

CYBER SWAY: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of social media plays a crucial role in the mindset of the masses, along with the spread of information. This research paper examines the foundation of social media, the statistical growth of the world's biggest social media platforms, a case study about misinformation, and legal governance on recent relevant cyber-crimes in India. This study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the workings and impact of social media, along with the current scenario of the world. Critical analysis shows findings on how much sway the opinion of social media affects the lives of the common people along with their thinking, mindset, and opinions. There is a steady increase in misinformation cases happening on the internet, in all fields. This has led to thousands of people being enticed by offers that seem "too good to be true" and losing money. This requires new legal reforms to be introduced in India, specifically a new bill to be passed regarding information technology which addresses the growing issues of cyber security, data protection, recognising misinformation as a crime, and stricter punishments on cyber offenses. All these issues make it necessary for better regulations regarding all things related to information technology.

Keywords: Social Media, Cybersecurity, Misinformation, Ethical Considerations, Legal Framework.

INTRODUCTION

Bill Gates once said, "The internet is becoming the town square for the global village of tomorrow." None of us could fault him for saying that, and all have to agree unanimously. The internet has provided us with instant connectivity with people across the globe, making communication possible within seconds. Compared to the past communications were done through letters which were very time-consuming.

As the internet has evolved over the decades, numerous technological developments a growing need for connectivity amongst people, and the sharing of information instantaneously, led to

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the introduction of social media platforms. The birth of the World Wide Web by Tim Berners-Lee, laid the foundation for the mass adoption of online communities to share information online. This only took place because the World Wide Web made the internet a place that is accessible to the public. After that, many online communities were, the earliest being Six Degrees.

After Six Degrees, the one social media platform that took off and revolutionised social media was Facebook in 2004 which was founded by Mark Zuckerberg along with four of his colleagues. Membership was initially limited to students studying at Harvard but its popularity made it spread to all North American Universities and gradually the entire globe. Facebook then in 2006 started allowing everybody of the age 13 and above to register on their site.

GROWTH

Facebook's success was the only thing that was "hot and new" on the internet because shortly after YouTube was also launched officially by December 2005. An idea so simple, that was to create a way for people to share videos online for them to be shared worldwide, created a craze. Soon after its official release, it was bought by Google in 2006.

But that was the end because then came the introduction of Twitter, whose idea was to create a platform of short messaging platform that gives a short information burst as well. This platform was comparatively slower but definitely took up its place as one of the biggest social media platforms presently.

To put into perspective how big these platforms have become in this day and age, let's look at some statistics of monthly active users on the world's three biggest social media platforms-

Facebook: As of April 2023, Facebook boasts 2.989 billion monthly active users. Which makes it the most popular social media platform worldwide¹

YouTube: In 2023, it has been recorded that YouTube has over 2.7 billion monthly users. This makes it one of the most popular platforms out there only behind Facebook.²

¹ Facebook MAU Worldwide 2023 | Statista www.statista.com

² YouTube Users Statistics 2023 | Global Media Insight www.globalmediainsight.com

WhatsApp: In November 2023, there is an estimated 2.78 billion monthly active users, which is again a company owned by Meta Inc., which is the parent company of Facebook too.³

If we average out the monthly active users from these platforms, the approximate value comes up to 2.823 billion monthly active users across only three platforms. This is roughly 35% of the world's population, of course, this is barring other demographics and users on other platforms. But this just shows what Amy Jo Martin, a well-known American author and entrepreneur said, "Social Media is the ultimate equaliser. It gives a voice and a platform to anyone willing to engage." All these numbers are projected to only grow and there doesn't seem to be any plateau in the number of active users globally.

