



Is Social Media Polarising Society?

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(This editorial is based on the article “Is Social Media Polarising Society?” which appears in The Hindu on 6th December 2018.)

We live in a world where we aren’t only consumers of information but creators as well, which gives us a misplaced sense of control.

Almost 1.49 billion people on average log onto Facebook daily; every second, on average, around 6,000 tweets are tweeted on Twitter; and since its inception, over 40 billion photographs have been posted on Instagram.

As we approach the end of the second decade of this century, social media and the Internet have drifted from their promise of closing distances and exposing us to the views of those who existed beyond our personal networks.

Because of extensive social media usage, we find ourselves to be more rigid versions of our former selves. Fake news is an industry today and finds great resonance with people. Its rise corresponds with a growing distrust in the mainstream media. Fake news has now even slipped into traditional media outlets and is often circulated by prominent individuals. This has contributed to the echo chamber phenomenon*.

“**Echo chamber**” is a term widely used in today's lexicon, that describes a situation where certain ideas, beliefs or data points are reinforced through repetition of a closed system that does not allow for the free movement of alternative or competing ideas or concepts.

How Social Media is Polarising Society?

- In the 1950s, a series of psychological experiments called the Asch Conformity Experiments were carried out by the social psychologist Solomon Asch, to determine the extent to which a person’s opinion is influenced by a group. Asch found through a series of trials that an individual was willing to go to the extent of giving a wrong answer just to conform to the majority view.

- **The respondents gave wrong answers either because they did not want to be ridiculed or thought of as “peculiar”, or because they believed that the group was better informed than them.** Although means of communication and engagement have evolved since the 1950s, the human instinct to fit in hasn't changed. To some extent, this also explains the impact of fake news online, which is said to contribute to a polarised society.
- A study carried out by Aalto University, Finland, on increasing polarisation on social media found that factors like user homophily (users in a social system tend to bond more with ones who are similar to them than to ones who are dissimilar) and algorithmic filtering have created the cycle of enforcing and reinforcing belief systems and ensuring that we don't open our minds to diverse opinions.
- **People seek “informed” opinions through filters only from people they trust and look for news that confirms their worldview.** This results in people cultivating rigid opinions of issues.
- Social media sites are more than willing to play abettors. **Twitter, for example, will routinely prompt you to follow people who hold a viewpoint that is similar to yours.**
- The features of openness, obscurity, and anonymity that once gave strength to marginalized communities are now giving room for mean intentions to grow.
- Over the last couple of years, there has been a growing trend of misinformation (due to biases or human errors), disinformation (fake news created intentionally) and even “fake accounts”, the latter directly targeted at pushing a political agenda or harassing somebody online.

Social Media is not the only reason for polarization

- **The printing press was seen as trouble by the Ottomans.** The speed at which books were printed and distributed aroused suspicion. Ironically, the first Greek printing house set up in 1627 printed a booklet targeting Jews. **Books were only a medium, just like social media. Banning books and blaming social media are results of the same flawed logic.**
- **If social media had an inherent bias towards evil, the #MeToo stories wouldn't have found an outlet.** There are many stories of lost children being found, dogs being adopted, money being raised for various causes, and other similar stories of good being done, is found on social media.
- **According to the BI-2018 survey** (Broadcast Audience Research Council of India - BARC - periodically conducts a research study to ascertain television viewing habits in India), the number of individuals with access to TV has gone up to 835 million; smartphone penetration in the country is at around 300 million. The number of daily active users on WhatsApp is 200 million; on Facebook, it is 194 million, and on Twitter, it is 7.83 million. **By all accounts, social media in India is still a niche phenomenon.**

- Social media is a mechanism comprising of multimedia and other platforms that are multilingual, multicultural and are inclusive, and allow equal opportunities for all, irrespective of class, creed, race, religion, sex, age or financial resources. **Blaming social media for every (online and offline) misconduct doesn't seem to have any logical base to stand upon.**

Conclusion

- **Because of the influence of social media, people are getting trapped in narrower worldviews that are seeping into not only voter behaviour but everyday personal interactions.** This is something we must be alarmed about. Log in or log out, the world is a far more opinionated place today but it need not be a rigid one.
- It is true that social media was used to garner support for a man who burnt a Muslim man on video in Rajasthan, but it was the same social media that was also used to raise funds for the parents of a child who was gang-raped and murdered in Kathua in Jammu and Kashmir. This shows that social media is only just a tool, which on the hands of a user can easily do as much good as bad.
- **Social media is a tool for empowerment, especially for a country like India where 70% of the population is yet to get online and leverage the opportunities it has to offer.**
- While social media is definitely facing the global challenges of information bombardment (both factual and fake), it is also enabling communities to access their rights and voice their opinion. **Hopefully, over time, people will learn to take more responsibility for what they share and social media platforms shall regain their lost trust.**