DIGITAL
CITIZEN
SUMMIT
2019

12 – 13 November 2019
Sanskriti Kendra, Anand Gram

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Digital Citizen Summit 2019: Event Report

This report is an edited and summarised documentation of the discussions held as a part of the Digital Citizen Summit 2019.

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You can read the online copy at **www.defindia.org/publication-2**

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THE DIGITAL CITIZEN SUMMIT SERIES

Since its inception in 2016, the Digital Citizen Summit (DCS) has explored the interaction of individual rights and complex digital ecosystems. Online spaces and digital media have expanded opportunities and opened newer avenues for participation. This particularly came to light in watershed moments like the Arab Spring where social media became an important tool for citizen activism.

However, with increasing smartphone penetration and evolving online uses and practices, there emerged a darker underside of online and social media. Platforms that were once the medium of civic participation and access to information also became a vehicle for majoritarian and populist forces to claim online spaces. The DCS journey has demonstrated diversity of issues currently at stake in the space of digital rights and range of stakeholder engagements that would be required to confront outstanding challenges.

DCS explored the landscape of social media and internet rights in 2016; access, rights, and privacy in 2017; the key challenges of privacy, surveillance, intimidation, censorship, and misinformation in 2018. Through its previous iterations it canvassed a diversity of themes that explored the different aspects of the digital ecosystem.

In 2019 it was decided to restructure the Summit to do a deep-dive on a particular issue to engage subject-matter experts and practitioners across its multiple dimensions. This was done in order to develop meaningful stakeholder engagements and advance the collective work done by them. Given the wave of offline violence unleashed by misinformation on social media platforms, the theme of this year's Summit sought to explore the intractable online information landscape and the compounding legal and social challenges it has thrown up.

DIGITAL CITIZEN SUMMIT 2019

In India, the past couple of years have seen an alarming rise in cases of lynching and mob violence on the basis of (mis/dis)information propagated via social media platforms. In response to this, the government released the draft Intermediary Guidelines (Amendment) Rules, 2018 with a calling attention motion on 'misuse of social media platforms and spreading of fake news'.

The draft rules aim to expand the conditional requirements for internet intermediaries in order to qualify for safe harbour. These conditional requirements have been expanded to include traceability requirements on social media platforms and internet intermediaries [see Rule 3(5)], automated censorship of 'unlawful information or content' [see Rule 3(9)], and definitional issues around terms such as 'grossly offensive or menacing in nature', 'threatens public order', 'threatens public health or safety'.

This broadens the legal mandate which devolves censorship powers onto social media companies thereby having a knock-on effect on individual rights and civic participation. Moreover, the circulation of misinformation online and its translation to offline violence involves a complex range of social and group dynamics. This highlights the wide ambit of the proposed legislation and its top-down approach with implications for constraining active civic participation online.

This presents a unique opportunity to contribute to the ongoing debate on developing policy priorities and regulatory frameworks that are informed by evidence from the ground-up and non-regulatory approaches like media and information literacy (MIL) in order to be truly effective towards combating online misinformation and offline harm. MIL provides a bottom-up citizen centric approach with the intent to make users critical consumers of information, thereby empowering individuals within both online and offline social space by providing them with the autonomy for unfettered participation in social life.

DCS 2019 aimed to unravel the complex strands of policy, practice, and social reality in order to develop an in-depth and thorough understanding of the complex information landscape online. It brought together subject-matter experts, academics, policy-makers, lawyers, technologists, and members of the civil society in order to facilitate learning and knowledge-sharing. This year DEF also hosted the 12-member Media and Information Literacy Expert Network (MILEN) from a diverse range of countries in the Global North and South in order to leverage the network's expansive collective experience in providing MIL training for a

diverse range of stakeholders and vulnerable groups across varying national contexts.

The purpose was to highlight the importance of a citizen-centric empowering approach like MIL as an alternative non-regulatory approach towards combating misinformation and its adverse effects. This enabled the Summit to have a range of comparative perspectives in order to understand the commonalities and differences between similar phenomenon across national borders as well to learn from best practices and legal, regulatory, and civil society responses in different national contexts.

