

APRIL 2022

DEMOCRATISING SOCIAL MEDIA



Powered by



Authored by





INTRODUCTION

Today, there are 6.6 billion smartphone users in the world, which translates to over 83% of the world's population. More than 70% have access to the internet and 90% of them currently use social media worldwide, where a social media user engages with 6 social media platforms on average. Narrowing down these statistics to India has 750 million smartphone users and around 43% of the population has access to the internet. More than 82% of active internet users engage with social media.

What has led to these astounding numbers? The answer is eased communication and conversation, formulation and transmission of ideas and opinions, quick access to information, marketing, etc. Social media is not only a source of news for a rising number of people, but it has also emerged as a space for netizens to voice their opinions and connect with a growing online audience.

Social media users get connections, recognition, validation, and wealth (for some). But now social media is not just a way to stay connected with friends or increase your social circle. Facebook's former Vice President of User Growth, Chamath Palihapitiya, claimed that "The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works."



Outside social media we associate with those people who are aligned with us in multiple ways. These interactions are primarily defined by the exclusive nature of the people and the moment. With social networks however that exclusiveness is lost as there is always an entity in the middle; it's like living in a panopticon for your "private" interactions with users on these services are instantly being analyzed and turned into a commodity the moment you press "enter."

Social media is often one of the ways to access user behavior and identify customer segments. Social media is first a medium for corporations to learn about user interests with or without their conscious effort. Though everything on the surface appears consensual between social media sites and their users, over the years it has been experienced that not much is in control of the users.



IS SOCIAL MEDIA REALLY DEMOCRATIC?

Democracy is of the people, by the people, and for the people.

As far as social media is concerned, it looks like we are free to post what we want, share what we want, follow whom we want, or cancel whom we want on social media.

On a larger scale do we really do all this at our own discretion or are we passively conditioned without being able to realize it? In today's world, social media is run by private companies, and though they offer an open space for public views, they have a stronghold on what stays on their platform. They have the power to manipulate what is seen by the public. They have the power to ban people from their sites. They have the power to propagate certain agendas. So it's certain that the control lies with these companies. Now, since the estrade is theirs therefore the returns are also theirs. Hence the current social media is more of the corporation, by the corporation and for the corporation.

