

# GENERAL ESSAY 2020

## Internet and Children

Parental and corporate initiatives are best suited to deal with the issue of inappropriate content on the Internet.

Data from the Internet and Mobile Association of India has confirmed that 66 million Internet users in India are in the age group of 5 to 11 years. While this is an indication that India's children are getting access to digital tools that help in improving learning and productivity, it is also a cause of worry, because it increasingly exposes them to the dangers that lurk in the online world. Children may stumble upon inappropriate content or worse, come in contact with cyberbullies or child predators, which can scar them for life. There are a large number of cases of cybercrime against children that have emerged in the recent past. For example, the Blue Whale challenge, an online game aimed at teenagers, was linked to numerous suicides around the world.

Countries like the US have recognised these dangers and have put in place strong laws such as Children's Online Privacy Protection Act. There is, of course, a case for arguing that parents and educational institutions have the primary responsibility in sensitising children to use the Internet safely; there are also technology filters — such as parental control software mechanisms — that do a competent job of protecting children. Relying on the State machinery excessively to 'police' Internet usage occasionally comes with downsides, given the State's reflexive instinct to abuse its regulatory authority.

But even so, Indian policymakers need to wake up to the need for having overarching laws that protect our children — not just from online predators but also from companies that mine user data for making profits. Recently, a major online video streaming site was fined \$170 million in the US for illegally collecting personal information of children without parental consent. This may be happening in India rampantly with no laws to protect the users.

In India, social media is largely unregulated. While this supports the free flow of data and freedom of speech, it has also led to the rise of online hate-mongering, abusive language and harassment. The Centre has so far failed to protect children from data harvesting and targeted advertising; its exertions in the regulatory space have tended to be focussed rather disproportionately on cracking down on dissent.

Technology companies such as Facebook, Apple and Google should also do more to ensure to create a safer digital world for children. As Internet networks penetrate into rural India, a large number of children will get access to online content for the first time. The technology companies should form an alliance with schools, parents, State governments to spread awareness about the pitfalls of using the Internet.

The Internet came into existence more than four decades ago, and companies like Google emerged in the 1990s, but we still do not have any authoritative findings regarding the social impact of the Internet on children. If Facebook and other technology companies want to get more users at a younger age then they also should work to help mitigate the dangers.

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