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**The Use of Social Media- Major Policy Questions**

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**by**

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Social media is a powerful tool to establish direct contact with the public and deliver the message exactly in the manner intended without the intermediation or intervention of formal journalistic expertise. It has the potential to generate real time interest and mobilize and engage people on issue of vital public interest. In fact, social media platforms serve as a potent inclusive vehicle to connect people though spatially apart; keep them update on the national and global issues; articulate voice and opinion on issues of public interest; acquire social and communication skills; and more importantly advance professionally. It also raises awareness, garners advocacy and encourage people’s active participation in sustainable development.

There has also been a huge transformation in the role of Geographic Information System (GIS) from being a specialized technology used by trained professionals to a wider social medium for the general public to communicate, engage in constructive dialogs and interact on vital national or global agenda of common concern. This has been engendered by the exponential growth of the GeoWeb and availability of spatial data and information for the general public. There has been at the same time, an immense upsurge in the virtual communities and organizations which gain access to information on issues of humanity’s concern like relief efforts for earthquakes, flood or other natural disasters.

YouTube, Flickr, Blogs, Facebook and Twitter have occupied a pivotal position in the daily language, lexicon and vocabulary of people of all ages and all walks of life- especially the youth. However, access to technology, Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure and

social media tools continues to pose a major problem for the poor as well as rural household. A deeply conscious effort needs to be undertaken to bridge the divide between those who do and do not always have the benefits of the latest technology allowing them to participate in the dialogue and discussion and articulate their voice on the current issues and debates that are taking place via new modes of public discourse.

### **Social Media Impact**

Social media are key component of daily life especially for the youth, who most of the time, are oblivious of the potential detrimental impact on their behavior and mindset. The social websites have become the major priority of addictive attraction for them in preference to education, family and out-door sports. They tend to portray themselves distinct from what they really are. There is a propensity to cyberbully one another which may lead to multiplicity of socio-psychological behavioral pathologies e.g., depression, schizophrenia, extremism, hatred etc. The use of social media for spreading extremism, hatred, pornography etc., is also a major challenge to preserve order, peace and harmony in the society.

### **Regulatory Measures**

Many countries have laid down the legislative and institutional frameworks for regulating the use of social media as well as encouraging self-governance by the big corporations. Germany enacted NetzDG beginning of 2018, to oversee the companies with more than two million registered users in the country. These companies were obliged to set SOPs for resolving complaints about the substance and content they host; remove illegal material, if any, within 24 hours and submit six monthly reports on their performance. A punitive clause was also provided to fine up to €5million for the individual and up to €50million for companies in case of failure to comply with these requirements.

European Union strictly prohibits the terror videos; imposes fines to the social media platforms in case the extremist content is not removed within one hour; introduced the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to lay down the rules on how companies, including social media platforms,

store and use people's data; issued copyright directive to make sure that copyright infringing content is not hosted on the sites.

Australia enacted the Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material Act in 2019 to impose criminal penalties for social media companies, possible jail sentences for tech executives for up to three years and financial penalties worth up to 10% of a company's global turnover. The country had already introduced in 2015, the Enhancing Online Safety Act to establish an e-Safety Commissioner. The e-Commissioner has the power to control social media companies over harassing or abusive posts, revenge pornography etc., and enforce within 48-hour "takedown notices", and fines of up to 525,000 Australian dollars (£285,000) and up to A\$105,000 for individuals.

Russia enacted a law in 2019 empowering the regulators to switch off connections to the worldwide web "in an emergency". Its communications watchdog strictly enforces implementation of regulatory laws.

China has effectively blocked social media sites such as Twitter, Google and WhatsApp and instead allowed only Chinese providers to substitute these platforms with Weibo, Baidu and WeChat. Chinese authorities also restrict access to the virtual private networks that some users have employed to bypass the blocks on sites. The Cyberspace Administration of China with hundreds of thousands of cyber-police closely monitors websites and mobile apps and screen messages that are deemed to be politically sensitive.

### **Some Critical Policy Questions**

Against this backdrop, there are major social and political concerns associated with the massive growth of social media namely peace and security, equity, privacy, and sustainability. The corporate sector produces and creates the data and thus has the custody and ownership of big data.

Motivated by profitmaking rather than common public good, the big corporation use and interpret the data to their advantage without at times duly factoring in public welfare and interest.

For a country like Pakistan, where the use of social media is rapidly expanding, a conducive policy, regulatory and institutional framework should be established to oversee the big corporations and businesses owning the major platforms and to promote the use of social media and make it a tool for effective communication and connectivity among the people on issues of common interests involving economic, social, political, cultural, environmental and development issues.

The framework should, inter alia, address the following issues and questions:

- What are the implications of the growing popularity of social media, and its integration with GIS in terms of widening or narrowing the digital divide between the urban and the rural and the rich and poor?
- How to regulate the collection of information from people and to study their profiles without their knowledge and consent and provide for the requirement of their informed consent?
- How to ensure that harmful content is removed quickly and take steps to prevent it appearing in the first place?
- How to safeguard and protect the spatio-temporal configuration of social networks and their privacy?

- What practices and restrictions need to be put in place to avoid malicious uses of spatial and personal data and protect users from content involving violence, terrorism, cyber-bullying, child abuse etc.?
- Considering the fact that not all Internet users are necessarily social media users, how can we disseminate relevant information to people who have not adopted online social-networking services? In addition, online social networks are only a small fraction of the total set of real social networks; how can we collect data on social networks that are not represented in the digital world?
- How to minimize the possibility of state's coercive apparatus to infringe upon the civil society space and rights given the increasing integration with the military infrastructure of digital media?
- Are the on-line social media and cloud computing technologies environmentally friendly and 'green' compared to the technologies and practices they replace?