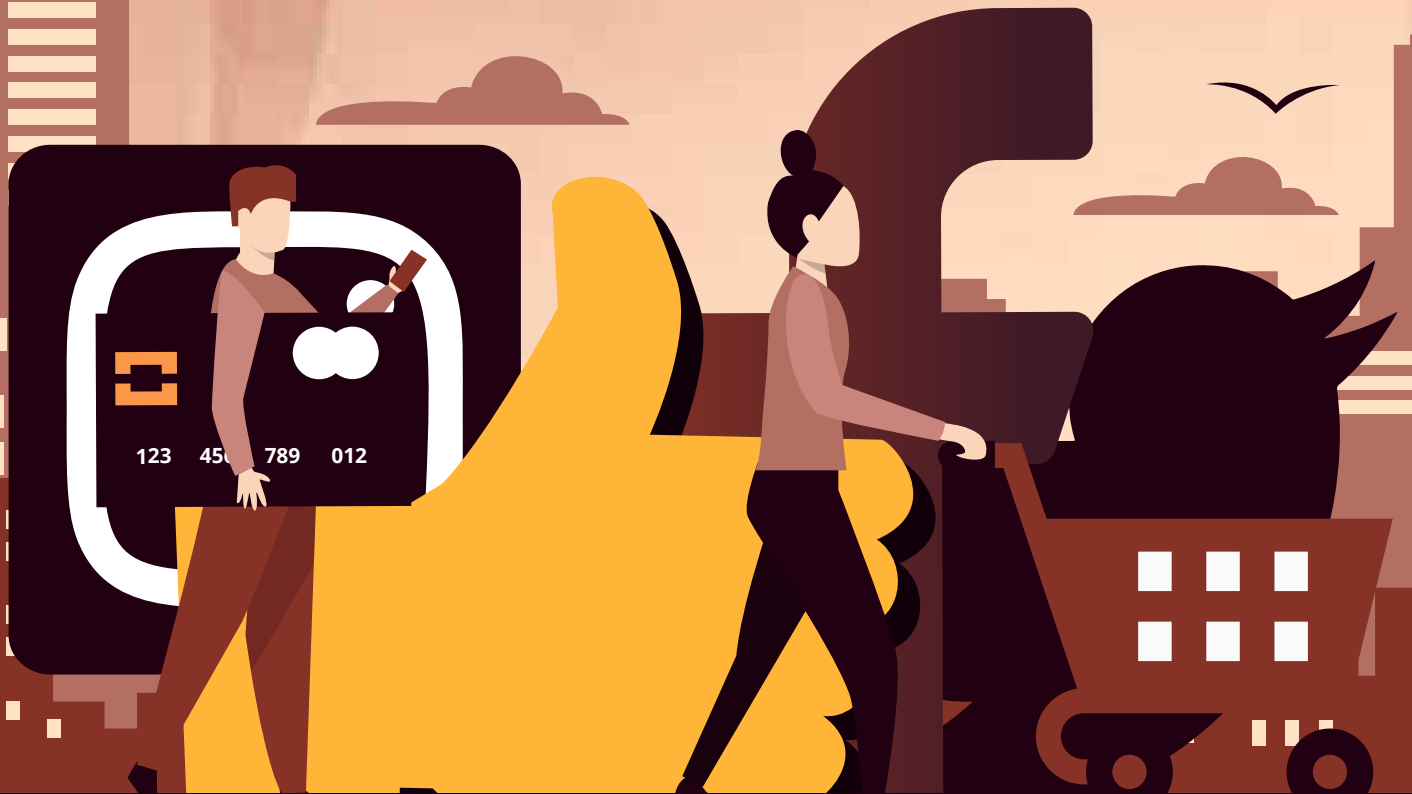# SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIETY

INTRODUCTION

In nearly two decades, the social media has gone from being an entertaining extra to a fully integrated part of nearly every aspect of our daily lives, thus revolutionizing the way we communicate, interact and socialize. As a result, it has created a huge impact on the social fabric of our society and the nature of social relationships.

Recent statistics suggests that there are more than three billion active social media users and the number is growing by 9% annually. This makes social networking sites like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter some of the most influential contexts regarding diffusion of information.

In the modern digitalized world, social media has 'given a voice to the people'. However, the debate about whether social media is cultivating global collaboration and facilitating a pursuit for a better world, or instead cultivating polarization and fragmentation is just beginning.

