy Orben a group leader at the MRC Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit, University of Cambridge, who led the study, said: “The link between social media use and mental wellbeing is clearly very complex. Changes within our bodies, such as brain development and puberty, and in our social circumstances appear to make us vulnerable at particular times of our lives.”

Professor Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, Professor of Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience at Cambridge and a co-author of the study, said: “It’s not possible to pinpoint the precise processes that underlie this vulnerability. Adolescence is a time of cognitive, biological and social change, all of which are intertwined, making it difficult to disentangle one factor from another. For example, it is not yet clear what might be due to developmental changes in hormones or the brain and what might be down to how an individual interacts with their peers.”

Dr Orben added: “With our findings, rather than debating whether or not the link exists, we can now focus on the periods of our adolescence where we now know we might be most at risk and use this as a springboard to explore some of the really interesting questions.”

Further complicating the relationship is the fact — previously reported and confirmed by today’s findings — that not only can social media use negatively impact wellbeing, but that the reverse is also true and lower life satisfaction can drive increased social media use.

The researchers are keen to point out that, while their findings show at a

population level that there is a link between social media use and poorer wellbeing, it is not yet possible to predict which individuals are most at risk.

Professor Rogier Kievit, Professor of Developmental Neuroscience at the Donders Institute for Brain, Cognition, and Behaviour, said: “Our statistical modelling examines averages. This means not every young person is going to experience a negative impact on their wellbeing from social media use. For some, it will often have a positive impact. Some might use social media to connect with friends, or cope with a certain problem or because they don’t have anyone to talk to about a particular problem or how they feel — for these individuals, social media can provide valuable support.”

Professor Andrew Przybylski, Director of Research at the Oxford Internet Institute at the University of Oxford said: “To pinpoint which individuals might be influenced by social media, more research is needed that combines objective behavioural data with biological and cognitive measurements of development. We therefore call on social media companies and other online platforms to do more to share their data with independent scientists, and, if they are unwilling, for governments to show they are serious about tackling online harms by introducing legislation to compel these companies to be more open.”

The research was supported by Emmanuel College, the UK Economic and Social Research Council, the Huo Family Foundation, Wellcome, the Jacobs Foundation, the Wellspring Foundation, the Radboud UMC and the Medical Research Council.

Source: Science Daily

Social media has a serious disinformation problem. But it can be fixed

Ruchi Gupta

Social media platforms have effectively supplanted traditional information networks in India. The dialectical relationship between online content, traditional media and political networks means that the messages propagated online effectively touch even those who are not yet online.

This ubiquity could have been a golden moment for India — democratising access to information, fostering community, increasing citizen participation and reducing the distance between ordinary people and decision-makers. However, social media platforms have adopted design choices that have led to a proliferation and mainstreaming of misinformation while allowing themselves to be weaponised by powerful vested interests for political and commercial benefit. The consequent free flow of disinformation, hate and targeted intimidation has led to real-world harm and degradation of democracy in India: Mainstreamed anti-minority hate, polarised communities and sowed confusion have made it difficult to establish a shared foundation of truth.

Organised misinformation (disinformation) has a political and/or commercial agenda. However, even though there is growing recognition of the political motivations and impact of disinformation, the discourse in India has remained apolitical and episodic — focused on individual pieces of content and events, and generalised outrage against big tech instead of locating it in the larger political context or structural design issues. The evolution of the global discourse on misinformation too has allowed itself to get mired in the details of content standards, enforcement, fact checking, takedowns, deplatforming, etc — a framework which lends itself to bitter partisan contest over individual pieces of content while allowing platforms to disingenuously conflate the discourse on

moderating misinformation with safeguards for freedom of expression. However, these issues are adjunct to the real issue of disinformation and our upcoming report establishes that the current system of content moderation is more a public relations exercise for platforms than being geared to stop the spread of disinformation.

There is thus a need for a comprehensive transparency law to enforce relevant disclosures by social media platforms. Moreover, content moderation and allied functions such as standard setting, fact-checking and de-platforming must be embedded in the sovereign bipartisan political process if they are to have democratic legitimacy.

Platforms are responsible for the speed and spread of distribution of disinformation and the design choices, which have made disinformation ubiquitous and indistinguishable from vetted information. It is thus the responsibility of the platforms to tamp down on the distribution of disinformation and their weaponisation. We argue that platforms are sentient about the users and content they are hosting and bear responsibility for their distribution choices.

We recommend three approaches to distribution that can be adopted by platforms: Constrain distribution to organic reach (chronological feed); take editorial responsibility for amplified content; or amplify only credible sources (irrespective of ideological affiliation). The current approach to misinformation that relies on fact-checking a small subset of content in a vast ocean of unreviewed content is inadequate for the task and needs to be supplemented by a review of content creators itself.

**Source: *Indian Express*
Gupta is founder of the *Future of India*
Foundation**



Govt Denied Information Under RTI on Frivolous Grounds During 2020-21: CIC Analysis

During the COVID-19 pandemic in its first year in 2020, which saw a migrant exodus in India, various ministries continued to reject a large number of applications under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, citing vague reasons, an analysis of the Central Information Commission's (CIC) annual report has revealed.

The RTI queries ranged from issues on production and availability of medicines, injections and vaccines to the distress among migrant workers and food security.

While there was a **2.95% drop** in the RTI applications filed across central public authorities during the year, there was a significant rise in the number of rejections by the ministries as well.

