Tackling Misinformation

Mains Syllabus: GS III - Challenges to internal security through communication networks, role of media and social networking sites in internal security challenges.

Why in news?

The World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Risks Report 2025 underscores misinformation and disinformation as the highest ranked short-term global threat.

What is the status of disinformation threats in India?

- **Misinformation** – It refers to false information that is not intended to cause harm.
- **Disinformation** – It refers to deliberate spreading of false information that is intended to manipulate, cause damage and guide people, organizations and countries in the wrong direction
- **Disinformation in India** - The study conducted by Indian School of Business (ISB) and CyberPeace found that political fake news accounts for *46 %* of fake news, followed by general issues (*33.6 %*) and religious content (*16.8 %*).
- These three categories alone represent *94 %* of the total fake news spread in India.

According to the World Economic Forum's *2024 Global Risk Report*, India was ranked *one of the highest* for the *risk of misinformation and disinformation.*

What are the effects of Fake News?

- **Threat to Social Harmony -** Misinformation fuels communal violence and religious tensions (e.g., mob lynchings due to WhatsApp rumors).
- Increases societal divisions and distrust among communities.
- **Public Safety and Law & Order Issues -** Fake news incites panic in society.
- For example, false reports of child kidnappers leading to lynching incidents.
- **Impact on Democracy -** Misleading political propaganda influences elections and voter behavior.
- **Economic Disruptions -** Misinformation about stock markets, financial institutions, or government policies causes market volatility.
- **Health Risks** - Spread of pseudoscience-based treatments undermines scientific medical practices.

What are the challenges in curtailing fake news?

- **AI-Generated Content -** The rise of *deepfake technology and AI-generated* misinformation makes it harder to distinguish between real and fake content.
- **End-to-End Encryption -** *Encrypted platforms* like WhatsApp make it difficult for authorities to track the source of fake news.
- **Diversity -** Diverse political and social landscape creates fertile ground for manipulated narratives, voter influence, and economic disruption.
- **Lack of Digital Literacy -** Many people, especially in *rural areas*, lack the ability to critically analyze and verify online content.
- **Political and Ideological Bias -** Fake news is often used as a tool for political propaganda, targeting *elections* and creating social divisions.
- **Legal and Regulatory Gaps -** Existing laws, such as the IT Act, are inadequate in tackling the dynamic nature of fake news.
    - The IT Act does *not define "fake news" explicitly*, making it difficult to enforce penalties effectively.
- **Lack of Fact-Checking Mechanisms -** Fact-checking agencies have *limited reach* compared to misinformation channels.
- **Dwindling public trust in legacy media** - With trust in mainstream media declining, citizens are relying more on social media for news.
- This shift has resulted in a significant number of users forwarding unverified information, often believing it to be accurate simply because it comes from friends or family.
- **Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) -** India has faced persistent Chinese disinformation threats since the 2017 Doklam standoff, prompting the ban of over 300 Chinese apps, including TikTok, to curb foreign interference.

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)
• **FIMI** - It refers to intentional and coordinated activities by foreign state or non-state actors to manipulate information environments. • It is a growing security and foreign policy threat. • FIMI is a pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. • **Manipulative** - Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. • **FIMI actors** - Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory. • **Impact** - FIMI poses significant security threats to the integrity of online political information, jeopardizing public trust in democratic institutions and electoral processes.

What are the steps taken by the Govt to tackle fake news?

- **Information Technology (IT) Rules, 2021 -** These rules mandate social media intermediaries to appoint a *Grievance Officer* responsible for addressing user complaints and removing content that violates the guidelines.
- **PIB Fact Check Unit -** Established in 2019, it addresses misinformation pertaining to government policies, initiatives and schemes, providing accurate information to the public.

- **Shakti Fact-Checking Collective – I**ndian fact-checkers and news publishers working collaboratively to counter online misinformation
- **5-Point Advisory to Combat Fake News -** To encourage citizens to verify the authenticity of information before sharing, the government has issued advisories such as
    - Checking the credibility of the source.
    - Being cautious of sensational headlines.
    - Cross-verifying information with reputable sources.
    - Consulting official government communications for accurate information.
    - Refraining from sharing unverified information on social media platforms.

What can be done to prevent the menace of fake news?

- India, poised to surpass 900 million Internet users, would find itself vulnerable without proper policy implementation to combat disinformation.
- **Regulating Large Online Platforms -** Platforms with more than 45 million users can be subjected to audits and transparency measures, similar to the EU's Digital Services Act.
- **Fact-Checking Mandates -** Platforms can be mandated with regular risk assessment and information verification.
- **Research Funding** - Adequate funding can be allocated for advancing cybersecurity research and innovation.
- Transparent content moderation policies can be implemented to address misleading content that threatens public health, safety, or democracy, with strict enforcement of non-discrimination rules.
- **Awareness Creation -** Expanding public awareness initiatives, such as the Reserve Bank of India's Financial Literacy Campaign with Amitabh Bachchan, is essential for fostering critical thinking and societal resilience.
- **Leveraging Technology -** Developing and deploying *AI algorithms* can aid in *detecting and flagging* false information on digital platforms.
- **International collaboration** - With the global nature of disinformation, cross-border coalitions needs to be established for a coordinated global response.

Reference

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