The first day of the Summit (12 November 2019) was aimed at *Navigating the (Mis)information Landscape: Policy, Practice, and Social Realities and saw multi-stakeholder discussion spanning Technological Challenges, Fundamental Rights and Legal Responses, Media and Information Literacy by the MILEN Network, Practice experience and Learnings by Stakeholder Groups.* The theme of this year's Summit sought to explore the intractable online information landscape of misinformation and disinformation and the compounding legal, technological, and social challenges it has thrown up in terms of developing a solution for its effective regulation that works within a rights-based framework. This was followed by *MILEN in India – Leveraging MIL as an Empowering Tool against Misinformation* with MIL workshops for civil society organisations and media professionals on the second day (13 November 2019).

The two-day Summit was held at the Sanskriti Kendra, Mehrauli – Gurgaon Road, Anand Gram, New Delhi – 110047 and saw nearly 150 people in attendance. Apart from multi-stakeholder representation, the Summit also had diverse international representation. This collective experience enabled an enriching comparative discussion to identify the next steps and approaches towards developing holistic solutions capable of meeting the intensifying challenges confronting society and citizens through the phenomenon of misinformation.

DCS 2019 would not have been possible without the support of its partners. It was organised with the support of Facebook as the Principal Partner; DW Akademie, WhatsApp, MILEN, and Rising Voices as Associate Partners; Association of Social Media Professional (ASMP) and Ideosync Media Combine as Community Partners; Bloggers Alliance as Knowledge Partner; and Global Shapers Community New Delhi as Outreach Partner.

AGENDA

12 NOVEMBER 2019

Navigating the (Mis)information Landscape: Policy, Practice, and Social Realities

- »   09:30 am – 10:00 am: **Registration and welcome tea**

- »   10:00 am – 10:30 am: **Launch of Digital Shift – A Special Issue by The Book Review Journal on technological impact**

- »   10:30 am – 12:00 noon: **Technological challenges, fundamental rights and legal responses**

- »   12:00 noon – 12:30 pm: **Networking Tea**

- »   12:30 pm – 02:00 pm: **Media and information literacy by MILEN**

- »   02:00 pm – 03:00 pm: **Lunch**

- »   03:00 pm – 04:30 pm: **Practice experience and learning by stakeholder groups**

- »   04:30 pm – 05:00 pm: **Networking Tea**

- »   05:00 pm – 06:00 pm: **Recommendations and the way forward**

13 NOVEMBER 2019

- »   9:30 am – 01:00 pm: **Promoting Critical Thinking in Communities – Capacity-building workshop with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)**

- »   2:30 pm – 6:00 pm: **Sifting through Facts and Post-Facts in News Production – Capacity-building workshop with Media Professionals**

12 NOVEMBER 2019

Navigating the (Mis)information Landscape: Policy, Practice, and Social Realities

TECHNOLOGICAL CHALLENGES, FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AND LEGAL RESPONSES

Misinformation on social media platforms have engendered policy and legal responses that question the technological architecture of social media platforms and fundamental rights thereof. This session looked comparatively across disciplinary areas in order to comprehend the challenges of each.

Moderator

» **Prasanth Sugathan,** Legal Director, SFLC.in

Panellists

» **Sarvjeet Singh**, Executive Director, Centre for Communications Governance, National Law University, Delhi.

» **Maya Mirchandani,** Senior Fellow, Observer Research Foundation; Assistant Professor, Ashoka University; Anchor - Wide Angle with Maya Mirchandani

» **Ritvvij Parrikh,** ICFJ Knight Fellow; Partner, PROTO (Civic Media Initiative)

» **Rahul Sharma,** Country Leader - India, International Association of Privacy Professionals (IAPP)

» **Deepak Maheshwari,** Director - Government Affairs, India, ASEAN and China, Norton LifeLock Inc.

» **Harmeet Singh,** ACP, Assam Police

» **Prasanna S,** Independent Lawyer

» **Inderjit Singh Barara,** Chief Cyber Security Officer, Vara Technology Pvt. Ltd.

Evolving relationship between technological development and misinformation

Historically, technological evolution that have provided an impetus to information and communication have served as double – edged sword. The advent of the Gutenberg press accelerated the production and reproduction of printed material which served to boost the circulation of information. This engendered practices like the circulation of fliers in Italian villages about how Jews were drinking blood of Christian children.

