

# DECODE UPSC

## TOPIC - 16

**Crack Prelims, Ace Mains, Impress in Interview**

# SOCIAL MEDIA BANS WORLDWIDE



## 1. Introduction to Global Social Media Bans

- Social media bans are increasingly being implemented worldwide, especially to protect minors from potential mental health risks and harmful content. The growing trend is being led by countries such as Australia, France, and India, among others, and focuses on age-based restrictions and greater governmental control. These bans are viewed as both protective measures for youth well-being and responses to rising concerns about cyberbullying, privacy, and addiction linked to social media platforms.

## 2. Key Trends in Social Media Bans

- **Child Access Restrictions:**
  - **Australia:** Enacted a pioneering ban on access for children under 16 to platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.
  - **France:** Followed suit with a ban on under-15s accessing social media without parental consent.
  - **Spain, Greece, and Denmark** are considering or implementing similar age-verification measures.
- **Strict Government Control:**
  - Countries like **China, Iran, North Korea, and Turkmenistan** maintain broad, long-term bans on Western social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, citing political or security concerns.
- **Geopolitical and Security Bans:**
  - **India** has banned TikTok and several other apps, primarily for national security reasons, setting a precedent for app-specific bans.
- **Temporary Political Restrictions:**
  - **Uganda** and other nations have used targeted social media shutdowns during election periods or times of civil unrest to manage information flow.

- **Enforcement Mechanisms:**

- Increasing demands for age-verification technologies to enforce bans, with platforms facing fines for non-compliance.

### 3. Advantages of Social Media Bans

#### Health and Well-being

- **Mental Health Protection:** Reduces exposure to anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and body-image issues, particularly in adolescents, who are highly susceptible to social media's curated content and validation pressures.
- **Improved Sleep and Physical Health:** Prevents late-night scrolling, which disrupts sleep, and allows more time for physical activities and in-person interactions.
- **Reduced Stress and Anxiety:** Alleviates constant exposure to negative news and overwhelming information, leading to better mental health outcomes.

#### Safety and Security

- **Reduced Exposure to Harmful Content:** Bans limit access to harmful content such as cyberbullying, hate speech, and self-harm.
- **Decreased Harmful Trends:** Prevents young users from participating in dangerous challenges that may lead to physical harm or even death.

#### Personal Development and Productivity:

- **Increased Productivity:** Limits distractions, giving individuals more time for academic work, hobbies, and real-world skill development.
- **Stronger In-Person Relationships:** Encourages spending more time with family and friends, fostering deeper, meaningful connections.
- **Enhanced Self-Esteem:** Helps individuals develop a more positive self-image, reducing reliance on external validation from social media.

### 4. Disadvantages of Global Social Media Bans

#### Digital Exclusion and Isolation

- **Vulnerable Groups:** Social media bans may isolate vulnerable populations, such as teenagers and LGBTQ+ youth, who rely on these platforms for support and community.

#### Driving Activity Underground

- **Unregulated Platforms:** Restrictions often fail, pushing users to less-regulated or dangerous online spaces, which can increase exposure to harmful content.

#### Reduced Digital Literacy

- **Lack of Safe Navigation Skills:** Bans hinder young people's ability to develop the digital literacy skills necessary to navigate online spaces safely and responsibly in the future.

#### Implementation and Privacy Issues

- **Age Verification Challenges:** Enforcing age verification mechanisms raises privacy concerns as platforms may collect sensitive personal data, creating potential security risks.

## Ineffectiveness and False Security

- **Rebellion and False Security:** Bans may foster rebellion among youth or create a false sense of security, failing to address the root causes of mental health issues, like cyberbullying and content design.

## Economic Disruption

- **Job Losses:** Content creators, social media managers, and related industries could face widespread job losses due to the ban.

## 5. Alternatives to Social Media Bans

- **Regulation of Platform Design:** Instead of outright bans, strengthening regulations on how platforms are designed can help address the root causes of digital harm.
- **Improving Digital Literacy:** Educating users, especially children and adolescents, on responsible social media use and emotional regulation is critical to empowering them to navigate online spaces safely.
- **Enhanced Mental Health Support:** Integrating mental health education and support systems within social media platforms could help mitigate adverse effects on users, particularly young ones.

