

# HOLD FACEBOOK, GOOGLE ACCOUNTABLE

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues relating to Growth & Development - Public Finance, Taxation & Black Money incl. Government Budgeting

Apr 21, 2020-Tuesday

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On Monday, Australia announced that it will now force technology giants such as Facebook and Google to pay news companies for using content. This, the government said, was meant to ensure a “level playing field”, and came after an 18 month investigation into the power of these digital platforms by the country’s competition and consumer commission. Earlier this month, France’s top competition authority asked Google to negotiate with media companies, both publishers and agencies, for using snippets on its search engine and news aggregator and pay them proper remuneration.

Both Australia and France are right. For too long, there has been an unfair ecosystem that has been built around the digital news landscape. Media organisations invest tremendous resources — personnel, editorial gatekeeping, overhead costs and distribution. Big digital intermediaries such as Facebook and Google take their content and push it on their platforms. But operating under ambiguous regimes, they pretend not to be media companies. This means they neither have the legal accountability that media organisations have, nor do they incur the same levels of expenditure. But they monopolise the revenue that streams into the digital news world. This has made several genuine media organisations unviable — reducing their profitability, forcing them to scale down their operations or even close down. This, in turn, hits not just particular companies but hurts democracy and the right of citizens to be informed.

This crisis has become even more acute given the economic slowdown after the coronavirus pandemic. India is not immune from either the trends in the digital news world, or the slowdown. Media companies now face additional challenges. For traditional print platforms, circulation has dipped because of unfounded fears about the possibility of the infection spreading through newspapers. Revenue is hit due to the curtailment of advertisement spend by private companies as well as the government. In this backdrop, it is time for the government to institute clearer rules for intermediaries. It is time to get Facebook and Google to meet their legal obligations — it is no surprise that there is a proliferation of fake news on some of these platforms in the absence of stronger accountability rules. It is also time to get them to pay the rightful share of compensation to those platforms whose content they use and leverage to build their own audiences and profits. India must carefully consider other global examples and put a stop to the reckless and unfair trade practices adopted by digital intermediaries. It is, indeed, time for a level

playing field — not just to help media, but also to preserve democracy and keep up the news-gathering mechanisms that are so essential to keeping citizens informed.

**END**

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