While historical epochs like Renaissance and Reformation pivoted around the ability of printing press to revolutionise communication and dissemination of information and knowledge, it also led to increased circulation of hate speech, rumours, and misinformation. It is in these often overlooked local practices fostered by technological development that socio-historical roots of community and group – based hatred like anti – Semitism have been traced back to. During World War II, motion pictures were used as propaganda tools to justify genocide and war crimes and normalise the extermination of an entire community.

However, not until the present moment in the age of social media has the information space been truly democratised and speed and velocity of information transmission truly realised. Proliferating use of social media led it to become the tool for mobilisation towards democratic struggles and social movements. This was until its very potential of bringing people together was transmuted to sow division, discord, and violence.

India has seen glaring instances of how the phenomenon of misinformation has torn through the country's social fabric and resulted in a climate of rumour fuelled lynchings and disturbing perpetration of violence. It has disrupted media and journalistic practice, thrown up new challenges for law enforcement, and brought regulatory objectives in contestation with fundamental rights.

Social media, stakeholders, and the splintered information ecosystem

While social media has been the tool for emancipation and empowerment, it has also become vehicle for violence and division both by individuals and state actors. Post the abrogation of Art. 370 in India (i.e. the revocation of statehood for Jammu and Kashmir and its bifurcation into the Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh), it was found out the 1500 fake social media accounts were created by adversary nations to accelerate the spread of misinformation in

India. The 2016 US elections were another case in point where social media was weaponised by foreign powers to affect election outcomes.

Further, misinformation and disinformation by public officials and formal news outlets have often compounded the problem. There have been instances where the Press Information Bureau has issued press releases which had to be backtracked after fact-checking. Public figures following and amplifying handles that actively propagate (mis/dis)information have acted as a catalyst for their wider circulation. In instances of localised violence and mob lynching social media has become the medium to mobilise along the lines of personal grudges as was seen in the case of mob lynching of two musicians in Karbi Anglong, Assam.

Karbi Anglong saw the mob lynching and eventual death of two musicians who were visiting village in the area to record the sound of streams for their music. While they were travelling there, they had an altercation at a local shop after which a message was circulated on social media designating the two as child lifters. Here a small altercation had led to the unfortunate incident of mob lynching after which the community was divided into tribals versus others.

Events like elections increase the velocity of (mis/dis)information cycles. In a research study conducted by PROTO, it collected 150,000 rumours and misinformation from an election perspective through a WhatsApp tip line. Through the analysis of content it came to light that information used during campaigning was more in the nature of storytelling that precludes a requirement to be factually correct with a greater emphasis on being persuasive, convincing, and memorable. In this scenario while fact-checking was able to debunk false information they were unable to de-bias people. One of the key components that have been missing from fact-checking initiatives is an aggregate look at patterns, strategies, and meta-narratives.

In order to arrive at an estimation of scale of the phenomenon of misinformation, assuming is an average of 5 million Tweets a day with an average of 20 characters per Tweet. This equals to 182 years of New York Times in the space of a single day. The technology does not yet exist to sift through massive amount of data and often requires a layer of human review to provide contextual balance.

Given the high velocity of information circulation on social media and phenomenon of viral claims, traditional media more often than not has become reactive to social media trends. This has upended traditional news cycles and undermined the editorial process and controls in news rooms. Thereby undermining trust in traditional media and highlighting the importance of fact – checkers as the new journalists of today.

Thus, while the information landscape had widened as a result of social media it has bifurcated into filter bubbles as a result of technological materialities of these platforms due to which social media users encounter the type of information that conforms to their beliefs based on their engagement history.

Misinformation and the law: Regulatory objectives versus fundamental rights

There have been administrative responses to the misinformation phenomenon: draft amendments to the intermediary guideline rules and legal proceedings aimed at instituting traceability on social media platforms that enable the tracing of the originator of the message. Any legal policy that attempts to regulate misinformation will end up against the freedom of expression obstacle. If jurisprudential justifications – whether they be moral, ontological, or consequential, or having a marketplace of ideas – in favour of freedom of expression are to hold true then careful thought needs to be given to existing attempts at regulating the phenomenon.

In reality, any kind of information is protected speech under Article 19(2) of the Indian Constitution unless it falls under its specified prohibited categories and/or causes harm covered by some criminal or civil law. It is not true that there are no law governing misinformation in India. There are ample provisions in the law about hate speech with section 505(2) of the Indian Penal Code dealing with rumours and incitement. However, in the effort to regulate the proliferation of misinformation the draft intermediary guideline rules tilts the balance of power in favour of social media platforms. The legal policy aims for social media companies to regulate content and own accountability on their platforms.