## 6. Conclusion

- While social media bans, particularly targeting minors, offer potential benefits like mental health protection and increased productivity, they come with several challenges. These include the risk of digital exclusion, driving activity underground, and curbing digital literacy development. Instead of blanket prohibitions, a more balanced approach that includes regulation, education, and mental health support would be more effective in addressing the root causes of online harm while fostering safe digital environments. As the world continues to grapple with the digital age's impact, it is essential to find solutions that balance safety, privacy, and access to digital opportunities.

# INDIAN CONTEXT

## 1. Introduction to Social Media Regulation in India

- Social media regulation in India falls under the **Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000**, and the **IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021**, ensuring that platforms are accountable for unlawful content.
- The **Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023**, adds a framework for protecting personal data, with specific safeguards for children, though its rules are still in development.

## 2. Key Legislation & Rules Governing Social Media

### Information Technology Act, 2000 (IT Act)

- **Section 69A:** Grants the government power to block content threatening national security, public order, or sovereignty.

- **Section 79:** Provides immunity to intermediaries (social media platforms) for content uploaded by users, provided they follow due-diligence rules.

## IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021

- **Content Removal:** Mandates platforms to remove harmful content such as obscene material, child abuse, or hate speech.
- **Grievance Redressal:** Platforms must appoint Grievance Officers and resolve issues in a timely manner (within 72 hours).
- **Traceability:** Platforms must help trace the origin of certain messages to prevent illicit activities.
- **Grievance Appellate Committees (GACs):** Users can appeal unresolved grievances through GACs, ensuring fairness in content moderation.

## Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023

- **Focus on Protection:** Establishes a framework to safeguard personal data, especially of children, ensuring more control for individuals over their data.

## 3. Key Provisions in the IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021

### Restricted Information

- Prohibits the hosting of content that is obscene, defamatory, harmful, or promotes hate and violence.
- Bans content that deceives or misleads the public, including **deepfakes**, and content violating privacy.

### User Awareness

- Platforms must inform users about consequences of sharing unlawful content, including the removal of content and account suspensions.

### Accountability

- Platforms must remove harmful content quickly upon receiving court orders or government notifications.

### Grievance Redressal

- Platforms must resolve complaints within 72 hours, with a 24-hour deadline for content that violates privacy, shows nudity, or impersonates others.

## 4. Important Social Media Regulations

### Grievance Redressal Mechanism

- **Intermediaries** must appoint **Grievance Officers** to address complaints from users within 72 hours and remove any offending content within 24 hours of receiving complaints.
- If complaints aren't addressed, users can appeal to **Grievance Appellate Committees (GACs)** via a dedicated online portal.



## Accountability of Social Media Platforms (SSMIs)

- **Social Media Intermediaries (SSMIs)** with over 50 lakh registered users must ensure traceability of serious content and publish compliance reports.
- SSMIs must appoint officers for coordination with law enforcement, offer voluntary user verification, and provide fair hearing mechanisms.

## Failure to Comply

- Failure to comply with IT Rules results in platforms losing their immunity under Section 79 of the IT Act and facing potential legal actions.

## 5. Specific Laws Addressing Harmful Content

### Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) 2023

- Strengthens laws for cyber-enabled crimes and online harms, especially on social media.
- **Section 296 & 294:** Provides punishment for obscene acts, including the sale or display of obscene material on social media platforms.

### Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 (for OTT Platforms)

- **Part-III of the Rules:** Imposes a **Code of Ethics** for digital content providers and OTT platforms, ensuring that content does not violate legal standards.
- The government has disabled access to **43 OTT platforms** for violating laws on obscene content.

## 6. Challenges in Social Media Regulation

- **Free Speech vs. Security:** Balancing the protection of free speech (Article 19(1)(a)) with the need to curb misinformation, cyberbullying, and illicit content remains a challenge.
- **Privacy Concerns:** The enforcement of age verification mechanisms and data traceability raises privacy and security issues.
- **Misinformation:** The spread of **fake news** on social media affects societal trust, judicial proceedings, and political stability, complicating regulation.

