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Dynamic public discussion is Required to regulate internet communications

It is a discussion on the face of "India Telecommunication Bill, 2022."

 Arun Teja Polcumpally | Published: 19th October 2022 6:22 pm IST



 Representative Image

India released a much-required draft bill titled 'India Telecommunication Bill, 2022' in September 2022. It is open for public comments till 20 October 2022. The bill proposes to grant the government an undue advantage to intercept internet communications and asks citizens to provide correct details while

registering for telecommunication services. The draft bill also mandates that service providers not send commercial messages to the public until they consent. This is much-required legislation, but some are apprehensive about the authoritarian power that the state would obtain. As the deadline for public comment is approaching, it would be better to recall the social challenges that Internet communications pose. This article is aimed to provide a strong initial reading for the public so that they could further a constructive discussion on internet communications and its impact on social relations.

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Information is considered a basic functionary of the social and is increasingly realised in post-industrial society. The increase in information consumption by the public and the impacted social interactions lead to various questions regarding the future direction of societies worldwide. One of the many questions brought about by the extensive information consumption by the public is whether the internet would bring hypernomia or anomia.

Hypernomia is a stalemated nature of society that is built on strict hierarchies and social order. Anomie is the opposite of the latter, highlighting the anarchy of a society. The same question can also be considered a debate between the internet and allied technologies pitching Rosenau's social contract against Hobbes' anarchism.

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Internet access allowed the public to be informed about almost anything. Such access will enable people to understand society better and make informed decisions. This technological innovation helped the public to break the information control by a few and create ways to fight social injustices. While advancing society's knowledge consumption, it parallelly deepens the existing societal divides. The internet creates filter bubbles with increased content and content generators. It is a phenomenon where the public increasingly consumes biased information to validate their selfish arguments. With the increase in filter bubbles, historical myths become truths because people tend to accept them as realities after watching un-corroborated evidence on WhatsApp and other social media. Media houses have also circulated such un-corroborated information. Indian national media 'The Wire' cited a BOOM report showcasing 40 fake national news reports by Indian media in 2020. This report hypothesises that the national media gathers information without proper research or validating facts. Low-quality journalism earned ill fame for Indian media houses, especially the electronic media is criticised for its low standards. Recalling the earlier argument 'whether the internet would bring hypernomia or anomia,' the phenomenon of filter bubble might hypothesise that society, with the help of the internet, and social media, would strengthen the social structures. Perhaps, it might create hypernomia.

Fake news and filter bubbles should be considered dangerous to maintaining societal peace and order—statistics of internet usage and information consumption force this apprehension. The average time spent by an individual on the phone is around 4.5 hours per day in India, as per the report sourced by Times of India. Data consumption per individual is 14 GB per month, as per an article published in Financial Express. Such heavy internet usage allows the public to consume information at will. The internet allows the public to take informed decisions and become knowledgeable but with a piece of information whose source and authenticity are questionable. Pew research reports that people are unclear about the correctness of the information they consume on social media. The statistics presented in the report show no conclusive evidence that social media has more fake news than other media platforms.

Today, with the emergence of technologies like AI, recommendation algorithms are increasingly taking over the agency of humans. Though it appears that people have a choice because of their information, only a few realise that the choices are restrictive. The biased results of recommendation algorithms again force us to think that the internet and allied technologies are reshaping and strengthening hypernomia. No matter how much we argue about the goodness of these digital technologies, their percolation into society is becoming ubiquitous. Now, what matters is how we decide to use them. In the words of Harari, “... it will not matter whether computers will be conscious or not. It will matter only what people think about it.”

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Harari opines that human experiences are interactive outcomes of historical data points. He calls this approach to understanding human social as 'Dataism.' Harari's argument is brought to showcase the scholarly debates around the confluence of digital technologies and the new social. If 'Dataism' helps create robust recommendation algorithms for internet companies, digital technologies might create a strict hypernomia, perhaps creating a society similar to Bentham's panopticon.

For some countries like China, strict hypernomia could be necessary to maintain a peaceful and orderly society. Conversely, the US sides with 'anomia', emphasising the free market and individualism. Though India appears to have taken a free market and individualism approach, the recent political developments showcase its authoritarian nature. Though it appears that countries worldwide are choosing between strict control and freedom, there is no conclusion on how digital technologies will impact society. No matter the outcome, the impact of digital technologies on society is a choice made by policymakers. As Luhmann postulated in his Risk-Decision theory, policymakers will consciously choose what, why, and when to adopt a technology accessing its risk.

