maktoobmedia.com

OPINION

When power meets platform: Zuckerberg's fact-check ban and its impact on India's rural digital landscape

Arpita Kanjilal

January 20, 2025



Mark Zuckerberg's decision to remove fact-checking mechanisms from Facebook disproportionately favors those in power and well-resourced entities, who can exploit the platform's lack of oversight to amplify their narratives. Politicians, corporations, and individuals with significant financial resources often have access to tools and strategies to push their messaging effectively. Without fact-checking, these groups can spread tailored disinformation, create echo chambers, and dominate digital spaces with unchecked content. False narratives or propaganda can be strategically disseminated to influence elections, public opinion, and policy decisions, benefiting those who can afford to pay for targeted ads or create viral content. This skews the digital landscape, giving a disproportionate advantage to those already in positions of power and influence.

On the other hand, marginalized communities—particularly those with limited access to digital tools, lower levels of digital literacy, and weaker voices in public and policymaking discourse—stand to be adversely impacted by the removal of fact-checking. These communities are often more susceptible to misinformation, especially without trusted verification mechanisms. Disinformation targeted at these groups can further deepen their marginalization by spreading harmful stereotypes, misinformation about social programs, or false health information,

often leading to tangible harm.

Rural India and underserved communities —the focus of the Digital Empowerment Foundation's efforts —are already underrepresented on digital platforms and face significant barriers to accessing accurate information. Misinformation and fake news can amplify existing social divides, perpetuate inequalities, and harm their ability to make informed choices, whether in health, education, or politics. By removing fact-checking, Zuckerberg effectively removes a tool that these vulnerable communities rely on to navigate the digital ecosystem and protect themselves from harmful narratives.

DEF has been actively addressing this issue through its SoochnaPreneur initiative. These rural women fact-checkers spanning 2000 Communication Information Resource Centers (CIRCs) are being trained to become trusted information intermediaries within their communities, ensuring wide outreach and a contextually, socially, and politically specific approach to tackling misinformation. This grassroots model not only helps disseminate accurate information but also empowers local women to become leaders in their communities, directly combating disinformation at the source. The SoochnaPreneurs are uniquely positioned to understand the local challenges, concerns, and cultural nuances of their communities, which makes them highly effective in curbing the spread of false content. However, with the removal of fact-checking on platforms like Facebook, the barrier to misinformation becomes even higher, and the vital role of initiatives like SoochnaPreneurs becomes more challenging.

Additionally, the absence of accountability for false information is likely to embolden those who spread misinformation about these marginalized communities, further othering them and influencing public attitudes against them. For instance, misinformation around health care, legal rights, or government schemes can have disastrous consequences, especially when disadvantaged populations are already less likely to access trusted, credible sources of information.

Zuckerberg's allyship with the President of the United States can be seen as a political maneuver, which raises significant concerns, particularly when private companies like Facebook align closely with government power. When government and private entities forge alliances, it often leads to the erosion of public sector accountability and ethical standards. This partnership can diminish the role of the public sector in ensuring fairness, transparency, and accountability, as the interests of private entities may not always align with the greater public good. In the case of Zuckerberg's decision to remove fact-checking, this confluence of interests may allow for unchecked influence over public discourse, ultimately weakening the role of the public in holding powerful entities accountable and compromising the principles of democratic governance. The public sector's responsibility to regulate

and safeguard the ethical use of digital platforms is undermined when such alliances are made, with the potential to exacerbate issues like disinformation and political manipulation.

In light of this decision, UN experts have expressed deep concern. They warn that removing fact-checking mechanisms will likely exacerbate the global infodemic of misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech online, particularly impacting vulnerable communities. The lack of oversight would make it even more difficult for these communities to discern credible information from harmful content, deepening social divides and undermining trust in democratic institutions. The UN experts emphasized that digital platforms have a responsibility to safeguard the integrity of information circulating in their spaces, as these platforms are increasingly central to public discourse, human rights, and the protection of democratic values.

The removal of fact-checking processes is seen as a significant setback in the global fight against disinformation, which already disproportionately affects marginalized and disenfranchised populations. UN experts argue that without such measures, the spread of false narratives becomes easier, and the victims of these misleading campaigns—often women, minorities, and low-income communities—will suffer greater harm. These groups, already marginalized in digital spaces, face greater risks of being subjected to manipulation and exclusion through disinformation that targets their vulnerabilities.

Additionally, UN experts warn that Zuckerberg's decision could worsen online hate speech and racially motivated violence, particularly in regions where discriminatory rhetoric and divisive ideologies are already prevalent. In their view, the absence of fact-checking would create an environment where false claims could escalate unchecked, potentially leading to real-world harm, including hate crimes and political unrest. This could jeopardize the right to freedom of expression by allowing misleading information to distort public debate, impede social cohesion, and threaten public safety.

In essence, the decision to remove fact-checking on Facebook could perpetuate digital inequality, entrenching the power of privileged groups while making it harder for marginalized communities to navigate the digital landscape responsibly. By reducing oversight on false content, Zuckerberg's decision exacerbates existing vulnerabilities and allows misinformation to flourish, further entrenching the status quo of social exclusion and disinformation targeting the already marginalized. DEF's work—focused on empowering communities with tools to identify and combat false content—becomes even more crucial in such a landscape, but without strong platform-level accountability, these efforts face an uphill battle.

Dr. Arpita Kanjilal is a part of the Research & Advocacy Division of the Digital

Empowerment Foundation.