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**DAILY EDITORIAL  
ANALYSIS**

**TOPIC**

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**SOCIAL MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY**

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## SOCIAL MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

### Context

- In recent years, the role of social media in democratic societies has become a hotly debated topic. While social media platforms have revolutionised communication and information dissemination, they have also introduced significant challenges to democratic processes.

### About the Social Media in India

- India has witnessed a remarkable surge in social media usage over the past decade, driven by increasing internet penetration and affordable data plans.
- As of early 2024, India boasts approximately **462 million active social media users**, representing about **32.2% of the total population**.
- On average, Indian users spend **2.4 hours per day** on social media, aligning with the global average. This time is primarily spent on messaging, browsing, and engaging with content across various platforms.

### Demographic Insights

- The digital landscape in India is diverse, with significant variations in social media usage across different age groups and regions. For instance, teenagers in rural areas show impressive digital skills despite limited literacy levels.
- The **Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)** highlights that over 30% of teenagers who can read at the 'word level' can browse the internet and find videos on YouTube.

### Growth Trends

- India's social media user base is projected to grow significantly, with estimates suggesting that by 2025, the number of social network users will surpass 1 billion.
- This growth is fueled by ongoing digitalisation efforts and the increasing affordability of smartphones and data plans.

### Social Media and Democracy

- Social media platforms have democratised access to information and provided a voice to millions. They enable citizens to participate in political discourse, mobilise for causes, and hold leaders accountable.
- For instance, during elections, social media is a powerful tool for voter education and engagement, helping to increase voter turnout and awareness.
- On the other hand, it poses significant challenges like misinformation and polarisation to democratic processes and institutions.

### Positive Impact of Social Media on Democracy

- **Empowerment and Mobilisation:** Social media has empowered citizens by providing a platform for voicing opinions, organising movements, and mobilising support for causes.
  - ◆ For instance, the Anna Hazare anti-corruption movement in India effectively used social media to gather public support and pressure the government for reforms.
- **Real-Time Information:** During crises, social media enables real-time information sharing, which can be crucial for raising awareness and coordinating responses.
  - ◆ For example, during the Palestinian crisis, social media played a vital role in spreading awareness about the situation on the ground.
- **Increased Political Engagement:** Social media has made it easier for people to engage with political content, participate in discussions, and hold leaders accountable.
  - ◆ Its increased engagement can lead to a more informed and active citizenry.

### Negative Impact of Social Media on Democracy

- **Misinformation and Fake News:** One of the most significant threats posed by social media is the rapid spread of misinformation and fake news.

- ◆ Platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook have been criticised for their role in amplifying false information, which can mislead the public and distort democratic processes.
- ◆ A study highlighted that social media makes it easier to **manipulate people with fake news**, with **three out of five Indian users** expressing this concern.
- **Polarisation and Echo Chambers:** Social media algorithms often prioritize content that aligns with users' existing beliefs, creating echo chambers that reinforce biases and deepen societal divisions.
  - ◆ It can undermine democratic discourse and make it harder to reach consensus on important issues.
- **Manipulation and Influence:** The ownership and control of social media platforms can influence public discourse.
  - ◆ For example, concerns have been raised about Elon Musk's control over Twitter (now X) and how algorithmic adjustments prioritise his posts, potentially skewing democratic debates.
- **Censorship and Control:** The monopolistic power of a few tech giants facilitates easier government censorship.
- **Insufficient Moderation:** Many social media platforms lack adequate moderation infrastructure, especially in linguistically diverse regions.
  - ◆ It can lead to unchecked hate speech, misinformation, and dangerous narratives, further exacerbating social tensions.
- **Impact on Political Discourse:** Social media has also contributed to the polarization of political discourse.
  - ◆ It can deepen divisions within society and make constructive dialogue more difficult.
- **Regulatory Challenges:** Governments worldwide are grappling with how to regulate social media to protect democratic processes without infringing on free speech.
  - ◆ In **India**, there have been calls for stricter regulations to combat misinformation and hate speech online.
  - ◆ However, finding the right balance between regulation and freedom of expression remains a complex challenge.

### Social Media Regulation in India

- India has been at the forefront of implementing regulations to manage the rapidly evolving landscape of social media. It aims **to balance the benefits of digital platforms** with the need to address challenges such as misinformation, privacy concerns, and the misuse of social media.

### The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021

- **Grievance Redressal Mechanism:** Social media platforms must appoint a **grievance officer** to address user complaints which is responsible for acknowledging complaints within 24 hours and resolving them within 15 days.
- **Compliance Officers:** Significant social media intermediaries (those with a large user base) must appoint a **Chief Compliance Officer**, a Nodal Contact Person, and a Resident Grievance Officer to ensure compliance with the rules and coordinate with law enforcement agencies.
- **Traceability of Messages:** Platforms like WhatsApp are required to enable the identification of the first originator of a message deemed unlawful by judicial order.
  - ◆ This aims to curb the spread of misinformation and illegal content.
- **Content Removal:** Social media platforms must remove or disable access to unlawful content within 36 hours of receiving a court order or notification from a government agency.

### Self-Regulation and Industry Response

- The Union Ministry of State for IT emphasized the potential for a self-regulatory body to handle content disputes, provided it includes consumer and government representation with the aim to reduce the compliance burden on companies while ensuring accountability.

### Conclusion and Way Forward: Balancing Freedom and Regulation

- While social media has undoubtedly brought numerous benefits to democratic societies, its potential to cause harm cannot be ignored. The spread of misinformation, polarisation, and manipulation pose significant challenges to democratic processes.

- To mitigate these risks, it is essential to implement robust moderation policies, promote digital literacy, and ensure transparency in the operation of social media platforms.
- Social media companies need to invest in technologies and policies that can detect and mitigate the spread of misinformation.
  - ♦ Transparency in their algorithms and operations is also crucial to ensure they do not inadvertently influence political outcomes.
- India has recognised the need to balance freedom of expression with the regulation of social media to prevent its misuse.
- Only by addressing these issues can we harness the positive potential of social media while safeguarding the integrity of our democracies.

**Source: TH**

### Mains Practice Question

To what extent has social media eroded the foundations of democratic principles, such as informed discourse, critical thinking, and civic engagement, while simultaneously amplifying misinformation and polarisation?