Training the focus on platforms as having onus for the content they host does not tackle the source of the problem. This is because different individuals and institutions have different roles to play in managing the information landscape. There was an instance where many (mainstream) media publications not only carried fake news but amplified it. Some of these publications did not take it down while others posted a disclaimer saying that the article has been updated. Platforms do have such solutions for fake news that they carry.

It is not helpful to have a homogeneous approach to the regulation of platforms since there is a range of divergence in terms of the services and functionalities they provide. For example, Twitter is very different from WhatsApp; thereby rules are very different in terms of how to stop the spread of misinformation on each of these platforms. Administrative interest in the regulation of platforms

will also have to take into account how such platforms are weaponised by state actors within a geo-political context.

With the increasing use of privacy invasive technology by governments and platforms combining bigger and larger datasets, individuals are losing control over data and information. However, the proposition for handing lesser power to the platforms should not lead to greater powers for the government. The balance between services and power being handed over to platforms and governments is tipping the scale against individuals. Therefore, it becomes important to empower individuals to have more control within the information landscape.

Existing challenges

Laws and regulations might not always be able to keep up with technological evolution and changing role of platforms and intermediaries. The primary aim of traceability is to arrive at the originator of the message since a message that has been sent out into the public domain might have elements that can affect public safety. Given that platforms operate through interoperability that enables the sending of a message from one platform to another it would be a near impossible task to institute traceability for the sum of all platforms currently active worldwide. Adding a tag to every user information that is generated will also cease to work in the long run. However, from a law enforcement perspective platforms need to come board as accounts that are hidden pose the greatest challenge.

Moreover, whenever an information is read it leads to specific cognitive reactions in our minds – how bias, visual, and cognitive markers are triggered and leads us to share a particular information. Once these dynamics are better understood it would help to frame better media and information literacy interventions and practices. This is further exacerbated through individual biases in design and technological materialities that result in filter bubbles and echo chambers.

Given the volume and velocity of information under circulation, a process if yet to be developed that can help fact-checking initiatives on a daily basis to decide which ones they should prioritise. There is yet to be a process where fact-checking can be scaled up into newsrooms and in that case there remains a challenge of how to keep bias from creeping in when a team of 3 becomes a team of 300.

An incident was narrated by the Avijit Michael, Executive Director of Jhatkaa – a campaigning organisation about how he was arrested under section 66A of the Information Technology Act, 2000 during a campaign for the Aarey forest movement in Mumbai. As a part of the campaign Michael had asked his campaign signatories to called up the Executive Director of the Metro Rail Corporation on the

public number listed on the official website. Whereas, on the other hand, when an activist tried to file a complaint after she was doxed and her private details were made public the police refused to lodge that complaint.

Key takeaways

»   Constant engagement and citizen outreach have proven to be beneficial in Assam. Since June 2018, 5000 offensive posts have been reported and 124 cases have been out of which 2800 posts were pulled down by people themselves. This has been a result of engagement, outreach, and sensitisation.

»   It is important to recognise that while technologies are global, laws, regulations and policies are local. Therefore, a platforms need to incorporate contextual parameters of operation and service delivery.

»   There needs to be system of collaboration that centres citizens and their rights within the policy-making process to avoid the shifting of excessive power to either platforms or governments.

»   Media and information literacy are important to sensitise individuals against misinformation.

»   Place a positive responsibility on State to share only verified information.

MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY BY MILEN

Within an intractable (mis)information landscape, media and information literacy (MIL) provides an empowering tool and a strategy for individuals to make informed and critical choices while instituting resilience within society as a whole. The Media and Information Literacy Expert Network (MILEN) is a global network of experts that have advocated for MIL at a policy level and work towards promoting civic participation through MIL tools and strategies.

