EdTech needs an ethics policy

What is the issue?

The lack of a regulatory framework in India has affected the privacy of students who use educational technology (EdTech) apps for learning.

Why EdTech became popular?

- Since the onset of the pandemic, online education has replaced conventional classroom instruction.
- This has spawned several EdTech apps which are now becoming popular.
- Schools and colleges moved their content delivery, engagement and evaluation from offline to online to ensure minimal academic disruption.
- The EdTech apps have the advantage of being able to customise learning to every student in the system.

How data is collected from this apps?

- To perform the process of learning customisation, these apps collect large quantities of data from the learners through the gadgets that the students use.
- These data are analysed in minute detail to customise learning and design future versions of the app.
- The latest mobile phones and hand-held devices have a range of sensors like GPS, gyroscope, accelerometer, magnetometer and biometric sensors apart from the camera and microphones.
- These provide data about the learner's surroundings along with intimate data like the emotions and attitudes experienced and expressed via facial expressions and body temperature changes.
- In short, the app and device have access to the private spaces of the learner that one would not normally have access to.

How is privacy being affected?

- In the EdTech industry, where investments are pouring in, researchers and app developers are being pushed to be as intrusive as possible.
- The safeguards that traditional researchers are subject to are either missing or minimal in research that the EdTech industry promotes.

- Children use these apps without parent or adult supervision and the intrusion of privacy happens unnoticed.
- Further, there is no option to stop using the app without some repercussions.
- Since India does not have protection equivalent to the GDPR, private data collected by an EdTech company can be misused or sold to other companies with no oversight or protection.
- In 2014, study titled 'Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks', tell us the vulnerability of data theft.
- It revealed that Facebook manipulated the emotions of 7,00,000 users by changing the type of posts that were shown to the user.

What can we infer from this?

- Given these realities, it is necessary to formulate an ethics policy for EdTech companies through the active participation of educators, researchers, parents, learners and industry experts.
- Such a policy draft should be circulated both online and offline for discussions and criticism.
- Issues of fairness, safety, confidentiality and anonymity of the user would have to be correctly dealt with.
- EdTech companies would have to be encouraged to comply in the interest of a healthier learning ecosystem.

Source: The Hindu

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