



CSB IAS ACADEMY

THE ROAD MAP TO MUSSORRIE...

MAINS Impact- 2025 – 01/12/2024

SOCIAL MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

SYLLABUS:

GS 2 > Polity

REFERENCE NEWS:

- The In a recent move, The Guardian newspaper in the UK announced its withdrawal from the social media platform, X. The decision was driven by concerns over the platform's toxic environment and the disproportionate influence of its owner, Elon Musk, in shaping political discourse. This action by The Guardian ignites a broader debate on the role of social media in democratic societies.

STATS:

Global Social Media Overview:

- Over **5 billion social media users** worldwide, making up about **62.3% of the global population**. This demonstrates the extensive reach of social media globally. (Source: 2024 Global Digital Overview, DataReportal)
- Daily social media usage worldwide totals **more than 12 billion hours**, highlighting the integral role of these platforms in daily life. (Source: 2024 Global Social Media Statistics, DataReportal)

Social Media in India:

- India has 821 million internet users with **462 million active social media accounts**, showing an annual increase of 19 million internet users or a 2.6% growth. (Source: 2024 Global Digital Overview, Datar portal)

POSITIVE IMPACTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON DEMOCRACY:

- **Amplification of Civic Participation:**
 - Social media has lowered barriers for political engagement, allowing citizens to discuss, debate, and mobilize around democratic causes.
 - **For instance**, in India, platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) have been widely used to promote voter awareness campaigns, **especially targeting first-time voters**.
 - Also, during the **2020 U.S. Presidential elections**, platforms like Instagram and TikTok played a key role in engaging younger voters, contributing to record voter turnout
- **Promotion of Freedom of Expression:**

- Social media provides a platform for voices often silenced in traditional media, fostering democratic dialogue.
- **For example**, during Myanmar's 2021 military coup, activists used X to share real-time updates and mobilize global support for democracy.
- In India, **YouTube has been a vital outlet for independent journalists and activists** to share their perspectives amidst increasing restrictions on mainstream media.
- **Empowerment of Social Movements:**
 - Social media acts as a catalyst for grassroots movements, enabling them to gain visibility and momentum.
 - **For instance**, in India, the **2020-21 #FarmersProtest** relied heavily on social media to raise awareness, rally supporters, and counter misinformation.
 - **Also**, campaigns like **#BetiBachaoBetiPadhao (Save the Girl Child)** gained traction through Instagram and YouTube, illustrating the platforms' role in driving social change.
 - **The #MeToo movement**, initiated in the U.S., became a global phenomenon via platforms like X and Instagram.
- **Increased Political Engagement:**
 - Social media platforms have brought younger demographics into political discourse, often transforming them into active participants.
 - **For instance**, political parties prioritized platforms like **Instagram and WhatsApp** to connect with **first-time voters**, recognizing their substantial presence on these platforms.
- **Enhanced Transparency and Accountability:**
 - Social media allows political leaders and governments to communicate directly with citizens, reducing reliance on intermediaries.
 - **For example**, during the **COVID-19 pandemic**, the Indian government used platforms like X and WhatsApp to share vaccination updates and dispel rumours. Globally, **Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy effectively used X** to communicate with international leaders and citizens during the Ukraine-Russia conflict.
- **Facilitation of Digital Campaigning:**
 - Political campaigns leverage social media for targeted outreach, reshaping election strategies.
 - **For instance**, Prime Minister Narendra Modi extensively utilizes platforms like X, Facebook, and WhatsApp for campaigns and initiatives like "Mann Ki Baat," fostering direct citizen engagement and inclusivity.
- **Fact-checking and Combating Misinformation:**

- Social media platforms are increasingly incorporating tools to curb misinformation, which strengthens democratic discourse.
- **For example**, during the **2022 French presidential elections**, platforms like **X flagged misleading posts** and redirected users to verified information, helping citizens make informed decisions

NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON DEMOCRACY

- **Spread of Misinformation and Disinformation:**
 - Social media facilitates the rapid dissemination of false information, which can mislead the public and distort democratic discourse.
 - **For instance**, in India, platforms like WhatsApp have been **used to spread rumours and fake news**, leading to incidents of **mob violence and communal tensions**. The rapid spread of misinformation poses significant challenges to maintaining social harmony and informed democratic participation.
 - **Also**, during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Russian operatives used social media to spread disinformation, aiming to influence voter behavior.
- **Political Polarization:**
 - Algorithms on platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) often prioritize content that **aligns with users' existing preferences, reinforcing their beliefs** and contributing to greater **political polarization**.
 - **For example**, a 2020 study by the Pew Research Center found that **64% of Americans believe social media has a mostly negative effect** on the country, with many citing increased division.
- **Manipulation by Political Actors**
 - Authoritarian regimes and political actors have exploited social media to manipulate public opinion and suppress dissent.
 - **For instance**, in India, political parties have been accused of **employing IT cells to spread propaganda and discredit opponents** on social media, affecting the fairness of the democratic process.
- **Undermining Electoral Integrity**
 - False information about voting procedures spread via social media can suppress voter turnout and undermine electoral integrity.
- **Erosion of Trust in Democratic Institutions**
 - The proliferation of fake news and conspiracy theories on social media erodes public trust in democratic institutions.
 - **For instance**, in India, the spread of misinformation about judicial decisions and parliamentary proceedings on social media has led to skepticism and reduced trust in these institutions.

- **Facilitation of Hate Speech and Violence**
 - Social media platforms have been used to incite violence and spread hate speech, leading to real-world consequences.
 - **For example**, in Myanmar, Facebook was used to incite violence against the Rohingya Muslim minority, contributing to a humanitarian crisis.
 - Also, in India, social media has been a **conduit for communal hate speech**, leading to incidents of violence and posing challenges to social cohesion and democratic stability.
- **Surveillance and Privacy Concerns**
 - Governments and corporations have used social media for surveillance, infringing on privacy rights and stifling free expression.
 - **For example, the Cambridge Analytica scandal** revealed how personal data from Facebook was harvested to influence voter behavior in multiple countries.
- **Economic Disparities in Political Advertising**
 - Wealthier candidates and parties can dominate social media advertising, leading to unequal representation and influence.
 - **For example**, in the 2019 UK general elections, the Conservative Party outspent Labour on Facebook ads by a significant margin, raising concerns about the influence of money on democratic fairness.
 - **For instance**, in India, major political parties with substantial resources have leveraged social media advertising to reach voters, potentially marginalizing smaller parties and independent candidates.

SOCIAL MEDIA REGULATION IN INDIA:

- **Information Technology Act, 2000 (IT Act):**
 - The IT Act governs electronic communication, including social media, in India.
 - **Section 69A:** Empowers the government to block information to protect sovereignty, security, public order, or prevent incitement to offenses. **For instance**, apps like **TikTok and PUBG Mobile were banned** under this section for allegedly compromising data privacy and security.
 - **Section 79(1):** Grants intermediaries (e.g., Facebook, X) immunity for third-party content if they only provide access and comply with due diligence requirements.
- **Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021**
 - Introduced to ensure accountability and online safety, these rules apply to social media intermediaries and digital media platforms.

- **Key Provisions:**
 - Platforms must:
 - Appoint a **Chief Compliance Officer**, a **Nodal Contact Person**, and a **Resident Grievance Officer**.
 - Remove unlawful content within **36 hours** of a court order or government directive.
 - Enable traceability of the **first originator** of content for serious offenses (e.g., threats to national security).
 - Users must be informed about:
 - Privacy policies and terms of service.
 - Prohibited activities, including sharing defamatory, copyrighted, or harmful content.
- **Challenges:** The requirement to trace the **"first originator"** raised concerns about **undermining end-to-end encryption**, especially for platforms like WhatsApp.

Fact-Checking Unit: In April 2023, the government proposed IT Rules amendments to establish a fact-checking unit to flag false information about government policies. However, the Supreme Court put the initiative on hold in March 2024 over freedom of speech concerns.

