

Uninterrupted Flow of Information on Social Media a Boon or a Bane for the Society ? : A Critical Study

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Abstract:

By virtue of its characteristic features social media provides a unique platform to its users to share ideas/information without any hindrance or interruption. From social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and You Tube to messaging apps like WhatsApp, Telegram, Viber and Facebook Messenger, Social media covers a broad universe of platforms that facilitate seamless communication to people residing in any part of the globe. Today more than 4.7 billion people use social media, that is equal to roughly 60% of the world's population. This could be possible because of continuously increasing popularity of mobile technology and large scale penetration of smart phones across the world. The information flow on social media without any gate keeping has two aspects. On the positive side it's a wonderful gift of science & technology to human beings that has made personal and professional life easy, provided ready-made solution to day to day problems, connected people residing in different corners of globe like family members and democratized the world of communication. But on the negative side, the uninterrupted flow of information on social media is far more dangerous than any evil spirit ever imagined. It can cause social disturbance and communal violence, prove to be an easy tool in the hands of mischief makers, peep into someone's privacy, fleece innocent people, pose a threat to the national security and bring death and devastation in the society.

Against this backdrop a rigorous research was done. The available literature on the topic was reviewed and a sample survey was conducted in Delhi & NCR to delve deep into the topic and find out answer to the research question--- if the uninterrupted flow of information on social media is a boon or a bane to the society ?

Keywords: Social media, Uninterrupted Flow of Information, Unique Gift, Social Disturbance, Death and Devastation, Boon and Bane.

INTRODUCTION

Uninterrupted information flow on social platforms is like nuclear power, which may prove to be a boon for the energy-starved nations and the global environment, whereas a nuclear strike could wreak climate havoc, cause death and devastation beyond imagination and pose a danger to the existence of mankind on earth. In the same way uninterrupted flow of information on social platforms could prove to be a unique gift of science & technology to humanity. It can facilitate communication between people residing in various parts of the world, help people trapped in man-made problems or natural calamities and can make life much more easy. But if misused it can cause social disturbance, pose a threat to the nation's security and bring death and devastation in the society. Everything depends upon its use.

Father of the nation Mahatma Gandhi, a journalist himself, had cautioned that pen which is not controlled, causes destruction. In this era, Mahatma Gandhi's views on the uncontrolled pen that gets wings on the social media, have become much more relevant. Today we interact on social platforms, comment upon and share information irrespective of its importance, sensitivity and utility anytime and anywhere in the world. Thanks to the interactive and participatory nature of the social media, it has

become immensely popular among a large section of people across the globe and its popularity is growing by leaps and bounds with each passing day.

Moreover, social network's emergence has democratized the world of communication and empowered the common man.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: SURVEY & CONTENT ANALYSIS

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature available on the topic is few in number. However, the available literature was reviewed, which include three research papers i.e. "Information Contagion: An Empirical Study of the Spread of News on Digg and Twitter Social Networks", "The Influence of social media on Information Flow" and "Social Media Analytics: tracking, modeling and predicting the flow of Information through networks". In these research studies It has been tried to establish that social networks play a crucial role in the spread of information on Digg and Twitter, and that network structure affects dynamics of information flow. But the similarity and dissimilarity aspect of both the sites create a big confusion, which needs to be evaluated further. In these studies the concern of researchers have been addressed, but advantages and disadvantages of social media information flow have not been dealt with. Moreover, techniques for social media modeling, analytics and optimization have been investigated, but the larger question whether social media information flow is a boon or a bane for the society, has been untouched.

INFORMATION FLOW A BOON

We live in the information age; and that's why today the use of Social Networking Sites is not a choice, but a necessity. Information flow on social networking sites helps us in our careers, gives tips for success in each field, provides the way to achieve the goal and acts as a friend, philosopher and guide, which we need at every step.

Today Facebook act as an aggregator of information. Other social sites also provide a large amount of potentially important information. People just follow the sites related to their interests. At the same time they also keep following the activities of their friends.

Social media has become a precursor of transformation in the society, bringing in revolutionary changes in people's mindset and playing a key role in promoting humane values like sympathy, helpfulness, forgiveness, charity and service to humanity. There are a number of examples of the brighter aspect of social media and its positive impact on the society.

