Role of Social Media in Shaping Society

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What is the potential of Internet in Information Dissemination?

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- The need to seek and share information and build communities is something we all possess.
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- The connected world and the internet services this need at scale, delivering transparency and dramatically lowering entry barriers.
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- This environment, where everyone is a publisher, presents both new opportunities and complex challenges for society.
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- In our country, there are roughly 240 million smartphone users and over 500 million feature phone users.
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- The Internet and Mobile Association of India estimates about 370 million internet users in our country — most of them are on mobile internet.
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How social media is misused?

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- Society and its conflicts manifest themselves in what has come to be known as “fake news” — and the internet does aid its rapid distribution.
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- That is not the malaise of the internet or social media platforms, however.
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- It is the actors, very often, competing political and other special interests which are producers of such content.
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- India has reflected these conflicts and contestations for ages but our

democratic spirit and tradition have endured much more than identity discord.
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- In August 2012, photos and cross-border propaganda material was misused and spread, sparking panic among people from the north-eastern region residing in Bangalore; the episode even caused a large-scale migration of people from the north-east back to their home states.
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- Rumours were authenticated as “news” and these were published widely.
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How these problems can be tackled?

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- All that this event probably required was counter-speech — a strong denial of the rumours and real-time reassurance to the affected people by the state, the community, newspersons and the media.
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- The lasting and most powerful antidote to rumours, fake news and hate speech is more speech.
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- Recently, we have seen the police deploying these positive strategies for community policing.
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- Recently, the Bangalore police actively used social media platforms to quell malicious rumours and fake news when the Cauvery river water-sharing verdict was announced by the Supreme Court.
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- The current climate also underscores the importance of independent fact-checkers; we are seeing the emergence of fact-checking websites in India. This is also a positive development.
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- It will help nurture a culture of fact-checking and an atmosphere where each individual will be more rigorous in their assessment when engaging with different types of information on different media and diverse platforms.
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What is the present trend of contemporary debate?

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- First, there is universal recognition that political polarisation is getting sharper.
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- Second, elections feel like a matter of life and death instead of a worthy democratic value and tradition.
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- Third, consensus-building is becoming increasingly difficult and
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- Finally, there seems to be a tendency to revel in labelling; the line between prejudice and politics is becoming extremely blurred.
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- The spirit of the internet runs counter to all of this — it is about bringing people together, discovering ideas, unlocking opportunities and forming communities.
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What is the way ahead?

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- In this connected world, while we try and build all safeguards by investing in fact-checking tools and processes that prevent the spread of hate and fake news on the internet, ultimately we all have to think and reflect upon our own behaviour.
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- We have to decide whether we want to build a world where a human being’s life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” or a world where we push the boundaries of openness, debate and integrity.
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