WAY FORWARD:

- **Strengthening Regulations:**
 - Establish a comprehensive framework that balances freedom of expression with the need for accountability.
 - Ensure transparency in implementing rules like the IT Act and Intermediary Guidelines to prevent misuse or overreach.
- **Promoting Media Literacy:**
 - Integrate media and digital literacy programs into school curriculums to help users identify fake news and avoid echo chambers.
 - Encourage public awareness campaigns on the responsible use of social media.
- **Enhancing Platform Accountability:**
 - Mandate platforms to improve their content moderation processes and invest in local language moderators to address regional nuances.
 - Develop AI tools to detect and reduce the spread of misinformation while respecting user privacy.
- **Strengthening Fact-Checking Mechanisms:**

- Promote collaborations between social media platforms and independent fact-checking organizations to counter misinformation effectively.
- **Encouraging Ethical Use of Data:**
 - Enforce strict guidelines on data privacy and surveillance to prevent misuse of personal information for political or commercial purposes.
 - Penalize companies and political actors found engaging in unethical practices like targeted disinformation campaigns.
- **Ensuring Equal Access:**
 - Regulate political advertising on social media to create a level playing field for smaller parties and independent candidates.
 - Encourage subsidies or support for non-profit digital platforms to reduce monopolistic dominance.

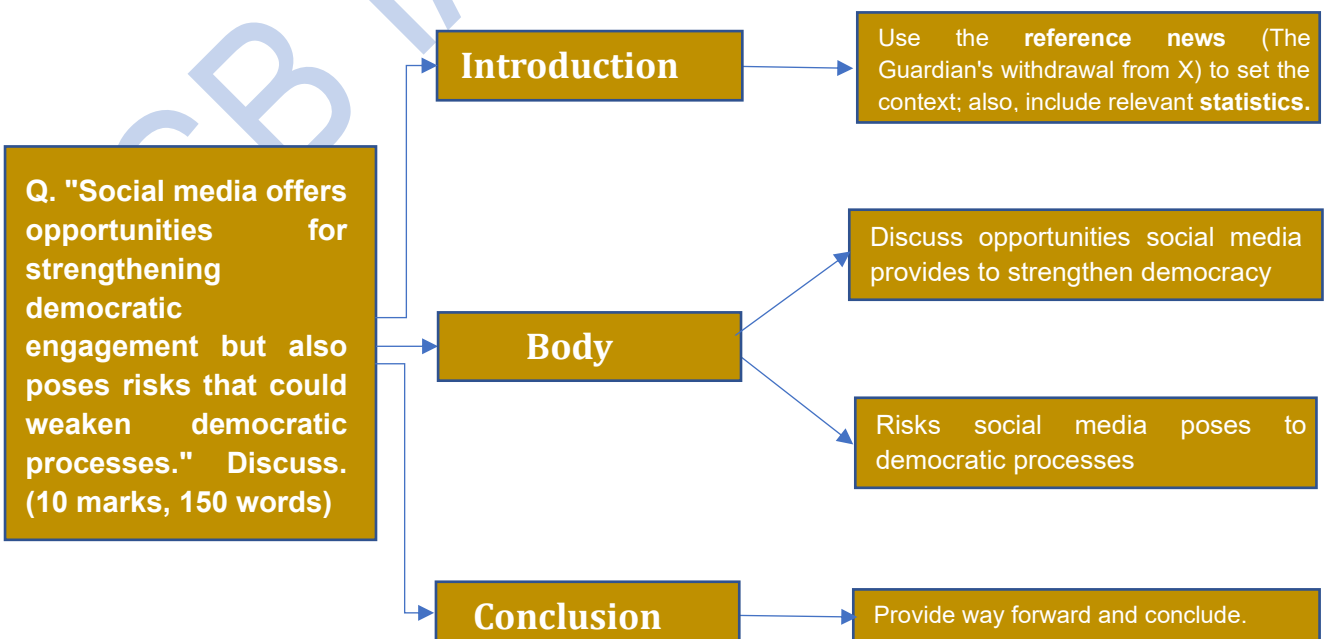
CONCLUSION:

Social media is a double-edged sword in the democratic landscape. While it empowers civic participation, freedom of expression, and transparency, it also poses challenges like misinformation, polarization, and privacy concerns. India's regulatory efforts and global best practices must converge to create an ecosystem where social media supports democratic values without infringing on individual rights. A collaborative approach involving governments, tech companies, civil society, and citizens is critical to harness the transformative potential of social media for democratic growth.