Moderator

» **Roslyn Kratochvil Moore,** Project Manager – Media and Information Literacy, DW Akademie, Germany

Panellists

» **Tamar Kintsurashvili,** Executive Director, Media Development Foundation, Georgia

» **Alexandre Amaral,** Journalist and Filmmaker, Brazil

» **Prossy Kawala,** Co – founder and Chairperson, Centre for Media Literacy and Community Development, Uganda

» **Joost Van De Port,** Founder, Media and Information Literacy Learning Initiative, Namibia

» **Hania Bitar,** Director, Palestinian Youth Association for Leadership and Rights Activation, Palestine

» **Osama Manzar,** Founder – Director, Digital Empowerment Foundation, India

Media and information literacy: Needs and approaches

Media and information literacy (MIL) helps an individual navigate an information landscape to arrive at verified and quality information. Ability to identify misinformation is a subset among a range of competencies under MIL that an individual needs within an information-rich environment. MIL helps an individual understand the responsibility of news media; critical analysis of news media; media structure and ownership; recognise the difference between opinion and fact; discern between fake news, propaganda, and satire; analyse the source of the information.

MIL asks an individual to reflect on the type of new one is consuming and its veracity. It encourages individuals to be active, to recognise their right to express, and the need for citizens to be engaged with media for correct information. While MIL puts the onus on the consumer to identify the difference between information and misinformation – it is also helpful to recognise the important debates internationally on content regulation, the role of platform algorithms, and the business model of misinformation.

Misinformation is directly linked to politics, economy, and society. Its circulation is fuelled by domestic and international power contestations and often amplified through bots used specifically for the purpose. It often gets tractions when politicians follow individuals and organisations who post fake news on social media. These interplays of power and misinformation as a means of control place individual citizens squarely in the centre where it becomes crucial for them to identify these strategies and exercise their rights.

National contexts and MIL responses

Georgia: In Georgia there are two sides compounding the information landscape: local government content and Russian interference. It was observed that as the intensity of misinformation increases on social media there are hundreds and thousands of likes from people who do not even belong to Georgia – these were bots used to amplify particular content. Media Development Foundation is using open source intelligence, news sources, citizen awareness to help individuals identify misinformation, trolls, and bots as well as the difference between news, misinformation, and propaganda. It has also been conducting workshops with teachers and young people to sensitise on the different information categories. However, transitional democracy and weak judiciary make it difficult to regulate social media where authorities can over-reach through broad based and intrusive legislation. Often it is also difficult to identify who is behind news outlets that

serve as portals for funnelling misinformation.

Palestine: There was a popular newspaper in Palestine which was for and by the young people of Palestine. The organisation was helping young people voice their issues, advocate for their rights, and hold concerned people accountable. However, with social media has served to complicate this ecosystem. While also empowering individuals to have a voice on their platform it has also dispensed with the requirement of the training required to be a journalist. On social media, everyone is sharing, writing, voicing their opinion on what is happening around them regardless of the veracity of the information. Given that one of the major impact of misinformation is its direct connection to politics, economy, and ethics – one of the central challenges becomes become the identification and recognition of misinformation. MIL aims to help young people become responsible and progressive consumers of media and information. However, in addition with encouraging critical consumption of information, it is also important to educate young people on data ownership and rights pertaining to government and business use of data.

Brazil: Social media has become the vehicle for political propaganda which was once only found through advertisements in newspapers but can now be seen, oftentimes, masquerading as news on Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter etc. Increasingly across countries elections bring forth a deluge of misinformation which are spread not only by political parties but also by private entities with vested interests. It is easy to fact-check text-based information however, the increased use of audio-visual content on social media has compounded the problem. Not just media professionals, but every citizen should be aware of the process of content creation given the circulation of user-generated content. Content creation starts with access, proceeds through reflection, and uses critical – thinking to finally create a particular piece of content. As global citizens, along with the rights of access come the duty for responsible use of media and information.

Uganda: In rural Uganda, radios are a major communication platform. Centre for Media Literacy and Community Development works with young people to gather and broadcast news. The radio also acts as a platform for discussion and deliberation on community issues, led by young reporters, by broadcasting community meetings on the radio so that people can hear their leaders ask them questions directly. It has been observed that it is more difficult to reach out to older people as opposed to younger ones, which is why radio as a medium of mass communication serves to play an important role in this aspect. Further, workshops on MIL are also conducted with members from the communities who then go back to their communities and pass on the learnings by making short videos, rap songs, or documents that can be easily shared via smartphones.

