Social Media and Elections

For Prelims: Chief Election Commissioner, Election Commission of India

For Mains: Social Media and Role of Elections

Why in News?

Recently, the **Chief Election Commissioner** addressed an international conference for Election Management Bodies (EMBs) hosted by the **Election Commission of India (ECI)** under the aegis of the United States' 'Summit for Democracy' platform.

- While inaugurating the conference, the **commissioner urged social media sites to use their "algorithm power" to flag fake news proactively.**

What are the Concerns Regarding the Spread of False Information?

- **Red-Herring:** The content moderation-driven approach to disinformation by all major social media platforms is a red herring **designed to distract from the far larger problem of amplified distribution of disinformation as part of business models.**
- **Opacity of Social Media Platforms:** Social media platforms are increasingly becoming the primary ground for public discourse over **which a handful of individuals have inordinate control.**
    - One of the biggest hurdles in being able to curb misinformation is the lack of transparency by social media platforms.
- **Inadequate Measures:** Various social media platforms have been **unable to evolve a coherent framework to stop misinformation** and have instead responded erratically to events and public pressure.
- The absence of a uniform baseline approach, enforcement, and accountability vitiated the information ecosystem.
- **Weaponization of False Information:** Social media platforms have **adopted design choices that have led to a mainstreaming of misinformation** while allowing themselves to be weaponized 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.
        - Misinformation spread through social media applications has been linked to **minority hate,** entrenched social polarisation, **vaccine hesitancy,** and real-life violence.
- **Digital Media Illiteracy among Children:** The **National Education Policy 2020** is a missed opportunity to insert **media literacy** in the curriculum.
    - Although 'digital literacy' is mentioned once in the document, social media literacy is entirely neglected.
    - This is a serious gap as social media is the primary source of students' literacy.
- **Threats due to Anonymity: The most famous reason for anonymity is to be able to speak the truth against vindictive governments** or to not let the views be tagged to the real

person being spoken about, in the offline world.
   - While on one hand, this is helpful for someone in sharing their views without any insecurity, it does more harm in the aspect that the user may spread false information up to any extent without being held accountable.

What are the Pros and Cons of Social Media in Elections?

- **Pros:**
  - **Planning Manifestos:**
    - Digital strategies have become increasingly important in the planning of political rallies and party manifestos in recent years.
    - And so far, anyone wanting to read the sentiment of the people, the pre-election survey has been replaced by a tweet survey.
  - **Influence Public Opinion:**
    - Social media helps the political parties in influencing the opinion of undecided voters, in giving the apathetic middle class a reason to go and vote.
    - It also helps in garnering the support base to vote in large numbers and influencing others to vote.
  - **Disseminating Information:**
    - Politicians are **increasingly adopting the new social media for campaigning, disseminating or retrieving information, or contributing** to rational and critical debate.
  - **Addressing People Problems:**
    - Social media makes it easy for people to stay up to date on upcoming events, party schedules, and election agendas.
    - Assign a tech-savvy candidate to manage social media and use it to reach out to people and hear their concerns.
- **Cons:**
  - **Polarisation:**
    - Social media has become an **instrument for politicians that is utilized to create more noise and even is made a way to promote polarization.**
  - **Growing Misrepresentation:**
    - Social media is greatly utilized to **blame and criticize the opposition parties** and the information is misrepresented by misleading and incorrect facts.
    - The number of political minorities is growing, and they are using social media to create a political logjam.
  - **Influence Voters Opinion:**
    - Social media presence and advertising requires a lot of spending. Only affluent parties can spend that much and they can influence the majority of the voter base.
    - During elections, the spread of fake news on Social Media Platforms **influences the people's preferences.**

How is Media regulated during Elections?

- The Election Commission does not regulate media. It has however, the responsibility to enforce the provisions of law or Court directions, which might have linkages with media or certain aspects of media functioning. These laws are mentioned below:
  - **Section 126 of the** Representation of the People Act, 1951: **It prohibits** displaying any election matter by **mean of cinematograph, television or other similar apparatus, during the period of 48** hours ending with the hour fixed for conclusion of poll.
  - **Section 126A** of the Representation of the People Act, 1951: It prohibits **conduct of exit poll and dissemination of their results** during the period mentioned therein, i.e., the hour fixed for commencement of polls in the first phase and half hour after the time fixed for close of poll for the last phase in all the States and Union Territories.
  - **Section 127A** of the Representation of the People Act, 1951: The **printing and publication of election pamphlets, posters, etc. is governed by its provisions,** which make it mandatory to bear on its face the names and addresses of the printer and the publisher.
- **Section 171H of the** Indian Penal Code: It prohibits incurring of expenditure on, inter alia,

advertisement without the authority of the contesting candidate.

Way Forward

- Social media platforms, political parties, civil society and election authorities **should put more effort into how social media platforms are used by politicians** during elections and frame a comprehensive guideline that benefits the voter.
- Social media, if used properly will certainly add to the vote bank but the other side of the picture will always stay. Hence, **there is a need to take some measures** for the effective use of social media in elections without any violation of individual rights.
- It is high time that to e**nsure that the voting is not influenced but is done with People's Own Choices and Preferences** and ensure Free and Fair Election in the country.

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question:

Q. What are social networking sites and what security implications do these sites present? **(2013)**

Q. Discuss the role of the Election Commission of India in the light of the evolution of the Model Code of Conduct. **(2022)**

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