

Social media and democratisation

- Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation,".
- From the beginning, social media platforms have trumpeted that they have 'democratised' self-expression.
- Now, one of the most striking things about online communication is how little people speak. Speak in their own words that are.
- It is worth asking at what point in this trajectory engagement stops being a form of self-expression but instead becomes a tool for mass homogenization social media moulds expression to fit its own format instead of vice versa.
- Retweets and likes are binary instruments which leave no room for personal nuance.
- Memes and emojis constrain articulation to the selection at hand, shaping instead of facilitating self-expression.
- It is not just the structure of social media platforms that inhibits self-expression but also the incentives.
- An important emerging discussion focuses on how the incentives of social media shape the discourse by

privileging antagonism, snark, and outrage over dialogue and reason.

The 'creator economy'

- The ability of social media platforms to abridge expression is also playing out in the so-called "creator economy".
- In order to improve user stickiness and engagement, social media platforms have started compensating users for original audio-visual content.
- While sites such as YouTube allowed individuals to create their own video channels and shared ad-revenue based on views, platforms have increasingly moved to shorter video formats ranging from 15 to 60 seconds.
- These videos are served up algorithmically and there are many reports of befuddled creators trying to hack the algorithm and make their content go viral.
- It is unclear, in this mix of super short videos, preoccupation with algorithms, and directed viewers, whether the creator has or can have a specific point of view and if there is much room for "self-expression".
- In fact, a significant portion of "content" is merely rehashed cuts of existing content.

- With the emergence of generative AI such as ChatGPT and Dall-E for text and images, respectively, there is a high possibility that “self-expression” will be further diminished by making it easy to generate content without requiring the individual to apply herself in any meaningful manner.

THE HINDU

Data Protection Bill

- A data protection law must safeguard and balance peoples’ right to privacy and their right to information, which are fundamental rights flowing from the Constitution.
- First, the Bill seeks to dilute the provisions of the Right to Information (RTI) Act, which has empowered citizens to access information and hold governments accountable.
- The RTI Act includes a provision to protect privacy through Section 8(1)(j).
- In order to invoke this Section to deny personal information, at least one of the following grounds has to be proven: the information sought has no relationship to any public activity or public interest or is such that it would cause unwarranted invasion of privacy and the Public

Information Officer is satisfied that there is no larger public interest that justifies disclosure.

- The proposed Bill seeks to amend this Section to expand its purview and exempt all personal information from the ambit of the RTI Act
- Second, by empowering the executive to draft rules on a range of issues, the proposed Bill creates wide discretionary powers for the Central government and thus fails to safeguard people’s right to privacy.
- Third, given that the government is the biggest data repository, it was imperative that the oversight body set up under the law be adequately independent to act on violations of the law by government entities.
- The Bill does not ensure the autonomy of the Data Protection Board, the institution responsible for the enforcement of provisions of the law.
- The Central government is empowered to determine the strength and composition of the Board and the process of selection and removal of its chairperson and other members.
- Finally, the Bill stipulates that the Data Protection Board shall be ‘digital by design, including receipt and disposal of complaints.

Microbiome and autism disorder

- Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is the term for a group of neurodevelopmental disorders
- According to the WHO, ASD affects one in 100 children.
- Children with ASD have impaired social interactions, lack verbal and nonverbal communication skills, and display restricted and repetitive behaviors.
- These characteristics can adversely affect one's cognitive abilities and, over time, diminish one's quality of life.
- A relatively under-researched aspect of ASD is the gastrointestinal problems associated with a subset of children with ASD
- The gut microbiome is believed to have a big impact on immune modulation and metabolic activities in the human body.
- Immune modulation refers, among other things, to the efforts of the immune system to ensure its response is proportionate to a threat.
- Investigations of the dynamic cross-talk between the gut microbiome and the host environment have revealed potential connections to ASD symptoms dysbiosis an imbalance in

the gut microbiome of children with ASD.