In this context, we will try to understand what constitutes social media, how social media over the years has benefitted various sections and segments of society, should social media be regulated, if yes then, what are the reasons for it, what are the challenges associated with the regulation of social media and In what ways a more responsible, useful and purposeful social media can be created for the emerging digital era with a more informed society.

What constitutes social media?

➤ Social media can be basically defined as a grouping of interactive **Web 2.0 Internet-based** applications that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through the **building of virtual networks and communities.**
  - ○ **Web 2.0** (also known as **Participatory or Social Web)** refers to websites that emphasize user-generated content, ease of use, participatory culture and interoperability for end users. This is in contrasts to the first generation **Web 1.0-era websites where people were limited to viewing content** in a passive manner.
➤ It **can be categorized into six types: Joint projects** like Wikipedia, **Blogs** like Twitter, **Content Communities** like YouTube, **Social Networking Sites** like Facebook, **Effective Game Worlds** like World of War craft and **Virtual Social Worlds** like Second Life.
  - ○ Other than this, social media technologies **may also include:** picture-sharing, vlogs, wall-postings, email, instant messaging, music-sharing, crowd sourcing, voice over IP and many more.
➤ **Social media is different from traditional media** in a sense that it has a broader reach, allows two-way conversation and immediate exchange of information, is generally free of cost and lacks any entry barriers.
➤ Today, **Social networks are one of the fastest growing industries in the world** with a projected 34% annual growth over the next 5 years.

How social media has benefitted the society?

The **fundamentals of social media** come down to a simple basic human desire: **the need to connect with other humans, and to be part of a group.** At first, social media simply existed to help end users connect digitally with friends, colleagues, family members, and like-minded individuals. But over the years it has transformed into a multifaceted platform that is being used as a tool for marketing, news reporting, social activism, customer feedback, entertainment, political outreach, recruitment etc. In this regard some specific benefits that social media has in today's society are:-

➤ **For Youth and Adults:**
  - ○ **Political Empowerment:** Social media has proven to be a solution to the challenge of declining youth political engagement as it has provided a new medium of communication through which established political institutions and actors can reach out to young citizens. Alternatively, young citizens are using social media to find new ways to express their political preferences and their opinion on a particular policy.
    - ✓ For example, Election commission of India runs **Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation** (SVEEP) programme through different modes and media to educate citizens, electors and voters about the electoral process.
  - ○ **Economic empowerment:** Social media is facilitating access to customized information about jobs and employment opportunities and is overwhelmingly perceived as an important tool for businesses in general, and specifically for start-ups and social enterprises.

○ **A transformational tool for education:** Social media has gained incredible popularity over the past few years as an open source of information and knowledge sharing platform. For instance, educational institutions are using social media space to interact with young minds and enhance the overall teaching-learning process.

  ✓ It has also enhanced peer collaborations facilitating team-building and communication skills, opinion formation along with practical and application based learning.

  ✓ For younger children, developmental benefits through online play schools or educational computer games include Literacy skills, Numeracy skills and Social Skills alongside intellectual benefits like developing problem-solving and critical thinking.
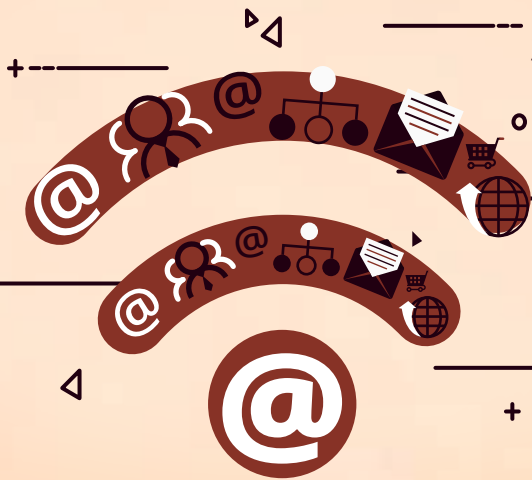
➤ **For vulnerable sections of society:**

  ○ **Platform for marginalised communities to fight for their rights:** Social media provides a great platform to marginalised communities to express their feelings, issues, problems and organise themselves to raise their voice against oppression. For example:

    ✓ **Use of rainbow profile filters on Facebook** enhanced feelings of belonging in LGBTQ community and acted as a means of showing support for the community.

