



Explain How Social Media Platforms Are Muddling the Information Ecosystem Under the Garb of Freedom of Speech & Expression. (250 Words / 15 M) (GS-2 Transparency & Accountability)

Approach :

1. Introduction.
2. Explain how social media platforms are exploiting the info. Ecosystem.
3. Conclusion.

Social media platforms achieved unrestricted growth by adopting a *laissez-faire* approach to user-generated content. This approach seeks to **indemnify content-hosting intermediaries from the liability** arising from user-generated content.

Social media's disinformation matrix: As private firms, the social media platforms enjoy the **freedom to decide what content they desire to host**, which is reflected in **differential content standards** across different platforms & **differential application of standards for the same content**. Also, since all major social media platforms are **primarily US based**, their content is moderated by the **American First Amendment principles**, which **prohibit government from curtailing free speech**, to restrict only a narrowly defined content category. Social media platforms have used this to their advantage to **reject any interventionist approach towards misinformation**.

For social media platforms, **"free speech" is a business model** instead of a principled imperative. Platforms have **opportunistically used "free speech" & protection against liabilities to advance their business models**. While **traditional news media is liable for its published content** and so, must **invest resources to vet information** before publishing, **social media has the advantage of protection from liability – promoting unvetted content**, and thereby **speedily getting the content to users**. Platforms have **exploited this twin advantage to boost user engagement**, ignoring the **deleterious impact of misinformation** on the wider democracy. Platforms keep users engaged by constantly populating feeds with new contents. This deliberated process is called **"amplification"** which is **based on user engagement signals**. Since **hateful & polarising content gets more user engagement, this value-neutral approach has amplified misinformation and other harmful content**.

Misinformation & propaganda have become pervasive also due to the **blurred distinctions between different sources of information** which has **removed the credibility & ideological positioning** of the consumed content. Instead, **engagement is seen as a bigger driver**, making **virality instead of quality the main determinant of a source's credibility**. This has **eroded the distinction between vetted information, propaganda & misinformation**.

Also, **content moderation is politically fraught** – important high-profile content moderation decisions are often ad hoc, driven by external pressure – especially government, media and public relations. Platforms are known to take down or block content on specific government



requests while **making exceptions for powerful users.**

The impact is acute for **India** because platforms have ***de-facto control*** over the content distribution along with ***low digital-literacy*** among users.

Thus, ***instead of focussing on the amplified misinformation distribution***, the discourse have ***carefully focussed on measures to reduce the conflict with freedom of speech & expression***. “Free speech” is just a justification for lucrative business model that privileges user engagement over information quality. Thus, there is a need to **reset the terms of the debate** in a manner that **addresses the problem of disinformation** more than its conflict with “free speech”.

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