Be it a natural calamity or man-made crisis, use of this media is proving to be a boon for the society. In the times of natural calamity like flood, Community WhatsApp alerts from Bhutan help people of Assam each year, which is a big relief for them. This system has become a role model to be followed by others. Social media, which is a key tool for communication today is equally useful in the times of man-made crisis like communal violence, social unrest and other such situations. Time to time several Dharmagurus, imams or clerics have embraced this media hoping that it will help them address the flow of misinformation on social networking sites. They feel that messages on social media promoting peace and harmony could be the solution to the online hate campaigns and the fake news.

A noticeable example of the brighter aspect of this media was the case of a young schoolboy from a poor family, sitting outside a Noida metro station, trying to earn some money through a weighing scale and studying at the same time. This scene caught a commuter's attention. He took a picture and uploaded on Facebook, which went viral. In response, several people including the then Uttar Pradesh CM came forward to help the child, ensuring full opportunity for the boy to study without having to work. Another case that came to lime light was that of tech-savvy Suresh Prabhu, who as the Railway minister became a god sent angel for a couple seeking help for their 18-month-old child. Mr. Suresh Prabhu provided a doctor and milk to the couple travelling in a train.

In July 2018, a 25-year-old sarpanch in Margao, Goa took to social media and challenged state's legislators to head to the fields to understand farmers' problems. Like the #HumFitTohIndia-Fit

challenge had everyone from cricket captain Virat Kohli to PM Modi sharing workout videos, Aquem-Baixo sarpanch Siddhesh Bhagat's #FarmingChallenge caught on, and legislators got their hands dirty, ploughing and planting alongside farmers.

The then agriculture minister of Goa Vijai Sardesai too stepped into the field, and remarked that his exercise was aimed at encouraging Goan youth to take up mechanised farming. Another example of the positive impact of this media also comes from Goa, which shows how social platforms can be used to bring people together for the cause of saving water. People connected with a WhatsApp group are identifying lakes and ponds that can be revived and mobilizing locals and stakeholders to search for alternative solutions to their water problem.

Besides, social media platforms have become very useful for activists. Social media has made their tasks of propagating a particular ideology, mobilizing public opinion or giving a call to protest, much easier. It also helps activists in getting national and international attention for their movements in real time.

INFORMATION FLOW A BANE

The negative aspect of information flow on social media is very disturbing. This include rumor mongering, spreading misinformation, creating panic and chaos amongst common people and dividing the society on the basis of caste and community. People across all sections are facing lots of problems due to the misuse of this media in general and the most popular social networking site Facebook and its messaging app WhatsApp in particular. PM Narendra Modi also expressed concern over the misuse of new media. While interacting with BJP workers of Varanasi through video conferencing in August 2018, PM asked people not to use this media to "spread dirt". PM said that information should be shared to strengthen the society.

MISUSE OF SOCIAL PLATFORMS

Over 2.24 billion people use Facebook's messaging service WhatsApp across the globe; and with 487.5 million users, India is the biggest market of this this messaging app. However, the wide reach of this messaging app has its dark side as well. It is often used by unsocial elements and wrong doers to promote their agenda, spark communal tension in the society and harm the national interests. The first case of the misuse of this media came to light in 2012. Doctored videos and pictures of quake victims went viral on this media. Miscreants morphed the images in question to establish that these Muslims were victimized in the riots that took place in Assam and Myanmar. It brought reactions on social platforms. Soon native citizens of north east

were forced to return back to Assam and other northeastern states from south India.

Similarly, riots that broke out in Kishtwar in Jammu and Kashmir after Eid celebrations in August 2013 were also aggravated by certain postings on the social media.

Evidence suggests that used as a rumor tool, social media also had an impact on events such as Muzaffarnagar riots.

In the communal riots in Delhi in February 2020 also WhatsApp groups played a key role.

The fake news are another headache on social media. In recent years, rumours about child kidnappers on the prowl became talk of the town in various states of India.

Multiple incidents of vigilante mob violence took place in different parts of the country in general and in four very diverse states i.e. Karnataka, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh in particular.

