



Redesigning Cyber Space

What is the issue?

\n\n

\n

- The principles of data protection need to be reinvented for preventing privacy abuse and ensuring a more democratic society.
- Also, as big firms have virtually monopolised cyber space, revising of our “fair competition laws for trade” to suit current realities is needed.

\n

\n\n

What are some approaches to prevent data abuse?

\n\n

\n

- **Minimisation** - Data controller firms should be allowed to collect data only if it is a prerequisite for providing a functionality or if it is a legal requirement.
- For example, Facebook’s messenger app on Android harvests call records without any consumer-facing feature on the app that justifies such collection.
- This could be stated as a clear violation of the data minimisation principle and a possible legal bar on such data collection could be considered.
- **Consent** - The data controller firms are required to secure explicit, and voluntary consent from users (unless there are exceptional circumstances).
- Unfortunately, consent has been reduced to a mockery today through unintelligible and lengthy “privacy notices” and “terms of services”.
- To reinvent consent we need to evolve a data protection regulator that allows individuals to check against their unique identifiers through a web portal.

\n

- The web portal is to provide the list of data controllers (like Facebook, Google) that hold a person's unique identifiers like "email, phone number, Aadhaar".

\n

- The data subject should then be able to revoke consent with one-click, which would mandate controllers to delete the said data point.

\n

- **Explicit Explanation** - Advertisements online are presently micro-targeted based on information that users give out in the course of their online activity.

\n

- While currently, the reason for why we see a particular ad is provided on demand, data controllers should be mandated to explicitly display them.

\n

- Presently, people do have a partial control over ads they see by manually blocking the automated ad dispersing algorithms, but more is needed.

\n

- Explicitness in 'ad policy' would nudge more users to control their online feed better and this would also help in overcoming the "Echo Chamber Effect".

\n

- **Echo Chambering** - This is a phenomenon in which sites tend to show users more content relating to subjects what they had sought in the past.

\n

- This thereby strengthens biases among people by reinforcing more of the same and gives false perceptions of online trends due to a conditioned news feed.

\n

- Consequently, different users get psychologically manipulated differently due to their customised news feeds and thereby social polarisation gets amplified.

\n

\n\n

What are the consequences of virtual online monopolies?

\n\n

\n

- Google (YouTube, search etc...) and Facebook have over the years monopolised digital advertising revenues due to their dominance in cyber space.

\n

\n\n

- In Google's case, this more pronounced as it has a big share in both the open 'digital ad market' as well as the operating system space with 'android'.
- These tech-giants have algorithms that are designed to maximise the amount of time that users spend on their platforms by feeding them engaging content.
- They've also asserted themselves as mere social platforms that host content in order to absolve themselves of any responsibility for what is posted on them.
- This self-serving myopic foresight implies that there is little incentive for them to curb misuse of their platforms by immoral participants.
- Consequently, they've ended up creating a remunerative avenue for unauthenticated news platforms, and sensation mongers.
- Additionally, their market dominance has gulped up considerable revenue streams of authentic content developers and news agencies.

What are structural changes needed in cyber space?

- The tech-giants need to be legally mandated to evolve internal mechanisms to prevent misuse of their platforms and to curtail the spread of misinformation.
- Also, a revenue sharing model should be established on mutual terms between content developers and the host site (to nurture an open business space).
- Notably, sites like youtube do pay developers currently, but these are by their own terms and conditions and not by a mutual contract between parties.
- **Fair Competition** - Our current set of "fair-competition laws for business" is proving to be ineffective in the wake of emergence of massive online firms.
- Fair competition is an essential component of democracy, open society, innovation, and we have to get creative to ensure its sustenance.

- \n
- For achieving the stated ends, fundamental changes to the competition law is needed - which could even mean capping the growth of firms in cyber space or rather breaking Google into smaller firms.
- \n
- Also, divorcing operating systems from other services and products can be considered to deny firms the unfair advantages of vertical integration.
- \n
- While these are all long-term fix, we need to start ideating now on what are the possible scenarios that could replace the current cyber space structures.
- \n

\n\n

What can be done in the near future?

\n\n

- \n
- To dislodge the tech-hegemony from their omnipotent and monopolistic position, newer alternatives need to be promoted.
- \n
- As an immediate step, the Indian government could procure software solutions for its needs from smaller firms as against buying Google's products.
- \n
- Notably, considering the scale of government's digital India initiative, there are immense opportunities for tech-companies to capitalise and grow.
- \n
- The education sector in particular has a massive demand for digital content and classroom tools, all of which run the risk of being pocked by Google.
- \n
- The government could also stop using Facebook, and Twitter for e-governance, and thereby stop providing free advertisements for these companies.
- \n

\n\n

\n\n

Source: Business Standard

\n\n

\n



IAS PARLIAMENT

Information is Empowering

A Shankar IAS Academy Initiative