Public Wi-Fi Hotspots

What is the issue?

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- TRAI has recently invited interested firms to establish nationwide, pay-as-you-go PDOs (Public Data Offices).
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- It aims at providing affordable and wide access to data to citizens.
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- However, there are certain issues to be addressed to make the initiative more consumer friendly.
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What are PDOs?

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- Public Data Offices are conceived more as PCOs that were used for making phone calls by public on paid basis.
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- The firms are intended as 'aggregators' and are invited to set up, on a pilot basis, PDOs to function as **public wi-fi hotspots**.
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- Any entity can purchase, self-register, set-up and operate a PDO.
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- They offer products for consumption, with low denominations ranging from Rs 2 to Rs 20, etc based on data used.
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- It is based on an open architecture based Wi-Fi Access Network Interface (**WANI**).
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- It allows users to do one-time enrolment into the service through KYC and mobile one time password, and access data.
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- Public wi-fi hotspots aims at decongesting telecom networks and ensuring last-mile delivery of broadband to users.
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What are the concerns with this?

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- **Licensing** - Department of Telecom has raised concerns with allowing **non-telecom companies** to operate public wi-fi hotspots.
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- It argues that Telegraph Act mandates that such entities take licences from the government for selling data.
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- Also India's biggest mobile carriers are concerned that the entry of aggregators without licence would undermine the **level-playing field** conditions.
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- **Cyber Space** - the **privacy and security concerns** with cyber space in India, leaves scope for doubting the safety of using public wi-fi.
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- **Gender** - common places like the tea shops and bakeries are currently emerging as favoured locations to host PDOs.
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- The limited geographical reach of wi-fi make these places over-crowded to utilise spots of maximise signal strength.
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- Given the social characteristics of these urban spaces, and the social norms with using public spaces, how gender inclusive these places could be is highly uncertain.
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What is the way forward?

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- The offer for aggregators and small entrepreneurs is expected to boost employment opportunities and encourage entrepreneurship in rural areas.
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- However addressing the issues with **licensing and authentication** could ensure a level playing field for other service providers.
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- Also, addressing the cyber security concerns and making proper **regulations** would make the service more secure to its users.
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- **Widening the service** to more public spaces which are not gender biased could make the initiative more inclusive.
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Source: The Hindu, Business Standard

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