Transparency advocate and human rights activist Venkatesh Nayak, in his analysis, said that the ministries chose newer and hitherto unused reasons to reject applications. The reasons ranged from national security exemption to information pertaining to Cabinet papers. The analysis noted that Section 8(1)(j) of

the RTI Act, which protects personal information of an individual and prohibits disclosure that may cause unwarranted invasion of the individual's privacy, was used most frequently during the pandemic year to deny information under the RTI Act. "The central level public authorities invoked this clause to reject 34.44% of the RTI applications in 2020-21 – a marginal increase from the 2019-20 figure of 34.01%," he said.

The Ministry of External Affairs reported a five-fold increase in the use of Section 8(1)(j) – up from 107 cases in 2019-20 to 681 cases in 2020-21. The Ministry of Steel invoked this section in 199 cases in 2020-21 compared to two cases in 2019-20, while the Ministry of Consumer Affairs and Public Distribution used this exemption in 142 cases in 2020-21 compared to 18 cases in the previous year. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare used it in 184 cases during the pandemic year as against 107 cases in 2019-20.

Source: The Wire, March 08, 2022

Unpacking IPCC's 'Bleakest Warning Yet' on Climate Change for India

The impact of climate change will be more severe and less avoidable in the years to come, according to the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, which was released on 28 February.

Issuing its "bleakest warning yet," the new report concludes that global warming is outpacing our ability to cope and that governments around the world are not doing enough to protect us from the hazards that climate change has

already unleashed, let alone from future disasters.

For India, the report says that the country could be one of those where heat and humidity levels would pass the limit of human survivability and climate change could mean about 40 percent of people in India living with water scarcity compared to 33 percent now.

The contents of this report are grim and upsetting. But like the physical science report that the panel published last year, none of this is new knowledge and scientists have been warning about this for years. This report pertinently provides the most detailed look yet at

the threats posed by global warming. It draws a direct link between climate change and serious consequences like humanitarian crises, food insecurity, water scarcity, migration, and even premature deaths.

And to combat this, nations across the world have vowed to limit total global warming to no more than 1.5 degree Celsius compared with pre-industrial levels. But what this report makes very clear is that exceeding this threshold will result in permanent lasting damage and that even humanity's best effort to adapt could falter.

Source: The Quint, March 03, 2022

CIC Uday Mahurkar's office sets new record, disposes of 5,056 RTI appeals

CIC Uday Mahurkar achieved a new record of clearing the maximum number of RTI applications in a year, breaking all the records of the last 16 years.

The Central Information Commissioner (CIC) Uday Mahurkar took to Twitter to share a new milestone where he stated that his court had disposed of 5056 Right to Information (RTI) appeals in 2021-22, which is the highest in a year since the enactment of the RTI Act in 2005.

Uday Mahurkar was appointed as the CIC in October 2020.

Mahurkar has achieved a new record of clearing the maximum number of RTI applications in a year and broke all the records of the last 16 years.

Mahurkar, a former journalist and author, said on Twitter that he had "passed landmark judgments without fear or favour".

In one of the judgements regarding ancient Sanskrit manuscripts, he ruled that a manuscript, whether owned by the

government or private body, is a national property as even those who donated to private ones did it for saving our heritage. "Was lauded by scholars across the globe," he tweeted.

He further stated that in his order, he directed the National Manuscript Mission to put in the public domain all the three lakh manuscripts of private bodies that it had digitised for the benefit of researchers. Previously, only 28,000 of these were put in the public domain.

Mahurkar said that for better results, he took creative steps like "coordinating with Public Information officers of Union Ministries" under his charge. He even called group meetings to know about their problems while strictly directing them to ensure the RTI Act's objectives of transparency and accountability.

Source: India Today, April 04, 2022

India ranks 85 in Transparency International's corruption index

Underlining that some of the mechanisms that could help reign in corruption are weakening, Transparency International ranked India at 85 among 180 countries in its Corruption Perception Index report released on Tuesday.

“The case of India is particularly worrying. While the country’s score has remained stagnant over the past decade, some of the mechanisms that could help reign in corruption are weakening. There are concerns over the country’s democratic status, as fundamental freedoms and institutional checks and balances decay,” the report said.

The index, which ranks 180 countries and territories by their perceived levels of public sector corruption according to

experts and business people, uses a scale of 0 to 100 to rank Corruption Perception Index (CPI), where 0 is highly corrupt and 100 is very clean. Transparency International gave India a CPI score of 40.

In 2021, India ranked 86th with the same CPI score of 40. The report highlighted concerns over the risk to journalists and activists who have been “victims of attacks by the police, political militants, criminal gangs and corrupt local officials.” “Civil society organisations that speak up against the government have been targeted with security, defamation, sedition, hate speech and contempt-of-court charges, and with regulations on foreign funding,” the report said.

Source: The Indian Express, January 26, 2022

About CMS Transparency

The CMS Transparency team focuses on issues of good governance, raising awareness about the Right to Information Act (RTI) and empowering citizens to benefit from the legislation. CMS Transparency has been providing significant database and momentum to create responsive governance systems in our country.

The team will continue to establish links with civil society groups and design campaigns for RTI to further social objectives like transparency in elections, exposing corruption and improving civic services.

"I am happy to note that Centre for Media Studies (CMS) has been carrying out the exceptional good work in various areas having substantial public interest. One of their initiatives is the study on corruption in the country in particular in certain geographical areas or on a theme."

K.V.Chowdary, Central Vigilance Commissioner, Central Vigilance Commission (2015)



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