This has led to the creation of a new profession called a "Content Creator" and if your content becomes popular, you are now given the tag "Social Media Influencer". These creators get paid by platforms in relation to how many views their content gets. There are presently many authentic content creators who post informational videos in various areas of their expertise, which in turn helps to educate and inform the general public. This has such a big impact that even Governments of countries along with agencies have set up their social media accounts because the information is quickly circulated through social media platforms and is almost as fast as the news channel. The only difference we see with the news channels and social media platforms is that presently social media platforms gain more traction than news channels. Of Course, this also leads to the problem of a lot of misinformation through unverified channels on social media, which may cause a huge wave of chaos and confusion.

According to a study conducted by the University of Southern California, it was found that misinformation isn't spread through a deficit of users. It's a function of the structure of social media themselves. The habits of social media users are a much bigger driver of misinformation spread than individual attributes. This study involved a couple thousand active Facebook users ranging from the age of 18 to 89.

In this research it was found that user's social media habits doubled and, in some cases, tripled the amount of fake news being shared. Their habits were more influential in sharing fake news than other factors, including political beliefs and lack of critical reasoning.

³ WhatsApp. User Statistics and Trends (Nov 2023) | BankMyCell www.bankmycell.com

This type of behaviour has been rewarded in the past by algorithms that prioritise engagement when selecting which posts the users see in their news feed, and by the design and structure of the sites themselves.

The study's final conclusions were

- Habitual sharing of misinformation is not inevitable.
- Users could be incentivised to build sharing habits that make them more sensitive to sharing truthful content.
- Effectively reducing misinformation would require restructuring the online environments that promote and support its sharing.⁴

In the Indian context, the most followed person from India on Instagram is Indian cricketer Virat Kohli with a following of 262 million, on X formerly known as Twitter our current Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi has amassed a following of 93 million followers. Of Course, these are a few examples of people who are in the spotlight consistently, so it makes sense for them to have such a huge following. But there are many of common origin who have entered stardom thanks to social media content creation, the biggest relevant example would be Bhuvan Bam aka BB ki Vines who is known for his comedy channel on YouTube named BB Ki Vines. He started his journey in 2015 and has gathered more than 4.7 billion views on his videos, simultaneously gaining approximately 27.1 million subscribers across all platforms. Another example is Sharan Hegde popularly known as Finance with Sharan who recently caught the public eye for his smart financial tips, and for educating the public about saving, investing, and personal finance tips. He also has also gained 3 million followers across all platforms.

There are many more such content creators, the list keeps growing bigger and bigger. In this day and age, almost everybody has wanted to pursue the career of being a content creator, everyone has chased it as it is the new shiny toy. But of course, not all of these people who have such a big following use it for the best of reasons. These celebrities can voice their opinion and share what they want to, ideally, this should be possible. But in this day and age, celebrity fan bases have blind faith in their views and comments, and having such a following can shift the mindset to a particular way, which may not necessarily be the right one. Misinformation is at an all-time high and is still affecting the masses because of the information being spread by

⁴ USC study reveals the key reason why fake news spreads on social media – By Pamela Madrid
<https://today.usc.edu>

an account with a massive following. A prominent example took place during the Pandemic time when, the then President of the United States put out the message, that if you drink bleach, you will not get covid. This wasn't backed by any scientific evidence and if someone would actually try to drink bleach would die. Many posters were then circulated all across the world which had the message "Do not ingest Bleach" in bold. Let's look at a case study that is relevant to the current scenario of the spread of misinformation. We cannot only blame the social media platform's algorithms but also some of the other content creators who try to cheat the masses for their own profit.