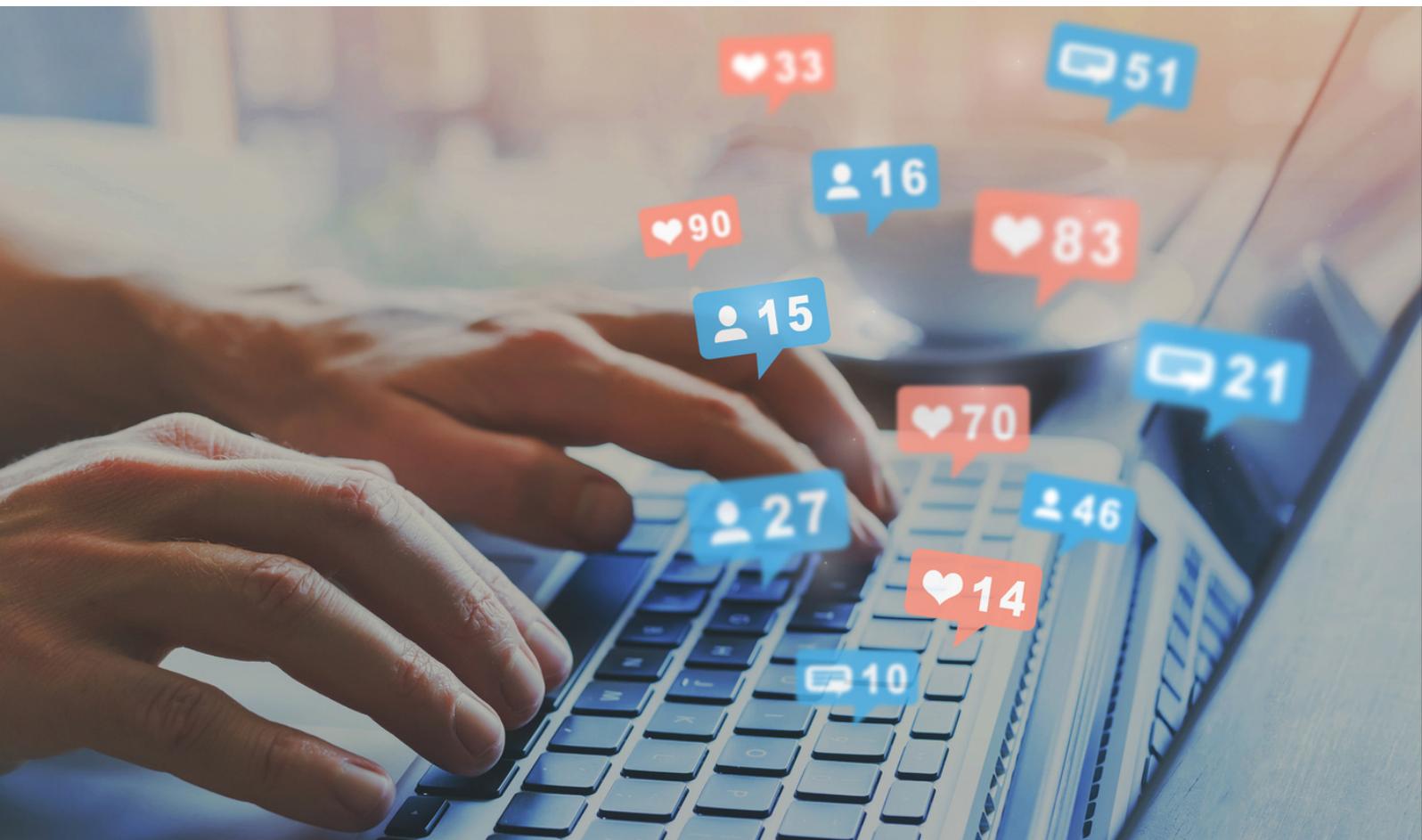




Why is it that some posts go viral and some get deleted?

Now, first, does everyone get to be open on social media? Does everyone get to voice their opinions on social media? No. Though supposedly it is an open forum, some people are not free to be open with their views. They get “shadow banned” or get their profiles deleted for saying something the masses don’t agree with. Is that democratic? No. The only thing democratic about it is that they ban political personalities as well.

Second, does everyone receive the same amount of recognition on social media? Why do some posts go viral? Is it because of popular support? There might be some views that convey a deeper and newer perspective on an issue that might not be viral. Why do some posts get deleted and some don’t even after years?





The answer to these questions is the ‘algorithm’. Social media platforms added a transformative innovation that is the algorithm that determined which posts a user would see, based on predicted “engagement”—the likelihood of an individual interacting with a given post, figuring in the user’s previous likes. Algorithms in social media platforms are digital means of sorting posts based on content relevancy like the design seeks to match a user’s taste, based on their profile, to specific posts that the system guesses the user will like. Moreover, algorithms can operate in a collaborative way which consists of matching users to other users who seem to share similar interests. The problem lies here; through the use of shadow bans, algorithms may give rise to information gaps by prioritizing revenue-inducing content. This is controversial for it can determine the importance and value of content which may lead to a non-objective and polarized decision of who and what gets attention. As a consequence, algorithmic design influences the spread of certain cultures and shapes the digital society in a certain way by determining which types of content or topics should be prioritized in each individual feed, as well as which artists, content creators, or brands should be given more prominence than others.





Is there someone who decides what gets attention and what doesn't or does that happen on its own ?

Is there someone who controls what gets deleted and what goes viral? Is there any algorithm that runs at the backend and controls the visibility of content? Or is it the Government that puts certain restrictions on the kind of content that can be made available? More importantly, if posts can go viral or get deleted that means someone is in charge and that someone can change the course of discussions, views, opinions, etc. Consider this, in the recent Johnny Depp vs Amber Heard case, if posts support the claim of one side, it can change the public view of the whole situation. This was a small example. In a larger scenario, it can cause political polarization which can change the course of national and global politics. That is the amount of power and control these social media platforms have over their users. Users are just sheep following in the direction they are being steered in. It's true that it's a platform that allows everyone to voice their opinions. But those opinions are checked and superintended by the algorithm which is made by private companies. So somehow what goes viral and what gets deleted is under the control of an entity other than the creator of the content.