As per media reports viral rumors about kidnappers, spread through WhatsApp led to the lynching deaths of more than two dozen people in 2018 in the country. 33 persons were lynched between January, 2017 to July, 2018.

Domestic and cross-border anti-social elements as well as non-state actors also misuse social media to disturb law and order by spreading rumors and uploading false content and images on the internet.

In Jammu & Kashmir 'bedroom jihadis' manipulate social media from the comfort of their homes to spread rumors and flare tensions.

The misuse of this media also poses a major challenge for over 13 lakh strong Indian army, which has warned its officers and soldiers against joining large groups on WhatsApp and other social networking platforms, where the identity of many users is not known. The directive is aimed at cautioning army men against honey-trapping.

False information on this media also poses health risk for lakhs of children going to madrassas. Every year hundreds of madrassas across Uttar Pradesh refuse permission to health officials to administer measles-rubella vaccines to students, putting lakhs of children at risk. And it is worth mentioning here that misinformation about Covid vaccines was a major stumbling block in achieving hundred percent vaccination target in the country.

So far social media giant Facebook is concerned, it has over 2.91 billion monthly active users and with this strength it is the most popular SNS of the world. India has the highest number of Facebook users in any country in the world, with more than 400 million active users.

This wide reach and popularity of Facebook also lures unsocial elements to use it for their vested interests. According to a study in 2017, Facebook plays a vital role in circulating fake news.

A number of fake news were shared on Facebook in the national election in the UK (regarding the nation’s withdrawal from the EU) and in recent presidential elections in the US.

It’s an established fact that these fake news influenced the election results.

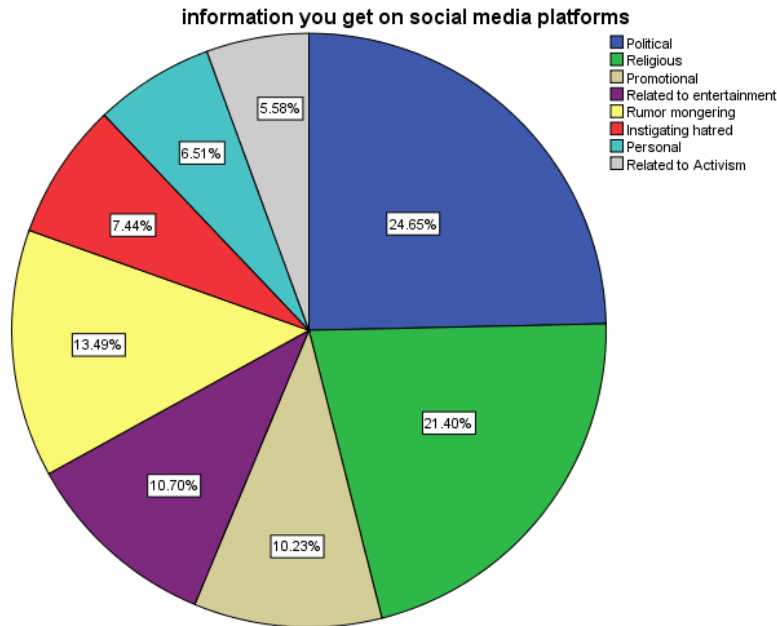
The misuse of Facebook also came to light during Covid pandemic. The social media giant told its millions of users that the online posts they watched about covid pandemic, contained misinformation; and announced plans to contain it. The situation became so grave that the Chief executive of the company Mark Elliot Zuckerberg came with a clarification on his Facebook page. All these examples establish the fact that Facebook is misused at large scale.

SURVEY & DATA INTERPRETATION

A sample survey was conducted in the national capital & NCR.. Two hundred and fifteen respondents of various age groups, genders, educational qualifications and income brackets took part in this survey. The data collected from this survey revealed many interesting facts and the insightful analysis of this sample survey gave a new perspective to this research.