CASE STUDY

A notable case in India is when the Security and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) banned Md Nasir a self-proclaimed successful trader from stock trading. He had approximately four hundred and eighty thousand followers and he had induced them to buy his course by assuring them profits/returns of a minimum of 3 lakh rupees by also providing them with recommendations of stocks to buy. He claimed he has an AI-powered algorithm that could see through all the events happening around the market and correctly predict the outcome of the share prices. SEBI also revealed that Md Nasir had seven trading accounts, and used two more frequently than the others. These trading accounts showed that Md Nasir "Baap of Chart" was losing more than two crores himself, and selling his courses to his subscribers/clients he had gathered more than seventeen crores. According to SEBI guidelines, it prohibits algo sellers from influencing investors with any mention of future returns. SEBI's current chairman Chief Madhabi Puri Buch in a press conference stated that SEBI is not against "Finfluencers" (Financial Social Media Influencers) from educating the public, and promoting investor awareness as it aligns with the objectives of SEBI itself. But if there is inducement by these said "Finfluencers" that is there is a guarantee provided to its clients/subscribers about returns earned by them. Which results in the offense of misleading and fraudulent.⁵

LEGAL GOVERNANCE

The Government has recognised these offenses and the law that is drafted by the Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY) has promised to consider stricter regulation of "deliberate" misinformation and doxxing as offenses under fresh legislation, which is to be expected to replace the Information Technology Act 2000. The new law is expected to have provisions to

⁵ MoneyControl: SEBI Bans 'Baap of Chart' www.youtube.com

ensure net neutrality, data privacy, and algorithmic accountability of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. It also is expected to focus on the “user harms” specific to the online world, which has changed a lot since 2008 which was the last time the IT Act was amended, with one of the officials also stating,” For instance, currently under Indian laws online misinformation is not illegal.”⁶ This is clearly seen under Section 79 of the Information Technology Act 2000 sub-section 3-

“An intermediary shall not be liable for any third-party information, data, or communication link made available or hosted by him.”

AUTHORS ANALYSIS

The conclusion drawn from this analysis could be divided into 4 important points:

Social Media’s Pervasive Influence: This paper demonstrates the pervasive influence of social media, with platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp collectively reaching around 35% of the global population. This highlights the unprecedented impact of social media on communication and information dissemination.

Rise of Content Creators: The emergence of content creators and influencers on social media platforms is a significant phenomenon. This shows how these people with massive followings, could impact public opinion and influence upcoming trends.

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Misinformation Challenges: This study identifies a critical challenge posed by misinformation, emphasising that it’s not merely a result of user deficits but is deeply rooted in the structure of social media platforms. The habit-driven sharing of misinformation is a considerable concern, influencing public perceptions and behaviours.

Legal Governance Necessity: The research underscores the necessity for updated legal governance in India, pointing to the drafting of a new bill to replace the Information Technology Act 2000. This reflects a proactive approach by the government in addressing evolving challenges related to technology, social media, and misinformation.

⁶ New IT Act looks to rein in ‘deliberate’ misinformation www.indianexpress.com

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE CONSIDERATION

In-Depth Analysis of Misinformation: Future research could delve deeper into the specific mechanisms through which misinformation spreads on social media. Understanding the psychology behind user habits and the role of algorithms in amplifying misinformation would contribute to more effective strategies for mitigating its impact.

Comparative Judicial Studies: A comparative analysis of legal frameworks in different jurisdictions could provide valuable insights. Examining how other countries address cybercrimes, and misinformation, and regulate social media platforms would offer a broader perspective for policymakers.

User Education Initiatives: Exploring the effectiveness of educational initiatives aimed at users to enhance digital literacy and critical thinking in the context of social media would be valuable. Understanding how informed users contribute to reducing the spread of misinformation could guide public awareness campaigns.

Ethical Considerations in Content Creation: Given the rise of content creators as influential figures, future research could explore the ethical dimensions of content creation. This included the responsibility of influencers in disseminating accurate information and the potential societal impact of their content.

CONCLUSION

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Our government has taken heed of the ongoing change and recognises the need for change with more clear and precise legislation in the technology sphere. The new bill promises a lot of change that is required for us as the public to grow. Hence till the time the new bill and guidelines are in place, the judiciary and other government agencies will have to come up with trendsetting judicial sentences. I would like to end this article with a quote from Justice AK Sikri-

“Education took us from thumb impression to signature, Technology has taken us from signature to thumb impression again.”