Free Speech Versus Hate Speech

Twitter Ceo said that the platform is not for free speech but rather for constructive discussion. First, free speech is a fundamental right. Second, who decides what is constructive. Third, is free speech justified if it is hate speech? Everyone has a right to speak their mind. But is it okay to express it universally at the expense of another human being or community? Is there a system in place to distinguish between free speech and hate speech? Online political discussions are experienced as angrier and less civil than those in real life. The dark side of social media is its ability to spread hate, bias, and vicious ideas that can and do lead to violence. And it's not even limited to sites. It's built-in. It lives in the algorithms the companies use to keep us engrossed and engaged. Recent studies in Germany made it clear that particular content pages alone don't do the work. For example: once users land on a page, algorithms used by websites such as Facebook and YouTube direct the account toward related websites. A major problem solver would be increasing user verification, because not only does it reduce the manipulation of the algorithm to go viral but it also adds accountability to the spectrum.

Censorship on social media is also a source of worry. Sites like Twitter and Facebook have clearly established themselves as the new public square. They are the places where most of us have our discussions about the controversies that arise in the realms of politics and culture, but these sites are privately owned businesses that can — and have — set “free speech boundaries” that are more restrictive than those set by the constitution in public spaces. This means that the majority of our communications are vulnerable to censoring.



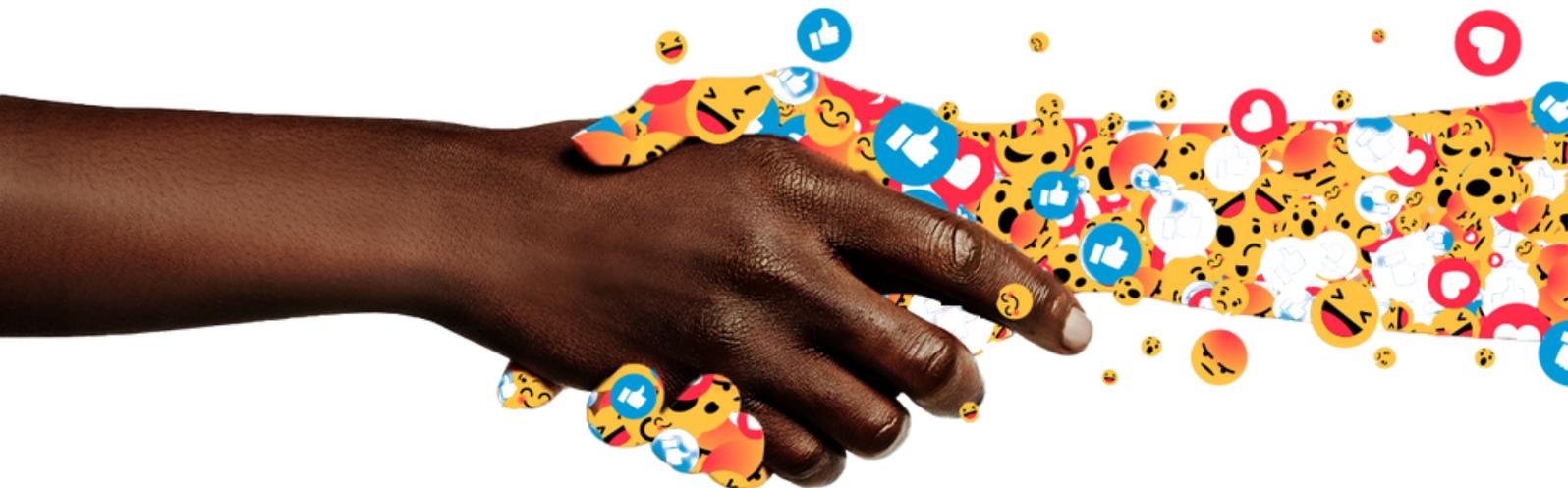


SHOULD PRIVATE FIRMS BE DEMOCRATIC?

Profit Versus Responsibility

These are all private organizations that control this generation in every aspect. It is their learning and expressing platform, their information kiosk, and their “*chai ki dukaan*”. Should these companies worry about making their platform democratic? Yes. It gives them a larger and more equal user base. It sticks to its propaganda of an open platform.