    ✓ **#LockdownCasteAtrocities is** also one such social media campaign by Dalit Human Rights Defenders Network (DHRDNet) that aims to share stories of pain, plight and struggle of Dalits during the COVID lockdown.

○ **Women empowerment and bridging gender divide:** Social media has proved to be a powerful vehicle for bringing women's rights issues to the attention of a wider public, challenging discrimination and stereotypes and encouraging policy makers to step up commitments to gender equality.

  ✓ **Hashtag activism** which includes various campaigns such as UN Women's #HeForShe, #MeToo, #DelhiGangRape among others have helped to mobilise public attention on women's rights and increasing the visibility of issues that are under-reported in mainstream media.

○ **A social support system for elderly population:** Social media has facilitated older adults to express themselves, participate in discussions and stay in contact with society. This has empowered older people and provided them with a sense of connectedness, greater control, self-efficacy and reduced loneliness.

➤ **For Social Cohesion and better Governance:**

○ **Cultural integration:** It has provided a common way of linking people from diverse communities, traditions, opinions and places with each other across the world establishing a sense of belonging to a greater social network other than one's own local community.

○ **Tool for collective action:** Social media has a large and growing impact on philanthropy and action for the common good. Crowdfunding, marketing, advocacy, and promotion of non-profits are some ways social media can advance the cause of a non-profit or social action. Because it is free, social media is accessible to people from all backgrounds who want to make a difference toward what they care about.

○ **Improved governance:** Social media provides an interactive two way communication mechanism through which the government can measure public sentiment with respect to new laws or key policy changes. By gathering feedback, ideas, suggestions, and absorbing these into the policy-making process, the government can rejuvenate the concept of direct democracy.

○ **Improved management in the Health Care Sector:** Health Care Professionals (HCPs) can use social media to potentially improve health outcomes, develop a professional network, increase personal awareness of news and discoveries, motivate patients, and provide health information to the community.

SHOULD SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS BE REGULATED? IF YES, THEN WHY?

Social media plays vital roles such as communication, collaboration, education etc and as a result, the associated stakeholders like social media platforms, participating public and governmental authorities assume a critical responsibility of keeping social media safe and secure so that it acts as a progressive tool for society.

In the light of the de-facto mandate that Social Media has assumed, social media platforms have had to shoulder majority of the responsibility. But despite having internal mechanisms to tackle illegal and inappropriate content, Social media companies have failed to ensure that social media remains a safe space and is not misused. For instance, some of the proven instances of gross failures of Facebook include: the anti-Muslim riots in Sri Lanka, the violence against Rohingya in Myanmar, harvesting of personal data by Cambridge Analytica etc. **The inability of social media platforms calls for their regulation** in the interest of users and overall social media space.

With increasing users on these platforms, growing technology and increased propensity to overuse and misuse, social media environment has been **generating several dangers** which demand an urgent and immediate need of regulation-

➤ **Increasing polarisation of society:** There is mounting concern that **the hyper-personalization bias of social media algorithms** contribute to social polarization by creating **'filter bubbles' or 'echo chambers'** that insulate people from opposing views about current events.

- People seek 'informed' opinions through filters only from people they trust and look for news that confirms their world view (known as **Confirmation Bias)** and users are more likely to like and share the more polarizing topics (called the **'amplification effect').**
- Excessive social polarization is undesirable as it **erodes the democratic institutions** that protect free speech and other basic rights.
- Twitter, for example, routinely prompts to follow people who hold a similar viewpoint. This results in **people cultivating rigid opinions of issues and narrower world views** that are seeping into not only voter behaviour but also everyday personal interactions.

➤ **Ethical and privacy concerns:** As social media is designed for unrestricted information sharing, protecting privacy becomes very difficult, especially for children and teenagers that represent the largest internet user groups and also other vulnerable groups who do not know how to protect their personal information on the web. This has resulted in unethical and undesirable behaviours such as:

- **Financial frauds** where people are becoming victim of online scam through social media,
- **Violation of human rights** through online teasing, cyber bullying, posting inflammatory or objectionable content, sexting and trolling,
- **Online abuse and defamation** to trample the dignity of individual for political and personal purposes.
- **Users being denied rights over their meta-data,** with little explicit knowledge or consent on how their data is being collected or used.
- **Denial of agency,** i.e. depriving someone of their ability to exercise freedom of thought. Although the user is still making choices, their decisions ultimately flow from understandings that may suffer from detrimental misconceptions that were promoted by a platform's algorithms.