India: India has a huge advantage as a result of its diversity and the ability to learn on its own. WhatsApp partnered with DEF to roll-out the first of its kind social programme in the world to address the issue of misinformation through the active capacity-building and participation of local community-level stakeholders. DEF's strong community presence and continued involvement in the evolving nature of digital inclusion of underserved communities enabled it to respond to the new challenges brought about by rapidly proliferating technologies. These community-based workshops were organised in partnership with the District Collector's Office and the Superintendent of Police in election- bound states with the aim of sensitising users about the need to verify information before sharing it. 4500 stakeholders at the local and community-level have been trained between September 2018 and January 2019 including police officers, local administrative officers, teachers, NGO representatives, local entrepreneurs, students, and self-help groups. Pre – and post – assessment of the workshops revealed that the percentage of respondents who hardly verified their WhatsApp forwards fell sharply by 10.4% and the percentage of respondents who are most likely to verify their information increased by 20.9%.

Key takeaways

»   While MIL puts the onus on the consumer to identify the difference between information and misinformation – it is also helpful to recognise the important debates internationally on content regulation, the role of platform algorithms, and the business model of misinformation.

»   The interplay of power and misinformation as a means of control place individual citizens squarely in the centre where it becomes crucial for them to identify these strategies and exercise their rights.

»   Open source intelligence, news sources, and awareness trainings can be used to help individuals identify misinformation, trolls, and bots as well as the difference between news, misinformation, and propaganda.

»   In addition to encouraging critical consumption of information, it is also important to educate young people on data ownership and rights pertaining to government and business use of data.

»   Not just media professionals, but every citizen should be aware of the process of content creation given the circulation of user-generated content. Content creation starts with access, proceeds through reflection, and uses critical – thinking to finally create a particular piece of content.

» It has been observed that it is more difficult to reach out to older people as opposed to younger ones, which is why radio as a medium of mass communication serves to play and important role in this aspect.

» Workshops on MIL conducted with members from the communities who can then go back to their communities and pass on the learnings by making short videos, rap songs, or documents that can be easily shared via smartphones have been found to be useful.

» WhatsApp partnered with DEF to roll-out the first of its kind social programme in the world to address the issue of misinformation through the active capacity-building and participation of local community-level stakeholders.

» Pre – and post – assessment of the workshops conducted by DEF revealed that the percentage of respondents who hardly verified their WhatsApp forwards fell sharply by 10.4% and the percentage of respondents who are most likely to verify their information increased by 20.9%.

PRACTICE EXPERIENCE AND LEARNINGS BY STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

The current information ecosystem involves a range of different stakeholders who are faced with their constituent challenges when confronted with this issue. The panel had participation from government, journalism, and fact-checking organisations who shared views on the challenges that plague the current information ecosystem.

Moderator

» **Amitabh Kumar,** Founder, Social Media Matters

Panellists

» **Ira Singhal,** Indian Administrative Services, North Delhi Municipal Corporation

» **Nasr Ul Hadi,** Partner, PROTO

» **John Dayal,** Journalist and Civil Rights Activist

» **Venkatesh H. R.,** Director – Training and Research, BOOM FactCheck

» **Prasanth Nair,** Indian Administrative Services, Former DC Kozhikode

Media and information heterogeneity

Media is not a monolith, it is the amalgamation of platforms working on diverse business models and objectives. It can broadly be divided into two types: civic media and news media. Civic media leverages the use of media in public interest to spread the word about the positive work being done by civil society organisations, academic institutions etc. which is important for the audience to know and access. News media on the other hand works towards getting consumer attention and translating it to monetisation. Journalism is a sub-set of news media, the main focus of which is to work in public interest and speak truth to power. It is not expected to focus on positive news but instead hold authorities accountable

for their responsibilities towards the citizenry. Thus, journalism works to provide credibility to news as a business model.

The proliferating use of social media has thrown into sharp focus the degrees of separation with the traditional model of news media. Social media, largely driven by user-generated content, drives the amplification of misinformation, disinformation, and opinions. Media houses have multiple levels of fact-checking involved which results in a time lag in getting the new out immediately. Technological disruptions have broken traditional business models of media houses. Social media has moved from being an alternative medium to a mainstream medium for news. However, moves towards incetivising news media on the basis of increased advertising revenue would undermine its purpose of working in the public interest. While the increasing mainstreaming of automated technologies like artificial intelligence can provide real time news updates it cannot deliver on the contextual integrity of the news which only a journalist can cater to.