Type of Information you get on social media platforms

Type of Information you get on social media platforms					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Political	53	24.7	24.7	24.7
	Religious	46	21.4	21.4	46.0
	Promotional	22	10.2	10.2	56.3
	Related to entertainment	23	10.7	10.7	67.0
	Rumor mongering	29	13.5	13.5	80.5
	Instigating hatred	16	7.4	7.4	87.9
	Personal	14	6.5	6.5	94.4
	Related to Activism	12	5.6	5.6	100.0
	Total	215	100.0	100.0	



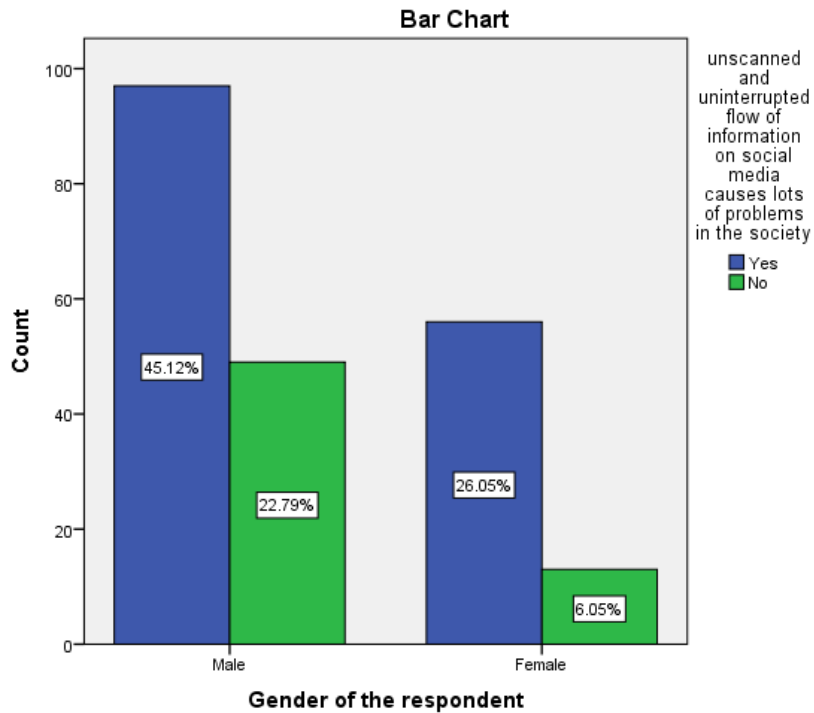
In this chart and cross tabulation, the respondents have been analyzed on the ground of their response to the question about the type of information they get on social media platforms. In Conclusion We find that out of the 215 valid respondents, 53 respondents say that they get political information, which is 24.7% of total respondents, 46 respondents say that they get religious information, which is 21.4% of total respondents. 22 respondents say that they get promotional information, which is 10.2% of total respondents. 23 respondents say that they get information related to entertainment which is 10.7% of total respondents.

Continuing the analysis, 29 respondents say that they get rumors, which is 13.5% of total respondents. 16 respondents say that they get information that instigates hatred which is 7.4% of total respondents. 14 respondents say that they get personal information, which is 6.5% of total respondents. Lastly, 12 respondents say that they get activism related information, which is 5.6% of total respondents.

In conclusion, We find that 53 respondents say that they get maximum number of political information on this platform, which is the largest number of responses for a type of information among total respondents.

Unscanned and uninterrupted flow of information causes lots of problems in the society

Do you think Unscanned and uninterrupted flow of information causes lots of problems in the society Cross tabulation				
Count				
		unscanned and uninterrupted flow of information on social media causes lots of problems in the society		Total
		Yes	No	
Gender of the respondent	Male	97	49	146
	Female	56	13	69
Total		153	62	215