In India, some research startups focus on AI's impacts on society – 'Digital Futures lab' headed by Urvashi Aneja, 'Indiaai' an initiative by Meity, Nasscom provides information regarding AI development in India. However, few conduct substantial ex-ante research on the internet, fake news, and its impacts on society. It is not argued that no one has ventured into this space. Some startups like 'Alt news,' and 'Factly' in Hyderabad are working on flagging fake news. However, there is no serious research based on

'Anticipatory governance methods' and the establishment of 'science cafes.' There is an immediate requirement for such initiatives. They would help in providing research for internet policymaking. Research with the 'Anticipatory method' would include periodic public deliberations, awareness, and understanding of technology making. It also provides designs for technology companies that would help them incorporate public well-being within the design of their products.

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Though the final date for public comments on the bill is almost near, it would be wise to conduct anticipatory governance research periodically and make the legislation dynamic.

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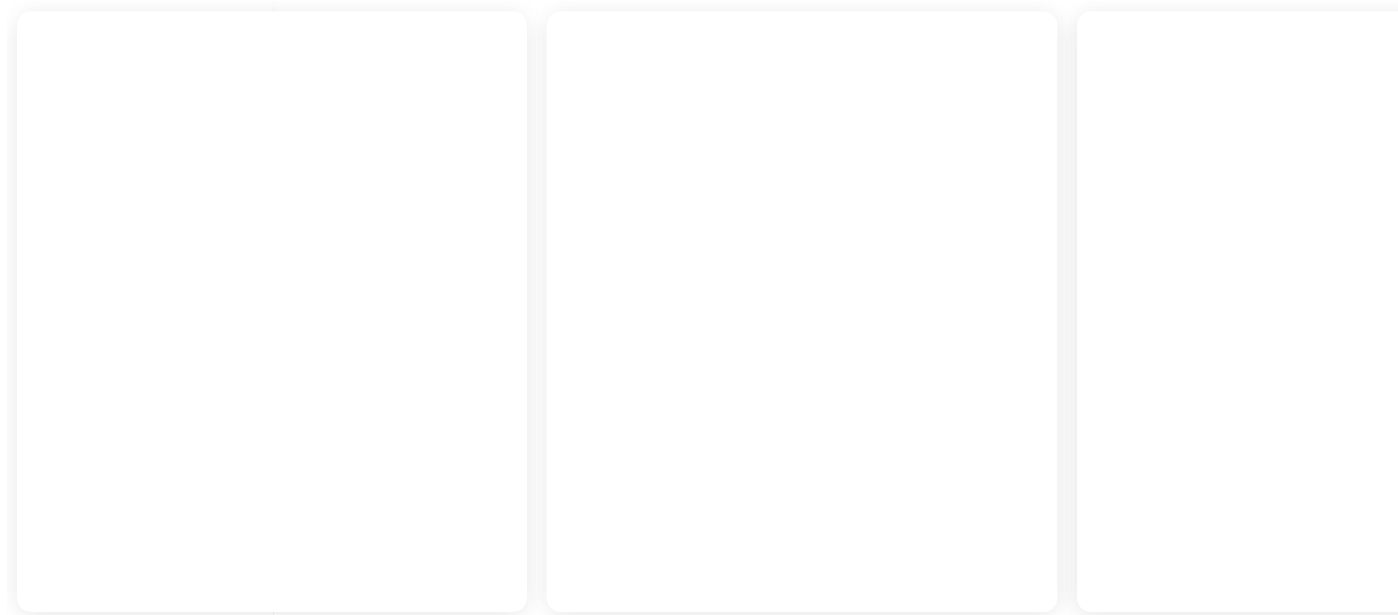
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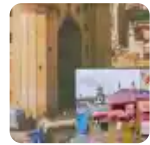


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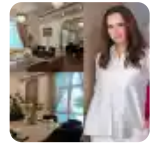
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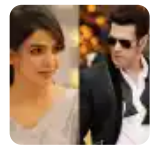
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