➤ **Social costs:** Impacts of social media on human behaviour and societal functioning have necessitated a conversation on how social media platforms should be regulated to minimize their social costs, such as-
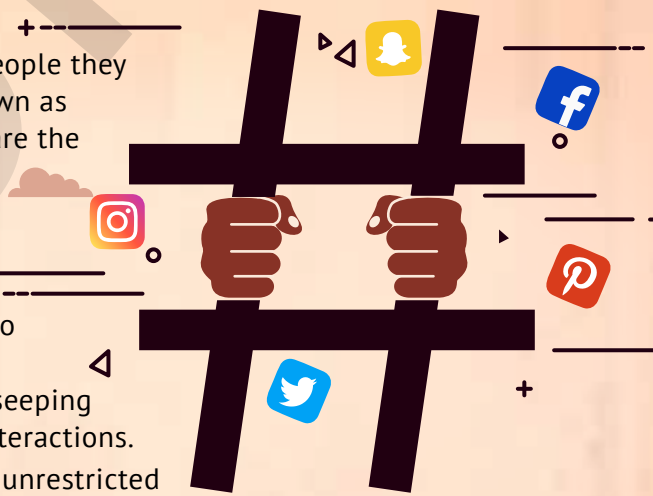
- ○ **Adverse impacts on mental health:** Social media has been associated with psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, severe isolation, internet addiction etc. For instance, cyberbullying and online shaming through the blue whale game has been linked to suicide and self-harm among children.
- ○ **Altered human behaviour:** Research has shown that the use of social media may detract from face-to-face relationships, reduce investment in meaningful activities, increase sedentary behaviour by encouraging more screen time, lead to reduced productivity and shortened attention spans, and erode self-esteem through unfavourable social comparison.
- ○ **Limited ability of society's to check anti-social behaviours:** Social media has enhanced the visibility of social, ethical, environmental and political ills by providing anonymity to internet users. This limits the ability of society to "penalize" the actor who chooses to use socially suspect language or ideas.
  - ✓ For example, in real life, repetition of controversial and fringe ideas can cause social ostracism, affecting the future expression of such anti-social behaviours. But online, anti-social personalities meet their equals and unite in their transgressions.
- ➤ **Misinformation and fake news:** Fake news, rumours, morphed images, click-baits, motivated stories, hate speech etc. spread virally through platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter etc among 35 crore internet users in India. They target not only political figures, but also religious minorities and dissenting individuals, with propaganda rooted in domestic divisions and prejudices. The consequences of such targeted misinformationrange from riots, death threats to actual murders.
  - ○ In the past year, more than **two dozen people have been lynched by mobs** spurred by nothing more than rumours sent over WhatsApp. More recently, during the **COVID-19** pandemic, **closed messaging services were used to spread inaccurate information.**
  - ○ The introduction and evolution of AI technology that is now capable of creating **"deep fake"** video content, using bots to micro-target populations with ads, and participate in human-like conversations, presents imminent future dangers of exponentially multiplying the current threats.
- ➤ **Threats to democratic institutions and security landscape:** Unregulated social media has empowered state and non-state actors with the means and know how to co-opt the media landscape in pursuance of illegal and terrorist activities, such as radicalization, child pornography, human trafficking, selling narcotics etc. It has also allowed foreign and domestic actors to interfere in democratic functioning of nations through unidentified use of political advertisements during elections, spreading disinformation about government bodies etc.
  - ○ This environment has also allowed **"lone-wolf"** attackers to use social media to broadcast violence. For instance, in 2019, the New Zealand mosque mass shooter live-streamed the attacks.
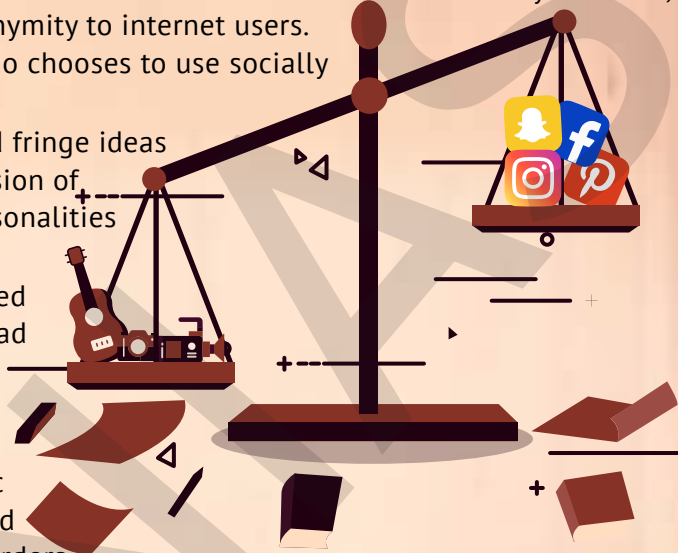
WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH REGULATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA?

