

The Social relevance of Social Media

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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.

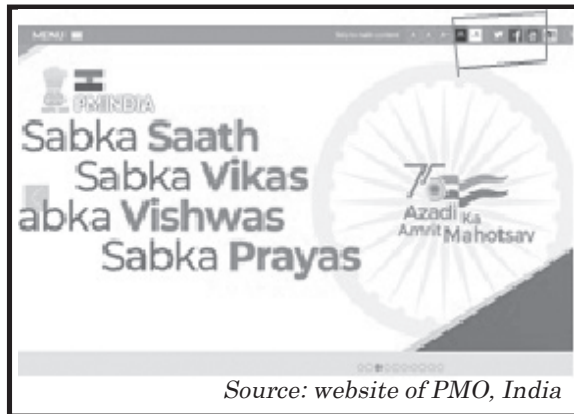
The checks and restrain from the administrators of these social media platforms are limited and more dependent on artificial intelligence (AI) based control of posts, which are profanity, abusive, vulgar, illegal, and offensive.

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.

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