## 7. Conclusion

- India's social media regulation framework aims to create a safe, accountable, and transparent digital environment. It balances the needs of freedom of speech with the protection of users from harmful content, offering **legal safeguards**, **grievance redress mechanisms**, and **age verification systems**. However, challenges such as privacy concerns, digital literacy, and the battle between regulation and free speech remain critical points of debate. Continuing dialogue between stakeholders, including users, platform providers, and regulators, is essential for creating a more secure and equitable digital space in India.



## UPSC Prelims Multiple Choice Questions

1. Which of the following statements is/are correct regarding the global social media bans in 2026?
  1. Australia enacted a ban on social media access for children under 16, covering platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.
  2. France followed Australia's lead by implementing a ban for children under 15, requiring parental consent for access.
  3. India has banned TikTok and other apps for national security reasons, with a focus on app-specific bans.

Select the correct answer using the codes below:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>(a) 1 and 2 only</p> <p>(b) 2 and 3 only</p> | <p>(c) 1 and 3 only</p> <p>(d) All of the above</p> |
|---|---|
- 
2. Which of the following are key provisions under the IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021?
    1. Platforms must remove obscene or harmful content within 24 hours of receiving a complaint.
    2. Social Media Intermediaries (SSMIs) with over 50 lakh registered users must ensure traceability of content.
    3. The rules mandate platforms to publish annual compliance reports to the government.

Select the correct answer using the codes below:

- |                  |                 |
|------------------|-----------------|
| (a) 1 and 2 only | (c) 1, 2, and 3 |
| (b) 2 and 3 only | (d) 1 only      |

3. According to the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, which of the following offences are addressed under the law?

1. Obscene acts and sale of obscene materials, including display of content in electronic form.
2. The law addresses cyber-enabled crimes and online harms, including misinformation.
3. The law mandates content moderation within 72 hours for minor issues and allows appeals after 48 hours.

Select the correct answer using the codes below:

- |                  |                 |
|------------------|-----------------|
| (a) 1 and 2 only | (c) 1, 2, and 3 |
| (b) 2 and 3 only | (d) 1 only      |

4. Which of the following statements about the Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000, and its provisions are correct?

1. Section 69A empowers the government to block content threatening national security or public order.
2. The IT Act provides immunity to intermediaries for content posted by users, provided they follow due diligence.
3. The IT Act grants the police the authority to search and arrest suspected individuals without a court order.

Select the correct answer using the codes below:

- |                  |                 |
|------------------|-----------------|
| (a) 1 and 2 only | (c) 1, 2, and 3 |
| (b) 2 and 3 only | (d) 1 only      |

## Answers

1. (d) 1, 2, and 3

- **Statement 1 is correct:** Australia has enacted a pioneering ban for children under 16, restricting access to major social media platforms.
- **Statement 2 is correct:** France has followed with a similar ban for under-15s requiring parental consent.
- **Statement 3 is correct:** India has imposed a ban on TikTok and other apps citing national security concerns.



2. (c) 1, 2, and 3

- **Statement 1: Correct.** The IT Rules, 2021 mandate that content violating privacy, impersonating individuals, or containing nudity must be removed within 24 hours.
- **Statement 2: Correct.** Social Media Intermediaries with a large user base (50 lakhs or above) are required to ensure traceability of serious content and comply with other provisions.
- **Statement 3: Correct.** Platforms must publish compliance reports and appoint local officers for coordination with law enforcement.

3. (a) 1 and 2 only

- **Statement 1: Correct.** The BNS, 2023 addresses obscene acts and the sale or display of obscene materials, including on digital platforms.
- **Statement 2: Correct.** It strengthens the framework for dealing with cyber-enabled crimes and online harms, such as misinformation.
- **Statement 3: Incorrect.** The law does not specifically mention content moderation timelines or appeals in the way described.