These are all profit-making companies, their agenda is to have more users and therefore more activity, which they simply attract by providing all kinds of content. Should they be concerned about responsibility or accountability for the nature of the content on their sites? Should they concern themselves with how the easy availability of information affects certain users? There is stuff on the internet that needs checking, content that isn’t suitable for everyone. Now social media is accessible to people of all ages and there’s content that is not appropriate for them. In reality, children may inadvertently consent to firms and brands monitoring every part of their life before they can legally consent to vote.



Regulation Versus Market Development

Social media is “target casting.” The social media companies' software algorithms monitor how users act online and utilize that information to put them into certain categories. The ability to contact such groups is subsequently sold to advertising. Companies that specialize in target casting generate money by charging a premium to target a limited but well-defined demographic. The Federal Communications Commission compels all broadcast advertising, including advocacy messaging, to disclose who is paying for it – something that social media does not have to do. For different editorial viewpoints, we may pick between print newspapers, broadcast, or cable channels – something that is not available on social media. Perhaps, there is no tangible regulation on the activities of social media companies.

While private companies have access to terabytes of user data, they are expected to be responsible for their security. In this new digital space with immense content at disposal, it is important to ensure that the content and the platform are regulated but at the same time offer enough incentives to both the user and the companies to operate. While the Governments have urged private companies to ensure accessibility and equality to their users, it comes at a cost of authenticity. In the recent few years, social media has played a vital role in bringing significant issues on the ground to a wider audience. For example, providing resources during the pandemic such as oxygen cylinders and medicines. This was a great example of the power of social media to work toward the larger good.





Transparency Versus Privacy

There are a few dimensions to privacy on social media. Firstly, privacy issues of social media can include the algorithm. Algorithms use the user's personal data to "know" how to display content on the social media platform. For example, algorithms use sensitive data like the user's geographical location, the friends and acquaintances with whom they interact the most, the pages and hashtags that they frequently search for, and so on. Similarly, there are concerns about how algorithms impact the opinions and interests of social media users, and hence the digital society as a whole. Secondly, privacy on social media is debatable. On one hand, all our activities are being analyzed and monitored, keeping everything in the open that however being necessary certainly violates the right to privacy. On the other hand, there are extremist violent groups on the internet who propagate all sorts of agendas without any hindrance or consequence. Now while there is a demand for privacy, there should also be a demand for transparency, especially regarding how the algorithm works and again how the content is judged, prompted and dismissed without transgressing privacy.





SOCIAL MEDIA IN INDIA: ECONOMICS VS POLITICS

In recent years, politics in India has taken a different turn in India. From monologues at rallies, the election campaign has been broadened by discussions and debates online where citizens are not just listeners but also participants. The 2014 elections were called the first social media elections in India, where all parties tried to gather their vote bank through extensive online campaigning. In 2022, in terms of post engagement by the community, AAP led with 27.8 million engagements, BJP was at 8.4 million and INC at 5.1 million, according to Facebook data.

Social media witnesses a large amount of political propaganda, deliberations, and campaigns during election time. Not only during elections but soft idea launches by political parties are also seen on social media. According to Google Transparency Report, political parties mostly in the last two years have spent around \$800 million (Rs 5,900 crore) on election ads.

The role of social media in a democracy is critical; however, does this entail or underscore the need for social media to be democratic is unclear since entities controlling these platforms are private and rules of the land permit incorporations to pursue shareholder interests as their primary objective. Increasing efforts by lawmakers to create awareness among users would certainly help in wiser usage of social media as against reckless sharing of private information.





REFERENCES

<https://www.bankmycell.com/blog/how-many-phones-are-in-the-world>)

How Many People Use Social Media in 2022? (65+ Statistics) (backlinko.com)

Democratize Social Media Before It Destroys Our Society - Paste (pastemagazine.com)

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2019/11/13/can-social-media-targetcasting-and-democracy-coexist/>

Social media's algorithms lead us down dark, divisive rabbit holes | The Seattle Times

Algorithms in Social Media Platforms (internetjustsociety.org)

Social Media Is Warping Democracy - The Atlantic

How social media is transforming Indian politics | World Economic Forum (weforum.org)

The Politicization of Social Media in India – South Asian Voices



QUESTIONS?
CONTACT US.

*www.kalamcentre.org
office@kalamcentre.org
011 4912 1754*