Authorizing Fact Checking

Why in news?

The Centre has added a clause to a proposed IT Rules amendment which would require social media platforms to remove content deemed false or misleading by the Press Information Bureau (PIB).

What is the proposed amendment?

- Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology would force social media platforms to take down content "fact-checked" by the PIB as false.
- The proposed amendment to the IT Rules opens the door for the PIB's fact-check unit, or any other agency authorised by the central government for fact checking for the purpose of such takedowns.
- This is problematic at many levels, with **deep implications for free speech and information**.

What is the issue?

> *The PIB's job is "to disseminate information to the print and electronic media on government policies, programmes, initiatives and achievements". The PIB launched its fact-checking division in 2019.*

- At the basic level, the question to be asked is how a wing of the "nodal agency of the Government of India (PIB)" could be the deciding authority on what is factual and what is not.
- The disturbing absurdity of an interested party also playing the judge cannot be missed.
- If the proposal is implemented, the government can play the **super censor at will**.
- This proposal signals a new low in the administration's thinking on matters of regulating news and information.

What are the similar proposals even before this proposed amendment?

- Even before this proposal, the government in recent years has given enough indications that it wants to control the news sphere.
- The reworked IT Rules in early 2021 are an example of this.
- A similar mindset was reflected in the provisions of the data privacy Bill that gave government agencies a free pass.

How does the PIB work on the information sphere?

- Defending the government and its institutions in the public sphere by putting out data or statements is very much within the PIB's ambit and logically defensible.
- But fact-checking is a very different thing. This is not to say that the PIB's fact check unit has not debunked rumours circulating on various social media platforms.
- It has, but it has done so as the agency of the government.
- However, making its "fact-checks" binding on news disseminating platforms will allow the government to easily throttle voices opposing it.

What does other stakeholders say?

- The Editors Guild of India has rightly criticised the proposal by pointing out that "determination of fake news cannot be in the sole hands of the government and will result in the censorship of the press".
- Fake news has to be dealt with in an appropriate manner, but the proposal in question will only make the task harder.

Reference

1. The Hindu | News marked false by PIB to be taken down: draft rule
2. The Quint | Take Down Content Found 'Fake' by PIB Fact-Check: Proposed Amendment to IT Rules

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