PRACTICE QUESTION:

Q. "Social media offers opportunities for strengthening democratic engagement but also poses risks that could weaken democratic processes." Discuss. (10 marks, 150 words)

APPROACH:



MODEL ANSWER:

Social media has revolutionized democratic processes, enabling engagement, transparency, and activism. However, it also amplifies risks like misinformation and polarization. The Guardian's recent withdrawal from X over concerns of toxicity underscores the need to evaluate social media's dual-edged impact. With **5 billion global users** (62.3% of the population) and **462 million active users in India** (DataReportal, 2024), its influence on democracy is undeniable.

Opportunities Social Media Provides to Strengthen Democracy

1. **Enhanced Civic Participation:** Social media fosters political discussions, opinion-sharing, and organizing around democratic causes.
 - **For example**, in India, platforms like Facebook and X have been key to voter awareness campaigns, especially for first-time voters.
2. **Amplification of Freedom of Expression:** These platforms empower marginalized voices, encouraging inclusive dialogue.
 - **For instance**, during Myanmar's 2021 coup, activists used X to share real-time updates and mobilize international support.
3. **Empowerment of Social Movements:** Grassroots movements leverage social media to gain visibility and momentum.
 - **For example**, the #FarmersProtest in India and global movements like #MeToo found widespread support through Instagram and X.
4. **Transparency and Direct Engagement:** Governments use social media to communicate with citizens, promoting accountability.
 - **For instance**, the Indian government used WhatsApp during the COVID-19 pandemic to disseminate vaccination updates and counter misinformation.
5. **Reshaping Political Campaigns:** Social media enables targeted political outreach, reshaping election strategies.
 - **For example**, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "Mann Ki Baat" uses platforms like X and Facebook to engage directly with citizens.

Risks Social Media Poses to Democratic Processes

1. **Spread of Misinformation and Disinformation:** Rapid dissemination of fake news distorts public opinion and creates confusion.
 - **For instance**, in India, WhatsApp has fueled rumors, resulting in mob violence and communal tensions.
2. **Political Polarization:** Algorithms reinforce users' biases, deepening ideological divides.
 - **For example**, a 2020 Pew Research study found that 64% of Americans believe social media increases political polarization.

3. **Manipulation by Political Actors:** Social media is exploited by political entities to suppress dissent and shape narratives.
 - **For instance**, IT cells in India are accused of spreading propaganda to influence public opinion.
4. **Erosion of Trust in Institutions:** Fake news and conspiracy theories erode faith in democratic institutions.
 - **For example**, misinformation about judicial rulings in India has fueled public distrust.
5. **Facilitation of Hate Speech and Violence:** social media has been used to incite violence and spread hate speech.
 - **For instance**, Facebook played a role in the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, exacerbating violence.

Way Forward

- **Strengthening Regulations**
 - Balance freedom of expression with accountability through robust frameworks like the IT Rules.
 - Ensure transparency in enforcement to prevent misuse.
- **Promoting Media Literacy**
 - Incorporate digital literacy in schools to help users identify misinformation and engage responsibly.
- **Enhancing Platform Accountability**
 - Mandate platforms to improve content moderation and address regional language nuances effectively.
- **Encouraging Ethical Use of Data**
 - Enforce strict guidelines on data privacy and penalize unethical practices like targeted disinformation.
- **Creating Fair Advertising Policies**
 - Regulate political advertising to ensure equal opportunities for smaller parties and independents.

Social media is a transformative yet challenging force for democracy. While it promotes engagement and transparency, it also risks undermining democratic principles through misinformation and polarization. A collaborative effort involving governments, platforms, and civil society is essential to harness its potential while addressing its challenges, ensuring it strengthens democratic systems in the years ahead.