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**THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN CONTROLLING
INFORMATION AND MISINFORMATION**- Raawiah Mansoor¹**ABSTRACT**

The impact that social media continues to have on the world at large is arguably one of the most revolutionizing phenomena of our times. The role of social media has moved way beyond the initial conception of providing a platform for people to interact with one another, to something much more potent commanding the ability to set the narrative in the power struggles for some of the most important leadership positions in the world. This article tries to demonstrate, how the capacity of social media to regulate the content that people are exposed to every second of the day and create virtual communities where people feel seen and validated acts both, for us and against us as a society. Further, the article concludes by analysing the complexities associated with the Government trying to regulate these platforms by bringing-in laws that can be readily manipulated and used to gratify their own political inclinations.

Keywords: Social media, Information, Misinformation, Echo-chambers, Regulations

INTRODUCTION

Thomas More's Utopia published in 1516 captivates its readers by taking them on a journey to a self-subsisting island and its supposedly perfect society. But anyone who delves a little further into this fictional world, soon realizes that perhaps this seemingly perfect society is not that enviable. The fundamental reason as to why this society seems so in sync is because every facet of life is operated in a calculated manner. Everything is well thought out, impersonal, and devoid of any emotional considerations. Curiously, it is for this very reason that as we near the end of this journey as a reader, we realize that while a society that

¹ Student at ILS Law College, Pune

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solely works on the principles of rationality and logic might make life much easier and systemic, it does so at the cost of the very thing that makes us human, our emotions. More coined the term Utopia to refer ambiguously to a place that is both a 'good-place' and a 'non-place'². Perhaps any idea of a perfect society is just that, an idea. Social Media like more's utopic island works against us as a society, for precisely the same reason, that it works for us. The ease with which information is disseminated to millions of people around the world in an instant on a day-to-day basis is why social media is one of the most used channels of communication in the world³. It allows people to instantly become a part of a community and feel seen and validated. And the same connectivity and desire to belong can be and has been misused beyond what anyone could have probably imagined. Social media has come a long way from being mere intermediaries connecting people to being vast repositories of data that is arguably the biggest ammunition in the current technology-driven world and having control over the content that people consume every second of the day.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN EMBRACIVE TOOL FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING

The positive impact of platforms that enable people across the globe to come together as a community, especially in today's world that is largely defined based on nation-states, is profound. Individuals taking a lead in raising global concerns have resulted in starting conversations that have evolved into movements of a significant nature. One of the most obvious examples in this regard would be the issue of climate change. While it has been one of the most debated topics for the past few decades, social media has taken it a step ahead. Earlier this discussion was mostly limited to the upper ends of the power hierarchy, being a topic of concern and debate for governments and powerful political and social participants. Social media has been able to take this debate to a much wider audience by encouraging greater awareness of climate change amongst the stakeholders at a very basic level. Online discussions on how climate is one of the foremost challenges that the global community is facing today have resulted in the public, especially the younger generations taking a conscious step towards demanding efforts from businesses, organizations, and

²Christina Acuna & Reagan Bleadell, *Thomas More: Utopia*, Pressbooks, <https://earlybritishlit.pressbooks.com/chapter/sir-thomas-more-utopia/> (last visited Feb 9, 2022).

³*How has social media emerged as a powerful communication medium?* University Canada West, <https://www.ucanwest.ca/blog/media-communication/how-has-social-media-emerged-as-a-powerful-communication-medium> (last visited Feb 9, 2022).

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governments towards sustainability⁴. To a great extent, it was the power of social media that turned a student movement on climate change by the name of “Fridays for future”, started by a young girl from Sweden, into something that was able to ignite conversations regarding the concerns of climate change across households, giving rise to what we know today as “The Greta Effect”⁵.

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown, perhaps better than anything else could, how social media platforms have played a pivotal function in the dissemination of vital information by providing space for governments and humanitarian agencies across the globe to communicate to the public the dos and don'ts of this unprecedented situation. In a bid to reach a wider audience with reliable information even the World Health Organization decided to sign up for TikTok.⁶ Social media played an essential role for the public, right from providing a platform for questioning their political leaders to creating a space for asking their fellow citizens for help. The UK citizens used ‘#WhereisBoris’ to question their government’s laid-back response to Covid at the beginning of the pandemic and their Indian counterparts were forced to ask for help by flooding their Twitter timelines with posts to find ‘emergency medicines’, ‘oxygen cylinders’, and ‘hospital beds’ during the deadly second wave that hit the Indian subcontinent.⁷ During this time, tweets around seeking or providing medical help increased by 1958% (20x), and #SOS was Tweeted 152% more, as compared to the initial period of the pandemic.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE PERILS OF ONLINE MANIPULATION

⁴ Ashley A. Anderson, *Effects of Social Media Use on Climate Change Opinion, Knowledge, and Behaviour*, Oxford Research Encyclopaedias (2017), <https://oxfordre.com/climatescience/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228620-e-369>