Evolving media and institutional relationship

Social media is gaining momentum among the bureaucracy as well who are leveraging this popularity of platforms among people and informing them of policies. Prasanth Nair, former IAS, Kozhikode reported, "When I started the Facebook page of my office as district collector for administration, during that time Facebook was in its initial days and viewed largely as an entertainment platform and discouraged my move. But with time people realised its importance and use. Social media is a superb tool for government administration for communication with the masses".

Social media has worked to increase efficient coordination and reduce response times for the administrative services. During the Kerala floods there were multiple pages and WhatsApp groups involving volunteers, army officers, and district officers, in different social media groups and passing the message to the right person from one group to another was seamless. It is hard to imagine how rescue operations might have been carried out without the use of social media as well as without the help of telephones, mobile calls, etc. However, even while social media is very helpful for administrative purposes, it has also proved to be very difficult for female officers with people unable to respect boundaries of private and professional lives of female officers.

Media business models, platform materialities, and social impact

Social media operates on attracting user attention in order to generate revenue from advertisers. Therefore, content aiming to getting traction on social media will be focused on sensationalism and topics like Bollywood, sex, cricket, and astrology. News having to function in the same business ecosystem would not be able to meet its function to work in public interest as the fourth pillar of democracy by speaking truth to power. Further, social media cannot be a replacement for traditional media due to the possibilities of influencing news contents on the basis of preference patterns expressed through likes and reactions. This is turn imparts biasness because social media will only show the content based on an individual's preference patterns and will filter in only the content that meets those parameters.

Further, the influence that technological materialities of platforms have on social dynamics raise questions about how algorithms can influence behaviour online and offline leading to the creation of filter bubbles and manipulation of opinion. This highlights the need for an international organisation which has an oversight of platforms and try to implement global standards.

Key takeaways

» Media is not a monolith, it is the amalgamation of platforms working on diverse business models and objectives.

» The proliferating use of social media has thrown into sharp focus the degrees of separation with the traditional model of news media.

» Technological disruptions have broken traditional business models of media houses. Social media has moved from being an alternative medium to a mainstream medium for news.

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» Social media has worked to increase efficient coordination and reduced response times for the administrative services.

» During the Kerala floods there were multiple pages and WhatsApp groups involving volunteers, army officers, and district officers, in different social media groups and passing the message to the right person from one group to another was seamless.

» While social media is very helpful for administrative purposes, it has also proved to be very difficult to female officers with people unable to respect boundaries of private and professional lives of female officers.

» News having to function in the same business ecosystem as platforms would not be able to meet its function to work in public interest as the fourth pillar of democracy by speaking truth to power.

» Social media cannot be a replacement for traditional media due to the possibilities of influencing news contents on the basis of preference patterns expressed through likes and reactions.

» Influence that technological materialities of platforms have on social dynamics raise questions about how algorithms can influence behaviour online and offline leading to the creation of filter bubbles and manipulation of opinion.

» Need for an international organisation which has oversight of platforms and work towards implementing global standards.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

Open House Discussion

» In many part of the world there is opposition to any regulation of the social media and it is believed that the common law is enough since social media regulation can have an impact on civil liberties.

» While there is need for regulation – it is unclear who would be monitoring the system and how such a system would be monitored which raises important questions about civil rights.

» There is a need to develop sustainable business models for free media that serve its public service function of holding authorities to account.

» While existing regulations on content regulation might fail significant tests of the law it remains to be seen how such regulation will evolve through responses of the civil society and other stakeholders.

» There are current provisions under the IPC which can be used to prosecute people who spread misinformation and the penalty for that is very steep.

» The community needs to have a more proactive role in the shaping of community guidelines that govern platforms.

» Granular research is needed on social context of origination of misinformation and the processes of its circulation before arriving at how it must be regulated.

» Traditional media houses must also be held accountable if they are sharing and/ or amplifying false information.

» Social media companies should have weighted metric system to identify misinformation.

» As was seen in the 2017 racial lynchings of African students misinformation amplifies and incites pre-existing prejudice, misconceptions, and stereotypes.

» Information can either be right or wrong, which is not the same for opinion which canvasses a range, so the question is any regulation aimed at combatting misinformation should only hinge on the former.

