



## Social Media and The Menace of False Information

*This editorial is based on “[A Twofold Approach to Win the War on Misinformation](#)” which was published in Hindustan Times on 19/05/2022. It talks about the concerns regarding the spread of false information through social media platforms.*

**For Prelims:** The Information Technology (Guidelines for Intermediaries and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, Digital Media Literacy, Misinformation v/s Disinformation v/s Mal-information, NEP 2020, Free Speech

**For Mains:** The menace of False information, Social media and spread of fake news, Risks to free speech and spread of misinformation.

[Social media platforms](#) have effectively supplanted traditional information networks in India. The relationship between online content, traditional media and political networks is so strong that the messages are propagated effectively to even those who are not yet online.

Many times, [false information](#), intentionally or unintentionally, gets transferred through social media that manipulates the beliefs of the people towards a particular community, the government or some ongoing issue.

**Public opinion is the currency of democracy**, and, therefore, **vested interests cannot be allowed to hijack public opinion** through the organised dissemination of misinformation.

India has primarily focused on controlling social media platforms through legalistic instruments and threats of criminal liabilities. However, the need is to **locate its regulatory efforts** and bring about a **comprehensive transparency law** to force meaningful disclosures by platforms to **enable a broader community of informed stakeholders**.

### 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**.
  - Even when platforms have disclosed certain kinds of information, the **data is often not presented in a manner that facilitates easy analysis**.

- **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**.

## How is Social Media Mis/Disinformation Affecting Politics?

- There are three notable effects of social media on our politics, which require deliberation.
  - Social media has led to a **dislocation of politics** with **people weighing in on abstractions online** while being **disengaged from their immediate surroundings**.
  - Social media has led to a degradation of our political discourse where **serious engagement has been supplanted by "hot takes" and memes**.
  - It has **obscured the providence of consequential interventions** in our political discourse because of opacity in technology.
- Meaningful politics, especially in democracies, is rooted in local organisation, discussion and negotiation. However, the spread of false information through social media has **facilitated a perception of engagement without organisation and action without consequence**.

## Misinformation v/s Disinformation v/s Mal-information

- Most of the time Fake news conflates three different notions: misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information.
  - Misinformations are false information, but **when a person conveys it, believes that it is true and shares**.
  - Disinformation is those which are shared intentionally by a person after knowing that it is not true; **false information which is intended to mislead**.
  - Information that is **based on reality but imposes harm** on a person, organisation, or country is termed as mal-information.

## What can be Done?

- **Law to Facilitate Transparency:** A meaningful framework to combat disinformation at scale must be built on the **understanding that it is a political problem**.
  - Transparency and regulation need to be brought to **bring governance of speech within the ambit of the democratic process**.
  - It is important to bring a **comprehensive transparency law** to compel **relevant**

- disclosures by platforms** to facilitate action by a wider group of stakeholders.
- Such a law should include **safeguards for user privacy** since platforms are a repository of the private information of citizens.
  - **Creating a Regulatory Body:** Bringing governance of speech under State purview is fraught with [risks to free speech](#). It is, thus, proposed to constitute a regulator with **statutory powers to lay out broad processes for governance of speech**, set transparency standards and **audit platforms for compliance**; and **advisory powers** to develop perspective on key misinformation themes especially those with public policy implications.
    - Such a body should be **answerable to Parliament and not the Executive**.
    - Such a model will increase democratic contest by moving contested speech issues into the political sphere and facilitate transparency of powerful technology platforms.
  - **Structural Reforms in Platforms:** Blanket immunity for platforms as “intermediaries” no longer makes sense since **platforms are far more interventionist with user content**. Therefore, platform accountability should be linked to their distribution model.
    - In this regime, platforms would **either adopt a hands-off approach** to content and constrain distribution to organic reach (chronological feed); **or exercise editorial choice and take responsibility for amplified content**.
    - Also, Platforms must be mandated to default to a chronological feed, allowing users to make an informed choice to opt-in for a curated feed.
  - **Digital Media Literacy among Children:** A strategy that has not received sufficient attention in India is digital media literacy to the citizens, especially school children, to **equip them with skills to steer through the information they receive**.
    - Hence, **technological interventions** to tackle misinformation should be complemented with **human-centred solutions focused on digital media literacy**.
      - Social media platforms should take initiatives in this regard and promote digital media literacy.
    - Also, the **NEP 2020 should equip students with social media literacy** that would involve the application of critical thinking to the information they are flooded with daily through social media.

### ***Drishti Mains Question***

“Social media cannot be wished away. Its structure and manner of use are choices we must make as a polity after deliberation instead of accepting as them fait accompli or simply being overtaken by developments along the way”. Comment.