The sheer size of the social media market and its innumerable applications makes its regulation an arduous task, posing challenges such as:

- ➤ **Tackling misinformation:** It is difficult to decide which content is fake and which is not. Even if some content is fake, it is difficult to decide whether it was satire or intentioned to create harm. Besides, social media alone is not responsible for the spread of fake news. Even before the advent of social media, fake news was regularly peddled and relished (e.g., the Ganesh idol drinking milk). Social media, at most, increases the scale and speed of spread of misinformation.

➤ **Regulating hate speech:** It is challenging to draw an official line between permitted and prohibited speech. Recent experience with movies such as Padmavat and Article 15 etc. has highlighted the inconsistencies in defining or applying rules. Besides, even if any extremist or anti-national content is banned on one platform, the content will simply move to different, perhaps lesser-known platforms. This makes it harder to track and counter such communication or gather intelligence, perhaps making the public less secure overall.

➤ **Lack of resources and know-how:** Unlike traditional publishing where regulation can be ex ante, social media regulation must necessarily be ex post due to scale. Government does not have the technological wherewithal to detect and remove objectionable social media content at the requisite scale or speed.

➤ **Issue of accountability:** Since platforms do not generally create their content, they contend that they are not responsible for what users produce and are thus exempt from the libel, defamation, and other laws and regulations that govern traditional media like newspapers and television.

➤ **Compliance stifles innovation and creates monopolies:** Collective experience over many industries (e.g., banking, healthcare, insurance, oil, etc.) has shown that high cost of complying with government regulations inhibits competition since it discourages startups from entering a market and disproportionately harms existing smaller players. For a country that desperately needs more startups, innovation, entrepreneurship, and investment, social media regulations may trigger exits and discourage new investments.

➤ **Impact on free speech:** Public regulation related directly to content moderation (a take-down of content approach) could lead to building a censorship framework that might harm freedom of expression and suppress dissent or disfavoured speech which, in turn, may lead to more "unimaginable harm to democratic polity".

Social media regulation in India

Present status:

➤ The **Information Technology Act, 2000 under section 2(1)(w)** defines 'Intermediary', and Social Media platforms, as such fall under the definition of intermediaries and are required to follow 'due diligence' as prescribed under the **Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines) Rules, 2011** (hereinafter referred to as "IT Rules") notified under section 79 of the IT Act.
  ○ They must inform their users not to host, display, upload, modify, publish, transmit, update or share any information that may affect public order and unlawful in any way.

➤ India is currently **finalising the Information Technology Intermediary Guidelines (Amendment) Rules 2018** to curtail the misuse of social networks and increase accountability and in the **process of introducing Framework and Guidelines for use of Social Media Regulations 2020.**

➤ There is no specific provision in Indian law that specifically deals with fake news. However, there are several offenses in India's Penal Code that criminalize certain forms of speech that may be relevant to fake news and may apply to online or social media content, including the crimes of sedition and promoting enmity between different groups.

Other steps taken:

➤ In the 2019 elections, **The Election Commission of India has issued instructions on social media use during election campaigns** that require candidates to provide certain information about their social media accounts; obtain pre-certification or approval of their political advertisements; and report expenditure on campaigning through the internet, including via social media websites.

➤ The **government has urged the Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to block access to child pornography websites** and also requested them to educate its subscribers about the use of parental control filters on devices via messages, emails, invoices, websites and more.

➤ The **Supreme Court of India issued the directions to the print, electronic or social media** to maintain a strong sense of responsibility and ensure that unverified news capable of causing panic is not disseminated.

➤ The **Supreme Court has struck down the controversial Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, 2000** that made posting "offensive" comments online a crime punishable by jail, as being unconstitutional and against free speech.

Status of regulation in other major democracies

➤ The recent executive orders issued by US President Donald Trump targeting social media companies days after Twitter called two of his tweets "potentially misleading" has put the regulation of social media debate to the forefront internationally.

