Society and Social Media

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This editorial analysis is based on the article **Social media: The new theatre of India's culture wars** which was published in Hindustan Times on 31st of August of 2020. It analyses the impact of Social media on society and governance.

The phenomenal rise of **Social Media (SM)** platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and others is proving to be a double-edged sword in the functioning of democracies. On the one hand, it has democratised access to information but on the other hand, it has also posed new challenges which are now directly impacting our democracies and the people.

Extent of Social Media

- India has 574 million active **Internet users** as of 2019.
- India is the second-largest online market, behind China.
- It was estimated that by December 2020 there will be around 639 million active internet users in India.
- The majority of India's internet users are mobile phone internet users.
    - The overall data traffic in India increased by 47% in 2019 driven by continued 4G consumption. **4G** constituted 96% of the total data traffic consumed across the country while 3G data traffic registered its highest-ever decline of 30%.

Benefits of Social Media

Democratisation of Information

- Social media is allowing the democratisation of knowledge and broader communication.
- Billions of netizens around the world now feel empowered to bypass traditional curators of information.
- They have also become creators and disseminators of content, not just consumers of it.

New Opportunities

- The rise of the virtual world provides voiceless people unprecedented opportunities to assert themselves and experience a sense of belongingness.
- The rise of several YouTubers as a medium of profession is a testimony of the phenomenon.

Wider and Heterogeneous Communities

- Online communities are, geographically, much wider and more heterogeneous than physical communities.
- In the past, many communities in India were not allowed to participate in public discourses, organise themselves and advance their thoughts and ideas.
- Their concerns, ideas, experiences, ambitions and demands largely went unheard.

Cheap and Easy

- Today, creating content needs less investment than the brick and mortar or any other Physical set up.
- It is more often soft-skill driven.
- With the assistance of technology, anyone can create competent, authentic, effective and fresh online content.

Countering The Hegemony

- Social Media has also evolved as a tool to counter the hegemony or narrative of traditional players.
- It has provided an alternate source of Knowledge in a world where mainstream media has come under severe public criticism for fake news and propaganda.

Closing The Distance

- Social Media has also bridged the distance.
- Friends and Family are now connected over WhatsApp and other Apps despite being far away in distance.

Direct Interaction With Government

- Today Social Media has empowered common people to directly interact with the government and avail government services directly.
- Common people tagging Railway and other ministries and the agencies responding to them is common news these days.

Challenges

Hate speech and Rumours

- **Hate speech** and rumours in India have been responsible for acts of violence and deaths in many of the cases for quite some time now.
- The most recent being the case when two sadhus and their driver were lynched in Gadchinchale village in Palghar, Maharashtra this year.
- The incident was fuelled by WhatsApp rumours about thieves operating in the area and the group of villagers had mistaken the three passengers as thieves and killed them. Several policemen who intervened were also attacked and injured.
- Similarly Hate Speech on Social Media had a big role in the **Delhi Riots of 2020.**

Fake News

- A 2019 Microsoft study found that over 64% of Indians encounter **fake news** online, the highest reported amongst the 22 countries surveyed.
- There are a staggering number of edited images, manipulated videos and fake text messages spreading through social media platforms and messaging services like WhatsApp making it harder to distinguish between misinformation and credible facts.

Online Trolling

- **Trolling** is the new bi product of Social Media.
- Vigilantes take law in their own hand and start trolling and threatening those who don't agree with their views or narratives.
- It has led to anonymous trolls who attack the reputation of an individual.

Women Safety

- Women face cyber rape and threats that affect their dignity severely.
- Sometimes their pictures and videos are leaked with and are forced to cyber bullying.

Way Forward

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

- Several Social Media houses have put up a mix of automated and human driven editorial processes to promote or filter certain types of content.
- These **AI** units will automatically flash the danger of mis reporting everytime an image or news is shared.
- This practice must be strengthened and disseminated.

