Facebook Takedown of Indian Pages

Why in news?

Facebook recently removed four networks of groups, pages and accounts from India and Pakistan.

What are the proposed reasons?

- Three of the four networks removed were taken down for "coordinated inauthentic behaviour" (CIB).
- Two of the India networks, one each linked to the Congress and BJP, had been on Facebook's radar for over two months because of this.
- CIB refers to an orchestrated set of platform violations operated by a single common entity or source.
- Another Indian network was taken down for what Facebook describes as a "civic spam".
- In this case, there were no common linkages between the individual pages, and these pages were not "coordinated".
- But regardless of the existence of a common source, the signals and violations in both categories are similar, which included-
    i. single user with multiple accounts (SUMA)
    ii. spamming behaviour
    iii. clickbait behaviour
    iv. location obfuscation
    v. content or ad farms
- Content or ad farms are websites and pages with large amounts of low-quality content, typically to make money, which appear high on search engines.

What were the networks taken down?

- **Congress's Gujarat IT cell** - Facebook linked one CIB India network to the Congress's Gujarat IT cell.
- Initially the platform's algorithms repeatedly flagged and took down multiple accounts.
- The company traced these accounts to an IP hub in the party's Gujarat IT Cell.
- Most of the accounts exhibited bot-like behaviour, rather than human efforts.

- **Silver Touch Technologies** - The other Indian CIB network was linked to the company Silver Touch Technologies, with special focus on a BJP-leaning page called India Eye.
- Facebook says the page, with 2.6 million followers and $70,000 in ad spending, was hiding its location and using a fake name.
- Facebook matched the admins to Silver Touch, and took down the page.
- Facebook saw no formal connections between Silver Touch and BJP in the back-end network.
- But Silver Touch has worked for both the ruling party and the government on IT solutions.

- **Civic scam** - In this case, Facebook's algorithms did most of the detection of violations and displayed the number of violations per page.
- With little human investigation, the technologists looked at those numbers and decided which pages to take down.
- As the violators in this category are often small players with a small number of followers, Facebook's policy is to not disclose their identity.
- But a majority of the pages in this category were political.
- **Pakistan** - The CIB takedown in Pakistan was of a network that linked back to the country's military media wing.
- Amongst other tactics, an online group of Pakistanis disguised themselves as Kashmiris who were aggrieved by the Indian Army.
- This violated the location policies according to Facebook.

What are the concerns with the move?

- **Free speech** - Facebook's decision was based on its assessment that the people involved coordinated with one another and used fake accounts.
- They misrepresented themselves with the objective of manipulating people.
- It may seem to be a credible step by the social media platform to deal with fake news and communal propaganda.
- But the problem with this approach is that it could suppress the right to free speech.
- **Wrong precedent** - While taking down the pages, Facebook has based its action on user behaviour, and not the content they posted.
- In future, pages related to political dissent or a social campaign could be taken down just because they do not comply with Facebook's rules.
- This could set a disquieting precedent, and defeat the very purpose of the platform being a medium for exchange of ideas.

Who should regulate these?

- **Media platforms?** -Social media platform owners can have the right to

decide what goes in and what's taken down.

- But a media outlet like Facebook cannot be treated like any other private entity.
- Facebook exerts immense influence on the social, economic and political outcomes of a country.
- So such a platform cannot be trusted to do its own policing.
- **Government?** - As the government is armed with draconian powers such as defamation and sedition laws, free speech has already taken a hit.
- India has been among the top countries in blocking politically inconvenient websites of foreign NGOs, UN organisations and activists.
- In China, the government lays down the rules for social media, and this has not been conducive to free speech in any way.

What can be done?

- Facebook's decision exposes the systemic flaws when it comes to policing social media platforms.
- The challenge of the day is to strike a balance between free speech and hate speech.
- So an independent regulatory body, rather than the media platform or government, should monitor content on social media platforms.
- If Facebook is allowed to increase its censorship powers on its own, it could lead to inconsistency and duplicities.
- If it is really serious about fighting spam and fake news, it should first remove the cover of anonymity of users.
- The shroud of anonymity gives anti-social elements the courage to spread hate and disharmony.
- Moreover, there should be no ambiguity regarding the grounds for taking down an account.
- The guidelines for this should be clearly spelt out in the interest of transparency and consistency.

Source: Indian Express, BusinessLine

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