Redesigning Cyber Space

What is the issue?

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- The principles of data protection need to be reinvented for preventing privacy abuse and ensuring a more democratic society.
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- Also, as big firms have virtually monopolised cyber space, revising of our “fair competition laws for trade” to suit current realities is needed.
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What are some approaches to prevent data abuse?

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- **Minimisation -** Data controller firms should be allowed to collect data only if it is a prerequisite for providing a functionality or if it is a legal requirement.
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- For example, Facebook’s messenger app on Android harvests call records without any consumer-facing feature on the app that justifies such collection.
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- This could be stated as a clear violation of the data minimisation principle and a possible legal bar on such data collection could be considered.
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- **Consent -** The data controller firms are required to secure explicit, and voluntary consent from users (unless there are exceptional circumstances).
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- Unfortunately, consent has been reduced to a mockery today through unintelligible and lengthy “privacy notices” and “terms of services”.
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- To reinvent consent we need to evolve a data protection regulator that allows individuals to check against their unique identifiers through a web portal.
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- The web portal is to provide the list of data controllers (like Facebook, Google) that hold a perosn’s unique identifiers like “email, phone number,

Aadhaar".
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- The data subject should then be able to revoke consent with one-click, which would mandate controllers to delete the said data point.
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- **Explicit Explanation -** Advertisements online are presently micro-targeted based on information that users give out in the course of their online activity.
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- While currently, the reason for why we see a particular ad is provided on demand, data controllers should be mandated to explicitly display them.
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- Presently, people do have a partial control over ads they see by manually blocking the automated ad dispersing algorithms, but more is needed.
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- Explicitness in 'ad policy' would nudge more users to control their online feed better and this would also help in overcoming the "Echo Chamber Effect".
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- **Echo Chambering -** This is a phenomenon in which sites tend to show users more content relating to subjects what they had sought it the past.
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- This thereby strengthens biases among people by reinforcing more of the same and gives false perceptions of online trends due to a conditioned news feed.
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- Consequently, different users get psychologically manipulated differently due to their customised news feeds and thereby social polarisation gets amplified.
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What are the consequences of virtual online monopolies?

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- Google (YouTube, search etc…) and Facebook have over the years monopolised digital advertising revenues due to their dominance in cyber space.
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- In Google's case, this more pronounced as it has a big share in both the open 'digital ad market' as well as the operating system space with 'android'.

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- These tech-giants have algorithms that are designed to maximise the amount of time that users spend on their platforms by feeding them engaging content.
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- They’ve also asserted themselves as mere social platforms that host content in order to absolve themselves of any responsibility for what is posted on them.
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- This self-serving myopic foresight implies that there is little incentive for them to curb misuse of their platforms by immoral participants.
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- Consequenly, they’ve ended up creating a renumerative avenue for unauthenticated news platforms, and sensation mongers.
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- Additionally, their market dominance has gulped up considerable revuenue streams of authentic content developers and news agencies.
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What are structural changes needed in cyber space?

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- The tech-giants need to be legally mandated to evolve internal mechanisms to prevent misuse of their platforms and to curtail the spread of misinformation.
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- Also, a revenue sharing model should be established on mutual terms between content developers and the host site (to nurture an open business space).
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- Notably, sites like youtube do pay developers currently, but these are by their own terms and conditions and not by a mutual contract between parties.
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- **Fair Competition -** Our current set of “fair-competition laws for business” is proving to be ineffective in the wake of emergence of massive online firms.
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- Fair competition is an essential component of democracy, open society, innovation, and we have to get creative to ensure its sustenance.
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- For achieving the stated ends, fundamental changes to the competition law is needed – which could even mean capping the growth of firms in cyber space

or rather breaking Google into smaller firms.
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- Also, divorcing operating systems from other services and products can be considered to deny firms the unfair advantages of vertical integration.
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- While these are all long-term fix, we need to start ideating now on what are the possible scenarios that could replace the current cyber space structures.
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What can be done in the near future?

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- To dislodge the tech-hegemons from their omnipotent and monopolistic position, newer alternatives need to be promoted.
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- As an immediate step, the Indian government could procure software solutions for its needs from smaller firms as against buying Google's products.
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- Notably, considering the scale of government's digital India initiative, there are immense opportunities for tech-companies to capitalise and grow.
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- The education sector in particular has a massive demand for digital content and classroom tools, all of which run the risk of being pocked by Google.
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- The government could also stop using Facebook, and Twitter for e-governance, and thereby stop providing free advertisements for these companies.
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Source: Business Standard

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