

INDIA NEEDS SOVEREIGN RULES TO GOVERN SOCIAL MEDIA

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If foreign media or laws get to determine what can legitimately go online, it would amount to a loss of sovereignty

When the internet was being hailed as a new frontier of freedom, few foresaw how an infodemic of fake news on social media platforms could scuttle the dream of a better-informed and thus wiser world. So severe has the crisis of lies fanning out far and wide become that “mis” is now an apt prefix for this so-called “information age”. The dangers of the phenomenon are clear. With weapons and viruses more lethal than ever, words and falsehoods can kill. India has had several instances of mob violence spurred by incendiary material posted online, but it has taken a firestorm over racism in America to lend the idea of social media curbs its urgency.

The US spotlight, of late, has been on the posts of President Donald Trump, whose challenger for the White House, Joe Biden, is campaigning to mount pressure on Facebook to revise its hands-off policy on what gets conveyed by its media vehicles. Under an employee siege over the issue, the US-based company had signalled a revision of its guidelines for content intervention. Twitter, which serves more as a broadcast platform, had acted earlier to tighten its self-regulatory norms, earning Trump’s ire by flagging a few of his tweets for a fact-check, and even slipping one behind a cautionary screen for allegedly “glorifying violence”. The editorial calls being made by this app have stirred an e-hornet’s nest, and US political trends suggest that state regulation could come into force at some point. Either way, what we say online in India may soon be subject to moderation by American values and politics, an outcome we need to pre-empt.

Our Constitution guarantees the right to free speech with a few riders—on the spewing of hatred, for example—designed for Indian social conditions. If foreign media companies or laws get to determine what can legitimately go online, it would amount to a loss of sovereignty. While US restrictions may follow global principles of civil decency on many matters, they are unlikely to satisfy the specific interests of our democracy. On geopolitical issues, the problem of foreign intervention could be even more acute. Twitter has reportedly shut down 170,000 accounts for spreading narratives deemed favourable to the Chinese government. The platform seems to be under no illusion that it is often deployed as a propaganda tool, but we have little official sway over its allegiances in playing gatekeeper. If our country were to be victimized by hostile agents, there is no saying what its stance would be.

To keep social media in consonance with our constitutional values, we need mechanisms of moderation that are answerable to us. The government is looking to employ an external agency to filter content. The rules that are instituted for this need to be framed clearly, and kept open to public scrutiny and democratic discussion. Our twin objectives should be to keep incendiary stuff off the web, while safeguarding our liberty to speak the truth.

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