Public Wi-Fi Hotspots

What is the issue?

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- TRAI has recently invited interested firms to establish nationwide, pay-as-you-go PDOs (Public Data Offices).
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- It aims at providing affordable and wide access to data to citizens.
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- However, there are certain issues to be addressed to make the initiative more consumer friendly.
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What are PDOs?

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- Public Data Offices are conceived more as PCOs that were used for making phone calls by public on paid basis.
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- The firms are intended as 'aggregators' and are invited to set up, on a pilot basis, PDOs to function as **public wi-fi hotspots**.
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- Any entity can purchase, self-register, set-up and operate a PDO.
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- They offer products for consumption, with low denominations ranging from Rs 2 to Rs 20, etc based on data used.
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- It is based on an open architecture based Wi-Fi Access Network Interface (**WANI**).
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- It allows users to do one-time enrolment into the service through KYC and mobile one time password, and access data.

- Public wi-fi hotspots aims at decongesting telecom networks and ensuring last-mile delivery of broadband to users.

What are the concerns with this?

- **Licensing** - Department of Telecom has raised concerns with allowing **non-telecom companies** to operate public wi-fi hotspots.
- It argues that Telegraph Act mandates that such entities take licences from the government for selling data.
- Also India's biggest mobile carriers are concerned that the entry of aggregators without licence would undermine the **level-playing field** conditions.
- **Cyber Space** - the **privacy and security concerns** with cyber space in India, leaves scope for doubting the safety of using public wi-fi.
- **Gender** - common places like the tea shops and bakeries are currently emerging as favoured locations to host PDOs.
- The limited geographical reach of wi-fi make these places over-crowded to utilise spots of maximise signal strength.
- Given the social characteristics of these urban spaces, and the social norms with using public spaces, how gender inclusive these places could be is highly uncertain.

What is the way forward?

- The offer for aggregators and small entrepreneurs is expected to boost employment opportunities and encourage entrepreneurship in rural areas.
- However addressing the issues with **licensing and authentication** could ensure a level playing field for other service providers.

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- Also, addressing the cyber security concerns and making proper **regulations** would make the service more secure to its users.
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- **Widening the service** to more public spaces which are not gender biased could make the initiative more inclusive.
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Source: The Hindu, Business Standard

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