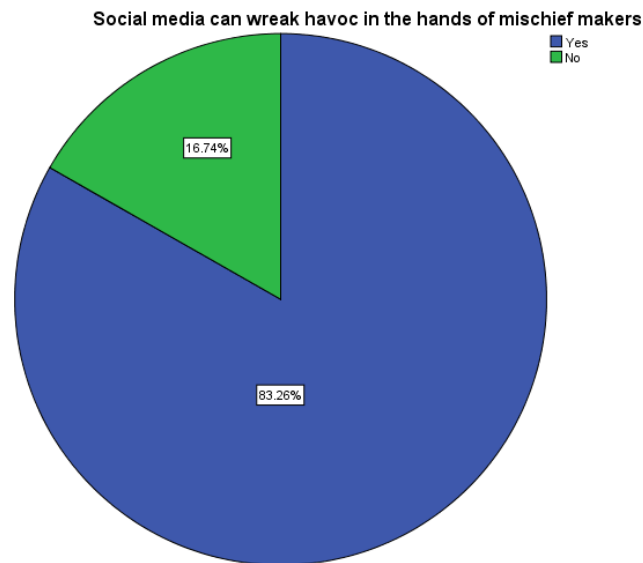
In the above bar chart and cross tabulation, the respondents have been analyzed on the ground of their gender and their response to the question that “unscanned and uninterrupted flow of information causes lots of problems in the society or not.” Concluding the analysis, We find that out of the 215 valid respondents, 146 respondents are male whereas 69 respondents are female. Out of 146 respondents, 97 say that “Yes, unscanned and uninterrupted flow of information causes lots of problems in the society” whereas 49 male respondents say that “No, this doesn’t cause problems in the society.”

Similarly, out of 69 female respondents, 56 say that “Yes, it causes lots of problems in the society” whereas 13 female respondents say that “No, it doesn’t cause problems in the society.”

In conclusion, it is analyzed that out of total 215 respondents, 153 respondents say that “Yes, it causes lots of problems in the society” whereas 62 respondents say that “No, it doesn’t cause problems in the society.” So the number of “Yes” is more than the number of “No.”

Social media in the hands of mischief makers

Social media can wreak havoc in the hands of mischief makers					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	179	83.3	83.3	83.3
	No	36	16.7	16.7	100.0
	Total	215	100.0	100.0	



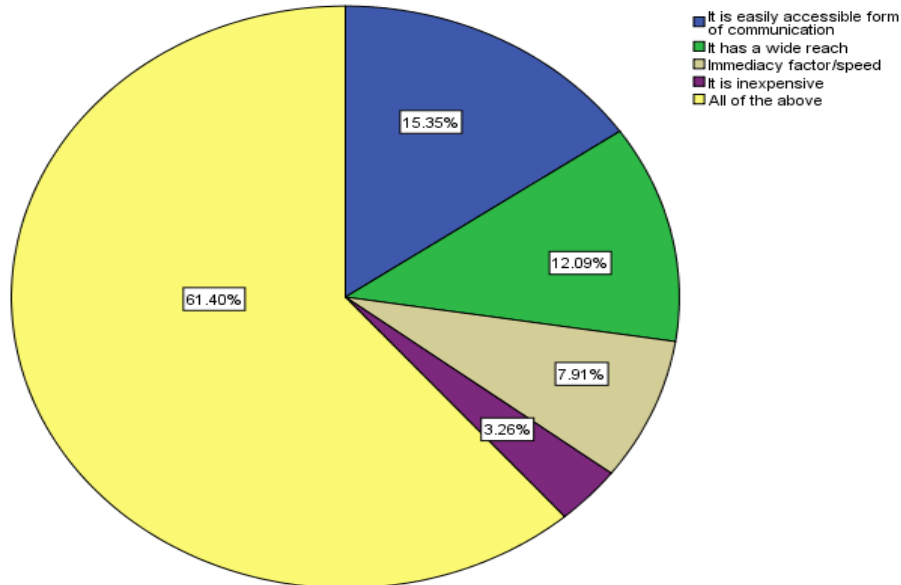
In this chart and cross tabulation, the respondents have been analyzed on the ground of their response to the question that “Social Media can wreak havoc in the hands of mischief makers or not.” After analyzing we find that out of the 215 valid respondents, 179 respondents say that “Yes, Social Media can wreak havoc in the hands of mischief” which is 83.26% of total respondents. 36 respondents say that “No, Social Media can’t wreak havoc in the hands of mischief” which is 16.74% of total 215 respondents.

In conclusion, it is analyzed that the informants who agree with the question that “Social Media can wreak havoc in the hands of mischief makers” is 179 which is more than the informants who say “No”.