⁵ Anandita Sabherwal et al., *The Greta Thunberg Effect: Familiarity with Greta Thunberg predicts intentions to engage in climate activism in the United States*, 51 *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 321-333 (2021), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jasp.12737>

⁶ Makena Kelly, *The World Health Organization has joined TikTok to fight coronavirus misinformation*, *The Verge* (2020), <https://www.theverge.com/2020/2/28/21158276/coronavirus-covid19-tiktok-who-world-health-organization-protection>

⁷ Shreya Sinha, *Here's how Twitter warriors are battling India's Covid-19 crisis*, *India Today* (2021), <https://www.indiatoday.in/coronavirus-outbreak/story/coronavirus-pandemic-twitter-users-helping-patients-oxygen-hospital-beds-crisis-1792517-2021-04-19>

“Nothing vast enters the world without a curse,” is how the creators of Netflix’s documentary, *The Social Dilemma*, which provides the viewers a peek into the machinations of social networking, decided was the best way to introduce their work to the viewers. Any discussion on social media needs to take into account that there is an urgent need to acknowledge that the scale at which these platforms are operating today has moved much beyond the limited framework of spreading information and bringing people together. With regards to a discussion on social media, misrepresentation of information can be understood in three principal ways: ‘misinformation’, ‘disinformation’, and ‘mal-information’⁸. ‘Misinformation’ and ‘disinformation’ both refer to flawed information, the basic difference being the intention. Disinformation is intended with the goal of deceiving and misinformation is usually unintentional. Mal-information on the other hand is when the information shared is genuine but the intent is to create trouble or cause harm. Misinformation is often used as an umbrella term to include all false or inaccurate information, including rumours and propaganda.

Using the vast data that social media platforms are infused with on a day-to-day basis, their recommendation algorithms can provide personalized recommendations to each user based on what seems most relevant to the user’s interests and preferences. More often than not, this leads to the users getting exposed to a similar type of content, thus creating echo chambers, where users are mostly engaging with information and ideas in alignment with their belief systems. For social media platforms, the key goal has always been to boost user engagement, and these echo chambers are highly opportune for that. When the content reaches a demographic that is likely to be of a similar viewpoint, it is more likely to get liked and shared, thus increasing user engagement. Such a system is the breeding ground for spreading misinformation inadvertently. Further, along with the creation of these echo chambers, considering the fact that creating and publishing content on these platforms is highly economical and reaches a vast audience, it has never been easier for governments, political parties, or even other powerful social groups to use the reach of social media to manipulate the

⁸Claire Wardle & Hossein Derakhshan, *INFORMATION DISORDER: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making* (2017), [https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c%20\(la](https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c%20(la)

public opinion⁹. In addition, bots (automated social media accounts) enable the misuse of such a system even more efficient and impactful. In a report published by the Oxford Internet Institute, it was revealed that as of 2019 around '52 countries used disinformation and media manipulation to mislead users' while '47 countries used state-sponsored trolls' to attack political opponents and journalists or activists critical of their policies¹⁰. The Cambridge Analytica revelations worryingly exposed how Trump's presidential campaign in the run-up to the 2016 US elections obtained the data of millions of Americans and successfully employed it for political messaging¹¹. Further, 'an estimated 15 percent of active Twitter accounts in the run-up to these elections were bots and played a crucial role in the spread of misinformation regarding several issues relevant to the elections¹². Many political commentators have also pointed out how the use of social media has been an integral part of India's ruling party, BJP's cultural and political messaging, with the party, 's IT cell often being under the scanner for going all-out to attack anyone online, who might be critical of the Government¹³.

Provided that a sizeable fraction of the population across the globe procure their news through social media is why social media companies are under increased scrutiny as to how they handle this enormous responsibility on their platforms. The sheer volume of content shared on social media daily makes it almost impossible to establish a comprehensive system to keep a check on what information or misinformation is circulating on social media and for what purpose. Under increased pressure, a lot of these platforms have claimed to develop

⁹Shalini Talwar et al., *Sharing of fake news on social media: Application of the honeycomb framework and the third-person effect hypothesis*, 57 *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* (2020), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0969698920306433#bib57>

¹⁰Samantha Bradshaw & Philip N. Howard, *The Global Disinformation Order 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation* (2019), <https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/09/CyberTroop-Report19.pdf>

¹¹Carole Cadwalladr & Emma Graham-Harrison, *Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach* the Guardian (2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election>

¹²Filippo Menczer & Thomas Hills, *Information Overload Helps Fake News Spread, and Social Media Knows It*, *Scientific American* (2020), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/information-overload-helps-fake-news-spread-and-social-media-knows-it/>

¹³*Privacy and Manipulation: How Social Media Has Affected Political Discourse*, *Economic and Political Weekly* (2021), <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/privacy-manipulation-social-media-political-discourse>

certain mechanisms to keep a check on what is being circulated on their respective platforms. Lately, platforms like Facebook have entered into collaborations with fact-checking organizations like “The Trust Project” to keep a check on the veracity of news posts and WhatsApp has introduced a forwarding limit to restrict the distribution of misinformation to a wider public. To keep the misinformation spread restricted in the wake of Covid-19, sites such as Twitter and YouTube have published stricter guidelines for publishing Covid-related content. Certain independent fact-checking organizations such as Alt News in India, have also been actively checking the veracity of claims circulating online.

