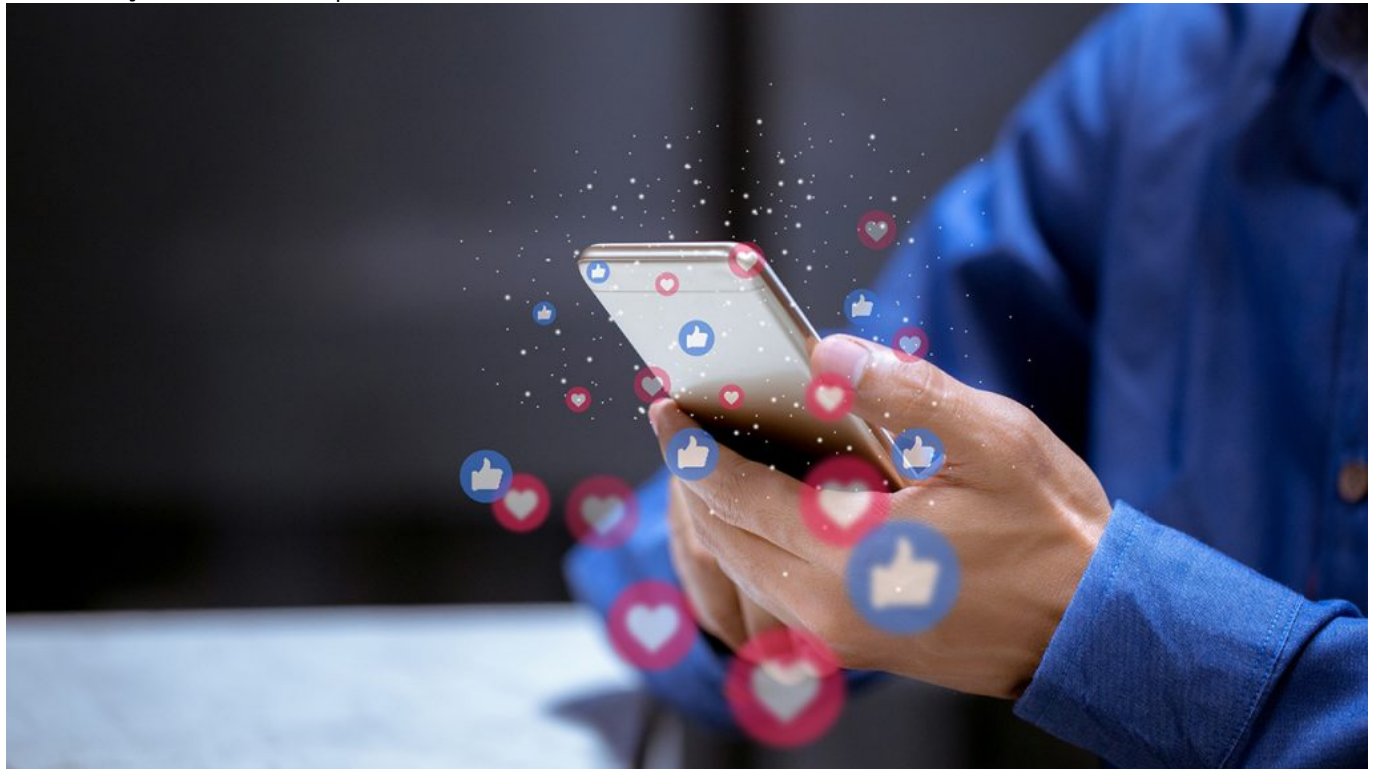


Disinformation Issues with Social Media

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The communication happening through social media has significant political bearings in democracies like India. When traditional media is thought to have surrendered before the ruling government, social media emerged as a platform that enabled the public to voice their opinion.

In a way, social media gave the public the power that they never had before. They could hold authorities accountable, report injustice, and support the cause they believed in, through social media.

Social media platforms have adopted design choices that have led to a proliferation and mainstreaming of misinformation while allowing themselves to be weaponized by powerful vested interests for political and commercial benefit.

Issues with Disinformation

- **Primary Source of Fake News:**

With millions of people using social media in a country like India, fake news is no less than a potential disaster. It can be used to influence public opinions, to gain popularity or to malign the image, character of certain individuals or opponents or to defame them. It polarizes public opinion and affects political institutions, political disinformation campaigns in the Indian electoral system could lead to the deepening of existing social discord, loss of civic trust in the electoral system, and the compromise of basic democratic principles.

- **Confirmation Bias:**

Social media algorithms and search engines observe users' behavior and present relevant and engaging content. These are advertising tools to generate better revenue. They end up reinforcing the confirmation bias of the people who cling to their deeply held beliefs inside a filter bubble. Isolation from other perspectives makes people vulnerable to polarization affecting political outcomes.

- **Disinformation and Propaganda Politics:**

Distortion of facts, using partial truths while changing the context to solve and manipulate a purpose, is disinformation. Increased disinformation on social media strengthens propaganda politics, gives rise to radicalism. The digital age is seeing an exponential increase in the usage of these tools to gain power. For example, reports were out in the media about personal data usage of the public to influence electoral outcomes.

- **Echo Chambers:**

People follow their friends, family and colleagues on social media. The social bias used during selecting who to follow, influences the information they see. People usually prefer information forwarded by their social circle. This practice results in the creation of echo chambers. These chambers fall prey to manipulation very easily and can also cause extremism.

Measures to Combat Disinformation

- A meaningful framework to combat disinformation at scale must be built on the understanding that it is a political problem: The issue is as much about bad actors as individual pieces of content.
- There is a need for a comprehensive transparency law to enforce relevant disclosures by social media platforms.
- Content moderation and allied functions such as standard setting, fact-checking and de-platforming must be embedded in the sovereign bipartisan political process if they are to have democratic legitimacy.
- It is the responsibility of the platforms to tamp down on the distribution of disinformation and their weaponization.
- Three approaches to distribution that can be adopted by platforms:

1. Constrain distribution to organic reach (chronological feed)
2. Take editorial responsibility for amplified content
3. Amplify only credible sources (irrespective of ideological affiliation)

- Finally, as the country with the largest youth population in the world, it is important that we actively think of how we want our youth to engage in our democratic processes and the role of social media platforms in it.

Way Forward

Meaningful politics, especially in democracies, is rooted in local organization, discussion and negotiation. However, the structure of social media has facilitated a perception of engagement without organization, action without consequence. Social media cannot be wished away. But 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.