- They had a higher abundance of lactobacillaceae, bifidobacteriaceae, and veillonellaceae bacteria.
- The fraction of bacteria of the phylum firmicutes was found to be significantly higher in the guts of children with ASD.
- We also found an underrepresentation of certain microbes that produce short chain fatty acids (SCFA), such as faecal bacterium and roseburia, in children with ASD

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Moon dust and Global Warming

- A sufficiently powerful volcanic eruption can spew sulfates and other aerosols into the stratosphere, cooling the air there.
- This fact has motivated people to artificially do the same thing to slow global-warming
- Researchers from the U.S. have proposed that billions of tonnes of dust can be launched from the moon to a point in space where the earth's and the Sun's gravitational fields cancel each other out.
- The dust will thus be 'parked' there, casting a shadow on earth and

dimming sunlight to offset carbon emissions.

- While aerosols in the stratosphere, especially radiation-scattering ones such as sulfates, do have a cooling effect, let's not forget the consequences of the 1816 eruption.
- The 'cool' summer sent crop yields plummeting worldwide, leading to disease and starvation.
- Many climate models have confirmed that dimming the amount of incoming sunlight with stratospheric aerosols will have similar outcomes.
- Some studies have argued that the resulting drought won't be as harmful and that the GDPs of most countries will be positively affected by such solar radiation management (SRM)
- Any projections related to changes in rainfall, as a result of blocking sunlight, will be highly uncertain.
- We are still struggling with the concept of 'loss and damage' under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, an instrument to compensate countries for the harm caused by climate change.
- Compensation for the accidental outcomes of SRM will be more contentious.

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South China Sea

- The Philippines invoked the dispute settlement mechanism of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 2013 to test the legality of China's 'nine-dash line' regarding the disputed Spratlys.
- In response, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at The Hague decreed in its July 12, 2016 judgment that the line had "no legal basis." China dismissed the judgment as "null and void."
- The award implied that China violated the Philippine's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).
- It noted that China had aggravated the situation by undertaking land reclamation and construction, and had harmed the environment, and violated its obligation to preserve the ecosystem
- Vietnam has added six Kilo-class, Russian-origin submarines to its navy.
- France, Germany, and the Netherlands, respectively, have supplied Formidable class stealth ships to Singapore, patrol boats to Brunei Darussalam, and corvettes to Indonesia
- Japan is partially funding the upgradation of the Indonesian coast guard. Indonesia and the Philippines are in the early stages of exploring

procurement of the BrahMos missile from India.

- The other ASEAN countries that have shown interest are Thailand and Vietnam.
- Growing Chinese muscularity in the SCS is visible in the increased patrolling and live-fire exercising by Chinese naval vessels; ramming and sinking of fishing vessels of other claimant countries; renaming of SCS features; and building of runways, bunkers, and habitation for possible long-term stationing of personnel on the atolls claimed by China.
- Chinese exploration and drilling vessels compete aggressively with those of other littoral countries in the disputed waters
- A complicating factor for China is Russia's growing military and economic equities in the SCS.
- Russia and Vietnam have a defence cooperation relationship, which they are committed to strengthening.
- China has objected to Rosneft Vietnam BV prospecting within the Chinese-defined 'nine-dash line.'
- Rosneft has also been invited by the Philippines to conduct oil prospecting in its EEZ.

India's relevant options

- India straddles and is the fulcrum of, the region between the Suez and Shanghai, between West and East Asia, and between the Mediterranean and the SCS.
- The SCS carries merchandise to and from India.
- It follows that India has a stake in the SCS, just as China has in the Indian Ocean.
- India must continue to actively pursue its defence diplomacy outreach in the Indo-Pacific region: increase military training and conduct exercises and exchanges at a higher level of complexity, extend Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief activities, share patrolling of the Malacca Strait with the littoral countries, etc.
- The Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships that India has concluded with Australia, Japan, Indonesia, the U.S., and Vietnam could be extended to Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore.
- India must also buttress the military capacity of the tri-service Andaman and Nicobar Command.

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