➤ The **U.S and E.U shaped its regulatory approach 20 years ago** that aimed to promote internet growth. These jurisdictions **protect social media organisations and other platforms from liability** whenever users post any contents on their sites. However both countries are now debating and revisiting these laws.

➤ The **EU has had a self-regulatory approach** over the past 10 years or more, expecting platform providers to take a responsible approach to their duty to manage appropriate behaviour. In the past year there has been a move towards greater legal regulation of social media unless the platform owners react quicker to remove or block hate speech, copyright infringing material and other illegal content.

➤ **Germany has The Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG)** which for past two years has required social network owners to combat fake news, but is now planning a law aimed at hate speech and other criminal posts, demanding that social media platforms report such content to the police authorities.

WHAT MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE TO STRENGTHEN SOCIAL MEDIA FOR THE EMERGING ERA?

➤ **Self-Regulation by the platforms:** A self regulatory framework can help social media platforms fulfil their obligation to the public **to limit spread of misinformation**, extremism, hate speech, etc. and build trust with community members. Some steps that can be taken in this direction are-

  ○ **Following a set of Human Rights Principles for Content Moderation** based on international human rights law: legality, necessity and proportionality, legitimacy, equality and non discrimination.

  ○ **Implementing measures that limit the virality of misleading content** through limitations of some functionalities; opt-in features to receive group messages etc.

  ○ **Give users the choice,** in an easy and intelligible manner, to decide on such issues as what information they want to see, and how they are targeted.

  ○ Ensuring that automated tools, such as algorithmic ranking, do not intentionally, or unintentionally, unduly hinder access to election-related content and the availability of a diversity of viewpoints to users.

  ○ **Expanding the number of moderators** and **investing to improve quality of content review,** particularly in at-risk countries, through development of sophisticated tools and technologies.

    ✓ For instance, YouTube, which along with the usage of AI , employs 10,000 people globally for monitoring and removal of objectionable content, took down 8 million videos in 2018 during a three-month period, 81% of which were removed automatically, and three-quarters of those clips never received a single view.

➤ **Redefining the role of the Government:** Governments should strive to protect the rights and freedoms of its citizens and mitigate the social costs of the social media by providing a strong democratic oversight. Following measures can be taken:

  ○ **Encouraging social media companies to define and periodically update content standards and enforcement guidelines:** Participation from the different stakeholders, including civil society and law enforcement should be ensured while framing those guidelines and finalised standards and guidelines should be made public for transparency.

  ○ **Making social media platforms liable for obviously illegal content,** if it is not removed within a certain period of being reported. There should also be a **transparent and rapid redressal mechanism** to be used in case of disagreements.
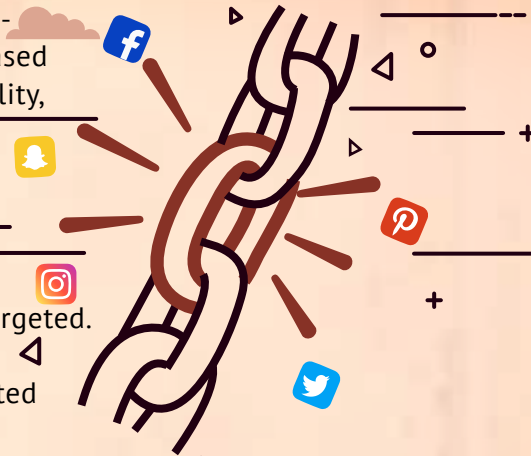
- **Supporting positive measures to address online disinformation,** such as the promotion of independent fact-checking mechanisms and public education campaigns.
- **Formulating Transparency requirements** related to all platforms' core functions in the public information ecosystem: content moderation, content ranking, content targeting, and social influence building.

➤ **Societal capacity building for better usage:** Social media does not operate in a vacuum but in an already prevailing socio-economic context. Efforts to address prevailing issues in this context will increase the potential benefits from social media usage.