GOVERNMENTAL CONTROL AIMING TO REGULATE SOCIAL MEDIA: INORDINATE POWER TO THE STATE

Various governments are also getting involved in a bid to regulate these platforms which as per their claims is essential for preventing cyber-crimes, fake news, and online manipulation. However, these claims certainly raise doubts about the intent of the people in power as these regulations can be easily structured in a way to suppress dissent and criticism. The complexities involved with such regulations can be understood by taking a look at the ‘Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021’ (Intermediary Rules 2021)¹⁴ introduced by the Government of India under Section 87 of the Information Technology Act, 2000 (IT Act). Electronics and IT Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad at the time of the introduction of these guidelines pointed out that their purpose is to deal with issues such as ‘the persistent spread of fake sensation, ‘abuse of these platforms to share morphed images of women’ and contents related to ‘revenge porn’ or to ‘settle corporate rivalries’¹⁵. Under these rules, along with establishing grievance addressable mechanisms, social media companies are expected to look at takedown requests for ‘unlawful’, ‘deceptive’, and ‘violent information’ within 24 hours and provide comprehensive redress within 15 days.¹⁶ The concerns regarding the intent as well the possible misuse of these guidelines by the government stem from various reasons. Under these new guidelines services like WhatsApp, and Telegram must assist the authorities in

¹⁴Ministry of Information and Technology, Government of India, the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 (2021).

¹⁵ *Id*

¹⁶ *Id*

identifying the source of ‘unlawful’ messages if required by a court of competent jurisdiction or a competent authority [Rule 4(2)]¹⁷. Further, the intermediaries are now required to preserve information for 180 days for investigative purposes, even after the user may have deleted their accounts [Rule 3(1) (h)].¹⁸The fact that India still lacks comprehensive data protection and surveillance laws, raises various questions about giving such vast powers to the executive over the citizens in terms of their online activities. Further, the fact that the final version of these rules was introduced very close in time to the farmers’ protests which were getting a lot of traction on social media, and the subsequent tussle between Twitter and the Central Government over the content being posted online regarding these protests, adds to the suspicion and worry. In addition to this, the latest investigations of certain media outlets concerning the Government of India being involved in surveillance of various important functionaries and ordinary citizens of the country, using Pegasus (spyware) have further increased complexities regarding such regulations¹⁹.

In 2015, the Supreme Court in *Shreya Singal v. Union of India*²⁰ invalidated Section 66A of the IT Act in its entirety, the most worrisome aspect of the section being its overly broad and vague approach. While the provision intended protection against ‘annoyance’, ‘inconvenience’, ‘danger’, ‘obstruction’, ‘insult’, ‘injury’, ‘criminal intimidate, or ill-will’, it left many terms undefined, leaving behind a lot of scope for arbitrary action. The court further held that the section went beyond the scope of ‘permissible restrictions’ under Article 19(2) of the Indian Constitution. Similar challenges to the constitutionality of the Intermediary Rules, 2021 are currently pending before numerous courts including the high courts of Delhi, Madras, and Bombay as well as before the Supreme Court. On the other end of the spectrum, in the case of *Tehseen S. Poonawalla, v. Union of India*²¹ the Supreme Court granted the government ‘broad authority,’ “to restrict or prevent the spread of irresponsible and

¹⁷*Id*

¹⁸*Id*

¹⁹Siddharth Varadarajan, *Pegasus Project: How Phones of Journalists, Ministers, Activists May Have Been Used to Spy On Them*, *The Wire* (2021), <https://thewire.in/government/project-pegasus-journalists-ministers-activists-phones-spying>

²⁰ *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India*, (2013) 12 S.C.C. 7

²¹ *Tehseen S. Poonawalla v. Union of India*, (2018) 9 S.C.C 501

explosive communications on various social media platforms, which tend to encourage mob violence and lynching of any kind”.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it can perhaps be observed that social media's continuing impact on human civilization is filled with contradictions, being good and bad at the same time. To be able to address these contradictions, the foremost thing that our society would probably have to acknowledge is that one of the underlying reasons for the power that social media holds is that it is able to provide people with a sense of belonging and social identity as compared to the real world where a lot of people feel a lingering sense of displacement, alienation and a perpetual longing to truly belong. Therefore, a lot of people end up becoming captives of their own coping mechanisms, and the difference between the real and the virtual gets blurred to an extent that it is difficult to be able to separate the information from the misinformation and consequently, truth from falsehood. At the same time, while the demands for having these platforms regulated to some extent are perfectly reasonable, what happens when the people in power themselves are under scanner for using these platforms to stifle dissent and spread misinformation for political gains is a question that needs to be pondered upon. Further, the fact that social media platforms also benefit to a large extent in terms of ease of expanding their business if the government of the day is on their side further complicates the possibilities of the executive's involvement in attempting to regulate these platforms