Using unregulated social media that can be a tool for mischief makers

Why people use social media when it is unregulated and can be used as a tool for mischief makers					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	It is easily accessible form of communication	33	15.3	15.3	15.3
	It has a wide reach	26	12.1	12.1	27.4
	Immediacy factor/speed	17	7.9	7.9	35.3
	It is inexpensive	7	3.3	3.3	38.6
	All of the above	132	61.4	61.4	100.0
	Total	215	100.0	100.0	

Why using social media when it is unregulated and can be used as a tool for mischief makers

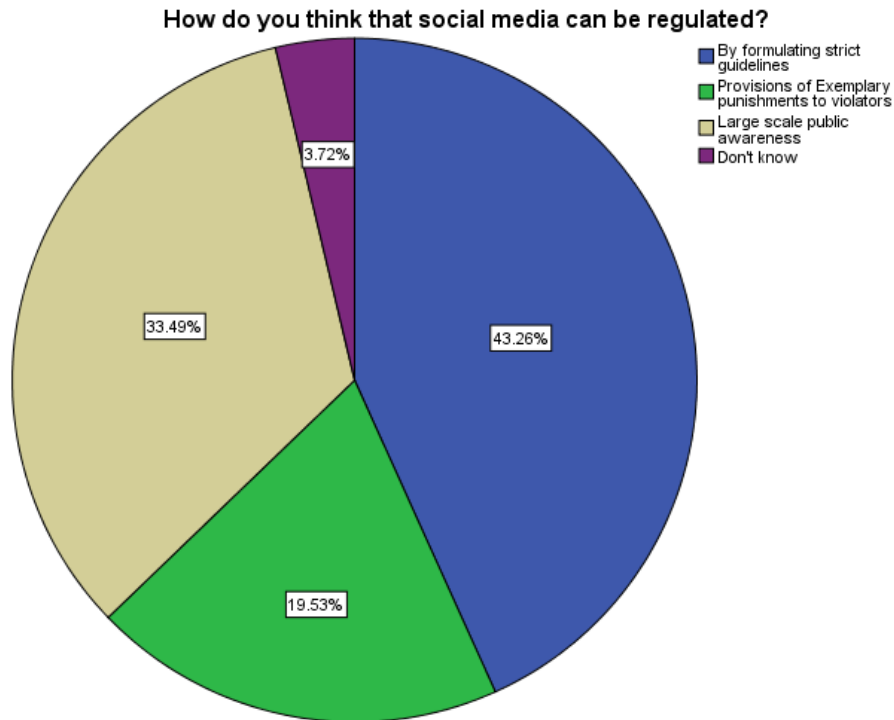


In this chart and cross tabulation, the respondents have been analyzed on the ground of their response to the question that “Why people use social media when it is unregulated and can be used as a tool for mischief makers?”. We find that out of the 215 valid respondents, 33 respondents say that it is easily accessible form of communication which is 15.3% of total respondents, 26 respondents say that it has a wide reach which is 12.1% of total respondents. 17 respondents agree to its immediacy factor and speed which is 7.9% of total respondents. 7 respondents say that it is inexpensive which counts to 3.3% of total respondents. Lastly, 132 respondents (which is 61.4% of total respondents) say that “All of the above” are the reasons for using social media even it is unregulated.

In conclusion, it comes out that most of the informants agree on “All of the above reasons”.

Regulation of Social media

How do you think that social media can be regulated?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	By formulating strict guidelines	93	43.3	43.3	43.3
	Provisions of Exemplary punishments to violators	42	19.5	19.5	62.8
	Large scale public awareness	72	33.5	33.5	96.3
	Don't know	8	3.7	3.7	100.0
	Total	215	100.0	100.0	



In this chart and cross tabulation, the respondents have been analyzed on the basis of their response to the question that “How do you think that social media can be regulated?” We find that out of the 215 valid respondents, 93 respondents say that social media can be regulated by forming strict guidelines which is 43.3% of total respondents. 42 respondents agree for the provisions of exemplary punishment to violators which is 19.5% of total respondents. 72 respondents say that it can be regulated by large scale public awareness which is 33.5% of total respondents. Lastly, there are 8 respondents who don’t know how social media can be regulated which is 3.7% of total respondents.

In Conclusion, It is analyzed that 93 respondents say that social media can be regulated by forming strict guidelines which is largest among total number of respondents.

REGULATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Information flow on Social Networking Sites is a big concern for the Indian Govt and time to time it has taken a number of measures to regulate it.

The government instructed WhatsApp to take stringent measures to curb the explosion of fake news. Government said WhatsApp “cannot evade accountability and responsibility” in a stern message to the world’s most popular messenger, which is widely used for sharing messages, events, videos and data. The senior management of WhatsApp was advised to take remedial measures to curb the spread of fake news.

In May 2020, the govt. through BECIL floated bids for an agency to provide “solutions and services” related to “fact verification and disinformation detection on social media platforms”.

In July 2019 the issues of fake news and online gaming were discussed in the upper house of the country and voice was raised to put checks and balances on some deadly and addictive games and fake news. Earlier in 2018, the Indian Govt. proposed to set up a hub for online communication.. The then I&B minister Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore said that the hub is meant to “facilitate information flow regarding its policies and programmes through social media platforms”. However, it faced widespread flak over surveillance fears. Ultimately government dropped the plan.

Starting 2014, the government has attempted to hire monitoring agencies. Time and again, BECIL has floated at least three such tenders in 2015, 2016 and 2017.

The Indian Govt. has amended the Information Technology Act and imposed steeper penalties on apps and websites that fail to crack down on the above mentioned activities.

After warning social media intermediaries again and again, finally the Govt of India notified new IT Rules in February 2021. New rules force social platforms to help in finding out the original source of an objectionable content.

The new guidelines also require social platforms to remove objectionable content in a given time and establish a mechanism for redressing grievances. They also have to cooperate in investigation.

SOCIAL MEDIA'S SELF-REGULATION

Facebook claims, since 2016, it has been practicing a strategy called “remove, reduce, and inform” to manage problematic content..

In July 2018 Facebook said that it will remove objectionable posts.

In April 2019, Facebook announced a slew of measures to combat false news stories, images and videos.

The major steps included:

- curbing the reach of objectionable groups
- Exploring user's perception about trustworthy news platforms
- Informing users about the content

Facebook claimed that during corona virus pandemic it removed fifty million posts full of falsehoods about covid 19 in April 2021. The social media giant said that 2.5 million ads for face masks, COVID-19 test kits, and other corona virus products tried to circumvent an advertising ban that was in force since 1st March 2020.. Facebook said all those ads were identified as problematic. Subsequently, they were flagged or removed.

Facebook utilizes both human fact checkers and Artificial Intelligence in the fight with fake news. On the one hand it works with 60 fact-checking organizations around the world, on the other, social media giant relies on AI to supplement the scrutiny done by human eyes. The 50 million posts flagged were based on 7,500 false articles identified by fact-checkers.

So far WhatsApp is concerned, because of the encryption it uses, the company cannot see the contents of messages sent on its platform. It has its own limitations. However, from time to time, WhatsApp has been taking measures to curb the spread of false information.

In April 2020, the company imposed new limitations on message forwarding. Before 2018, a message could be forwarded to 250 groups at a time, in 2018 to 20 and in 2019 to 5 only. . According to WhatsApp these steps impacted message forwarding which got reduced by 25%. Across the globe.

CONCLUSION

Information flow has got extra ordinary speed and reach in the era of Social Media. As a result it has become very powerful. It can make or break the society. If it can bring the dawn of happiness to humanity, it may also cause death and devastation in the society. So as a responsible citizen of the country and above all as a human being, it is very important to understand the uninterrupted flow of information on social platforms, which is a prominent characteristic feature of this media. Research findings say that majority of respondents are well aware that social media could be misused by mischief makers. But this awareness is not a hindrance to the increasing popularity of this media because of its unique features like, easy accessibility, fast speed, wide reach and cost effectiveness.

So far the regulation of social media is concerned, 43.3% respondents say that this media can be regulated by forming strict guidelines which is largest among total number of respondents.

It's a fact that both the government and social media companies have taken a number of steps to curb information flow on social networking sites and messaging apps. But due to the nature of social media,

the task has become tough; and much more needs to be done to achieve the goal. Here it would be worth mentioning that the findings of this research say, if used with caution, the information flow on social media can prove to be a game changer for the humanity.

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