» Social media companies need to play a more proactive role with officials from the companies who are able to make decisions in the same rooms as other stakeholders who play an important role in the ecosystem.

» The spirit of multi-stakeholderism should permeate to higher levels of decision and policy making in both businesses and governments.

» Changing platform algorithms that have an adverse impact on citizen and society take time and can only happen if the leadership is onboard.

» Policy – makers drafting regulations for platform governance need to understand how technology works. However, in a career in administrative services by the time one reaches policy – making positions, one quite senior so there is a generation gap.

» Technologists should also understand how policy – making works.

» There should be focus on integrating MIL in school curriculum to maximise and scale impacts.

» While the societal impact of MIL will take time to take root; MIL with students and youth have demonstrated strong impact on the individuals in the short term.

» Simultaneously, there is also a need to do MIL with the most vulnerable as well as the most influential i.e. the chains in the network in order to work on containing the immediate adverse fallouts of misinformation.

» MIL should also be made included as a mandatory first step for first-time users of social media platforms.

» Misinformation does not impact everyone equally and policy – making needs to take cognisance of the vulnerabilities experienced by marginalised persons due to the gendered nature of online abuse and focus on privacy and consent.

» There needs to be case studies of business models that can demonstrate that misinformation is bad for business and it would be helpful to include the business leaders and business intellectuals in the conversation.

13 NOVEMBER 2019 MILEN IN INDIA – LEVERAGING MIL AS AN EMPOWERING TOOL AGAINST MISINFORMATION

The increase in smartphone, internet, and social media penetration around the world has provided newer avenues for access and participation. However, as technology and related uses and practices have evolved over time social media has becomes a vehicle for majoritarian and populist forces to claim online spaces. One of the prominent ways in which this has happened is the spread of misinformation taking advantage of social media and its powers of rapid dissemination. As a result of this, access to information and freedom of expression has increasingly come to be regulated in the guise of clampdowns on misinformation.

Majority of the countries have tended to opt for overbroad legislation and regulatory mechanisms like making social media companies responsible for active censorship, crushing jail terms for broad definitions of what constitutes misinformation, and even to the extent of internet shutdowns. These top-down regulatory approaches have potential knock-on effects on the freedom of expression and active civic participation online. The media and information literacy (MIL) approach provides a bottom-up citizen centric approach with the intent to make users critical consumers of information. This also empowers individuals within both online and offline social space by providing them with the autonomy for unfettered participation in social life.

The Media and Information Literacy Expert Network (MILEN) has expansive collective experience in providing MIL training for a diverse range of stakeholders and vulnerable groups across varying national contexts. The Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) has been deploying MIL in India for underserved populations without formal education and functional literacy through its START digital and media-literacy toolkit as well through misinformation workshops in election bound states. With the rise of misinformation related incidents in India and the corresponding legal and regulatory propositions put forward there is an urgent need to highlight the potential for citizen-centric bottom-up approaches that work towards empowering citizens in taking control of their medium of information and expression.

Towards this end, MILEN's India visit provided an invaluable learning, experience and knowledge sharing in applying its expertise towards leveraging MIL as tool for empowerment and active civic participation. On 13 Nov 2019 MILEN conducted 2 half-day workshops with civil society and journalists in order to outline best practices with two of the frontline stakeholders within the ecosystem.

Promoting Critical Thinking in Communities – Capacity-building workshop with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

CSOs work with grassroots communities around the country with expanding smartphone and internet penetration. Whether or not media and information literacy are their direct mandate, CSOs increasingly have to deal with this rising phenomenon within their constituencies. This workshop sought to highlight how to embed MIL as a part of their existing project design.

Sifting through Facts and Post-Facts in News Production – Capacity-building workshop with Media Professionals

Increasingly journalists and news production houses are grappling with a post-fact world and declining trust in news media. This workshop aims to highlight the importance of developing a critical thinking approach to the production and dissemination of news as an bulwark against misinformation campaigns.

Throughout both these workshops participants were guided through critical steps of processing information, which involved—access, analyse, create, reflect and act—to instil responsibility, consideration, cultural sensitivity and awareness. One of the key takeaways of this exercise was—people forget to practice 'reflect' — i.e. individuals often fail to acknowledge their own responsibilities while disseminating information.

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