Social Media Monitoring by Police Forces

Mains: *GS III – Challenges to Internal Security through Communication Networks, Role of Media and Social Networking Sites in Internal Security Challenges, Basics of Cyber Security*

Why in News?

In recent years, the monitoring of social media by police forces across India has escalated significantly and this shift reflects the increasing role of social media in both facilitating communication and criminal activities.

What is the status of social media monitoring cells in India?

- **Growth of monitoring cells** – According to an analysis of police infrastructure data, the number of dedicated social media monitoring cells has grown substantially.
- As of January 1, 2020, there were 262 such cells across 28 states and 8 Union Territories.
- By January 1, 2024, this number had increased to 365.
- **State specific increase** – Some states have seen a particularly sharp increase:
    - **Bihar –** 52 cells
    - **Maharashtra** – 50 cells
    - **Punjab** – 48 cells
    - **West Bengal** – 38 cells
    - **Assam** – 37 cells
- The number of monitoring cells also saw a notable rise in states that experienced significant civil unrest.
    - **For instance**, in Manipur, where large-scale ethnic violence erupted in 2023, the number of monitoring cells rose from 3 on January 1, 2020, to 16 by January 1, 2024.
- **Need for monitoring cells** – Social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and WhatsApp are increasingly becoming avenues for both crime and social unrest.
- The rise in the number of dedicated monitoring units reflects the evolving nature of threats in the digital age.

What is the impact of social media monitoring?

- **Forecasting of crimes** – Police forces across states have recognized this and established monitoring cells to pre-empt crime trends and detect possible disturbances, misinformation, and violence being planned or disseminated online.

- **Curb misinformation's** – Officials argue that this strategy helps in not only curbing cybercrimes but also monitoring hate speech, communal tension, and politically motivated violence that often manifest on social media.

What are the other developments that are taking place?

- **Expansion of Cybercrime Units –** Alongside the expansion of social media monitoring cells, the number of cybercrime police stations has also seen a rise.
- The total number of cybercrime stations increased from 376 as of January 1, 2020, to 624 as of January 1, 2024.
- This increase highlights the growing recognition of the need for specialized cyber units to tackle internet-based crimes, such as data theft, online fraud, and digital harassment.
- These developments align with global trends where law enforcement agencies are enhancing their capabilities to tackle digital crime in real-time.
- **Increasing role of drones in law enforcement –** In addition to social media monitoring, law enforcement agencies have been increasing their use of technology in crime detection and prevention.
- Drones, which provide aerial surveillance capabilities, have seen a marked rise in usage.
- As of January 2024, there were 1,147 drones available to state and Union Territory police forces, up from 1,010 drones in 2023.
- Drones are increasingly being used for crowd control, surveillance of remote areas, and tracking criminal activities in real-time.

What are the issues and challenges in social media monitoring?

- **Privacy issues –** Determining what's public vs. private, and the constitutionality of monitoring private profiles or using fake accounts, remains a complex legal area.
- **Fake Accounts & Deception –** Criminals use fake profiles, while police using them can violate platform rules and public trust, leading to legal challenges.
- **Information Overload –** The sheer volume of data makes identifying genuine threats difficult, requiring sophisticated tools.
- **Context & Misinterpretation –** Sarcasm, slang, and cultural nuances in posts are hard for automated tools (and even humans) to interpret accurately, risking false flags.
- **Tool Limitations –** Inadequate or unreliable surveillance software, often reliant on basic keyword lists, can miss threats or generate too many false positives.
- **Lack of Training & Policy –** Insufficient training for officers and a lack of comprehensive departmental policies hinder effective, lawful monitoring.
- **Resource Constraints –** Police forces often lack sufficient funding, trained personnel, and specialized labs for deep analysis.
- **Measuring Effectiveness –** Quantifying success is hard as the goal is often prevention, and cybercrimes can be covert until major damage occurs.
- **Erosion of Trust –** Secretive monitoring or perceived targeting of specific groups (like activists) can damage community relations.
- **Algorithmic & Human Bias –** Existing policing biases can seep into online monitoring, disproportionately affecting minority communities

- **Human Resource Challenges –** Despite the technological advancements and expanded infrastructure, the police force continues to face significant staffing shortages.
- The 2024 report noted that _5,92,839 police posts were vacant_ across the country, against _the total sanctioned strength of 27,55,274._
- This staffing gap remains a key challenge in ensuring that the growing demands of modern policing, especially in terms of technology, can be met effectively.
- Additionally, of the total sanctioned strength, a significant portion of police personnel belong to marginalized communities:
    - 3,30,621 personnel from _Scheduled Castes_
    - 2,31,928 personnel from _Scheduled Tribes_
    - 6,37,774 personnel from _Other Backward Classes_

What lies ahead?

- The rapid expansion of social media monitoring cells, coupled with the rise of cybercrime units and drones, represents a crucial shift in India's law enforcement strategies.
- While the growth of technology-based policing is a positive step towards combating modern crimes, the persistent challenges of human resource shortages and digital security remain significant hurdles to achieving fully effective policing.

Reference

[The Hindu| Social Media Monitoring](#)