- **Addressing the systemic issues in society:** Online discussions simply mirror what is already happening in the society. There is thus a need to focus on addressing the prevalent issues of communalism, casteism, sexism, extremism, poor law and order etc. A strong enforcement of rule of law will allow greater freedom of expression online and weaken the need for regulation.
- **Increasing accessibility for disadvantaged sections of society:** Advantages of social media are restricted for many people to due illiteracy, language barriers and the digital divide in infrastructure between rural and urban areas. This must be addressed to promote inclusion and participation of all.
- **Digital Literacy and Awareness:** Responsibility for media literacy and appropriate and safe use of technology exists at several levels - family, school, community and government. Parents, carers and those working with young people are aware of the benefits and potential problems associated with media use. They should be encouraged to educate themselves about these topics and should be empowered to help young people set reasonable limits around media usage in a way that enhances their development & minimizes problematic use.

Conclusion

Social Media is a widely used entity thus being a boon and bane at the same time. Since the effect of social media is subtle and develops over time, a thorough reflection is indispensable in order to ensure that it is moving in the right direction.

Freedom of expression on social media is integral to a healthy, thriving democracy. The solution to the aforementioned problems lies not in curtailing it but enabling and cultivating it by upholding social media ethics to ensure the use of social media in the right way, right perspective, right purpose and for the right cause for the society.

TOPIC AT A GLANCE

SOCIAL MEDIA

A grouping of interactive **Web 2.0 Internet-based applications** that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through the **building of virtual networks and communities.** Examples include **Joint projects** like Wikipedia, **Blogs** like Twitter, **Content Communities** like YouTube, **Social Networking Sites** like Facebook etc.

Benefits of Social Media for Society

- ➤ **Facilitated political and economic empowerment of Youth.**
- ➤ **Acted as a transformational tool for education.**
- ➤ **Provides a platform for marginalised communities to fight for their rights.**
- ➤ **Helps in women empowerment and bridging gender divide.**
- ➤ **Provided a social support system for elderly population.**
- ➤ **Provides a platform for collective social action and facilitates cultural integration.**
- ➤ **Facilitates better governance and health care management.**

Need for Social Media Regulation

- ➤ **Increasing polarisation of society: Social Media is dividing people on the basis of their views** resulting in **people cultivating rigid opinions of issues and narrower world views.**
- ➤ **Ethical and privacy concerns such as financial frauds, human rights violation, online abuse etc.**
- ➤ **Social costs** in the form of **Adverse impacts on mental health, Altered human behaviour** and **society's inability to check anti-social behaviours.**
- ➤ **Rising incidences of misinformation and Fake news** consequences of which range from riots, death threats to actual murders.
- ➤ **Threats to democratic institutions and security landscape due to the** illegal and terrorist activities taking place on social media.

Challenges in Social Media Regulation

- ➤ **Tackling misinformation:** Difficult to decide which content is fake and which is not.
- ➤ **Regulating hate speech:** Challenging to draw an official line between permitted and prohibited speech.
- ➤ **Lack of resources and know-how** to detect and remove objectionable social media content at the requisite scale or speed.
- ➤ **Issue of accountability** since the content is user generated & not created by the social media platforms.
- ➤ High cost of complying with government regulations **inhibits competition and innovation and may create monopolies.**
- ➤ Regulating content **might harm freedom of expression and suppress dissent** that may negatively affect country's democratic framework.

Ways to strengthen Social Media for the emerging era

- ➤ **Self-Regulation by the platforms to limit spread of misinformation by taking steps such as:**
  - ○ **Following a set of Human Rights Principles for Content Moderation.**
  - ○ **Implementing measures that limit the virality of misleading content.**
  - ○ **Give users the choice** to decide what information they want to see, and how they are targeted.
  - ○ Ensuring that **automated tools,** such as algorithmic ranking **are not misused** to alter user's viewpoints.
  - ○ Expanding the number of moderators and investing to **improve quality of content review.**
- ➤ **Redefining the role of the Government through steps such as:**
  - ○ **Encouraging social media companies to define & periodically update content standards & enforcement guidelines.**
  - ○ **Making social media platforms liable for obviously illegal content.**
  - ○ **Supporting positive measures to address online disinformation,** such as independent fact-checking mechanisms and public education campaigns.
  - ○ **Formulating Transparency requirements** related to all platforms' core functions in the public information ecosystem.
- ➤ **Building Societal capacity for better usage of social media through:**
  - ○ **Addressing the systemic issues in society such as** communalism, casteism, sexism, extremism, poor law and order etc.
  - ○ **Increasing accessibility for disadvantaged sections of society** to promote inclusion and participation of all.
  - ○ **Promoting Digital Literacy and Awareness to** minimize problematic use of social media.