Fight Misinformation With Information

- This is the other way where alternative information alongside the content with fake information is posted so that the users are exposed to the truth and correct information.
- This approach, which is implemented by YouTube, encourages users to click on the links with verified and vetted information that would debunk the misguided claims made in fake or hateful content.
- E.g, If you search "Vaccines cause autism" on YouTube, while you still can view the videos posted by anti-vaxxers, you will also be presented with a link to the Wikipedia page of MMR vaccine that debunks such beliefs.

Bringing Regulation

- There must be an exhaustive national law to deal with the ever expanding horizon of Social Media.
- Responsibility must be fixed and there must be deterrence of law.

Public Awareness

- A **digitally literate** country is the need of the hour.
- Responsible social media use must be taught at every school and college in the country and especially in the rural areas where people can be easily manipulated.
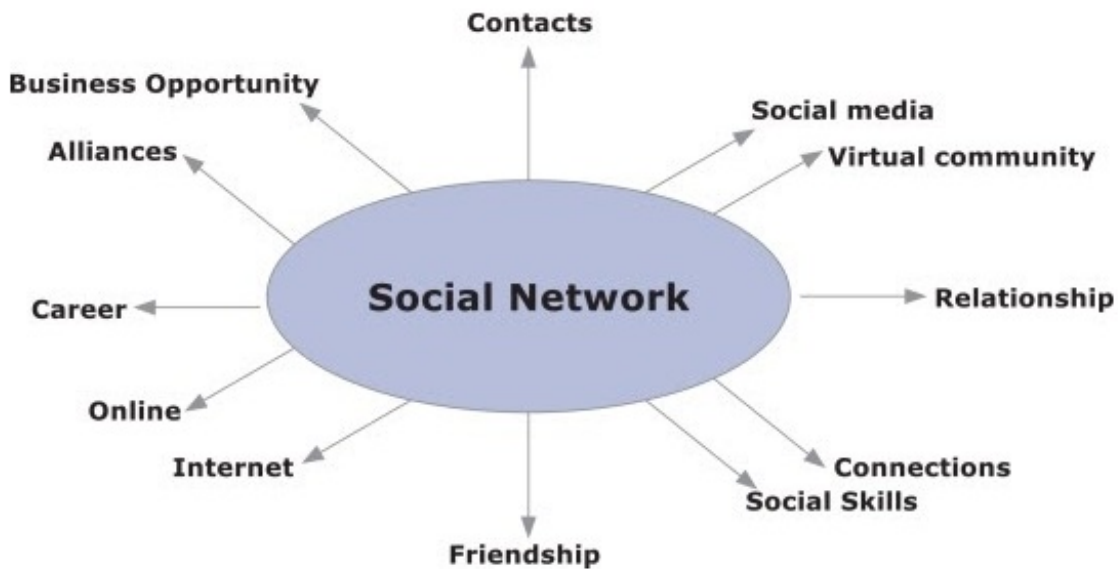
Legal Measures

- The **Election Commission of India (ECI)** had announced measures to curb fake news and misinformation on social media platforms at the time of elections.
- It had brought political parties' social media content under the ambit of the model code of conduct, and had asked the candidates to disclose their social media accounts and all expenditure on their respective social media campaigns.
- Similarly the media Wing of the I&B Ministry has been assisting various arms of the government in keeping an eye on activities on various social media platforms.
- Such practices must be encouraged at all scales and institutions.

Conclusion

- As India is not a surveillance state, there must not be any illegal or unconstitutional check on the right to privacy and freedom of speech and expression which are the fundamental rights of every citizen.
- There must be a balance as the Constitutions itself has provided several limitations on one's right to speech and expression.
- Big technology firms who own social media platforms can mediate content and thus impinge on democracy.

- They and everyone must be held accountable for their actions which have wide social ramification.

Dimensions of Social Network

Contacts

Business Opportunity

Social media

Alliances

Virtual community

Social Network

Career

Relationship

Online

Internet

Connections

Social Skills

Friendship

Drishti Mains Question

Social Media is a double edged sword in the functioning of democracies. Critically analyse the statement in the light of current development.

Watch Video At:

https://youtu.be/oWH4NM87_p4

This editorial is based on **"Ask me no questions!"** which was published in The Financial Express on September 4th, 2020. Now watch this on our Youtube channel.