4. (a) 1 and 2 only

- **Statement 1: Correct.** Section 69A of the IT Act allows the government to block content that poses a threat to national security or public order.
- **Statement 2: Correct.** Section 79 of the IT Act provides immunity to intermediaries if they comply with due diligence requirements.
- **Statement 3: Incorrect.** The IT Act empowers the police to investigate cyber offences but requires adherence to the law and specific provisions for search and arrest (Section 78, Section 80). It does not allow police to act without a court order in this regard.

# UPSC MAINS



## UPSC Mains Basic Question

1. Discuss the role and significance of the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023, in regulating social media platforms in India.

### ✓ Answer Framework:

- **Introduction:**

The Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023, was introduced to safeguard personal data in India. It provides a framework for individuals to have more control over their data, especially in light of growing concerns about data misuse by social media platforms.

- **Body:**

The DPDP Act primarily focuses on regulating how personal data is collected, stored, and processed by social media companies. One of its key features is the emphasis on consent from users before their data can be shared. It also ensures that companies take adequate measures to protect sensitive personal data from breaches. Additionally, the Act outlines penalties for violations and establishes a data protection authority to monitor compliance.

In the context of social media, this law is essential as it regulates the kind of data that platforms can collect and how they can use that data. With increasing incidents of data breaches and misuse globally, the DPDP Act aims to provide users with better control and transparency over their information.

- **Conclusion:**

The DPDP Act, while still in its early stages, marks a significant step toward regulating the digital landscape in India. It plays a critical role in protecting users' rights while ensuring that social media platforms adhere to guidelines for the responsible use of data. It also fosters greater trust between users and digital platforms, which is vital for the country's digital ecosystem.

## Advanced UPSC Mains Questions

### 2. Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the growing trend of social media bans in India and globally, particularly in relation to mental health and user privacy.

#### ✓ Answer Framework:

- **Introduction:**

Social media bans, particularly those targeting minors, have become a growing trend globally and in India. With rising concerns over mental health issues, misinformation, and privacy violations, governments are increasingly looking at age restrictions and platform accountability.

- **Body:**

The advantages of social media bans primarily revolve around mental health benefits, particularly in protecting young users from cyberbullying, body-image issues, and anxiety related to social comparison. For example, restricting access to platforms like TikTok and Instagram for children could improve sleep quality, reduce stress, and enhance face-to-face social interactions, all of which contribute to better physical and mental health.

However, such bans come with several disadvantages. Critics argue that blanket bans can lead to digital exclusion, especially for vulnerable groups like LGBTQ+ youth, who use social media as a source of support and self-expression. Additionally, the enforcement of age-verification mechanisms raises concerns about user privacy, with the risk of sensitive personal data being collected and potentially misused. Furthermore, bans may drive users to less-regulated, underground platforms, where the risks associated with social media use can be amplified.

- **Conclusion:**

While social media bans could help mitigate the mental health risks posed by excessive platform use, they also present challenges, particularly concerning privacy, exclusion, and the displacement of activity to unsafe spaces. A balanced approach, combining regulation, digital literacy, and mental health education, is essential to create a safer online environment without curbing access to vital social connections and information.

3. **Examine the role of social media regulation in India and globally. How do global trends in social media bans and regulations influence India's approach to digital governance and data protection?**

✓ **Answer Framework:**

- **Introduction:**

Social media regulation has become a critical issue globally and in India, driven by the growing concerns over misinformation, privacy violations, and cyber threats. Countries worldwide are enacting measures to protect citizens, especially minors, from the potential harms of unregulated digital platforms.

- **Body:**

Globally, many nations, including Australia, France, and India, have started imposing age restrictions on social media platforms to protect youth mental health. These include bans on underage access, implementation of strict verification measures, and creating a legal framework to safeguard users from harmful content. The rise of the "digital Wild West" has led to these regulations, as lawmakers seek to mitigate the adverse effects of excessive screen time and online harms like cyberbullying and exposure to inappropriate content.

India's approach, through the Information Technology Act (2000) and the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act (2023), focuses on holding platforms accountable for unlawful content, requiring quick removal, and mandating grievance redressal mechanisms. The government's framework emphasizes transparency, ensuring compliance while safeguarding user privacy and national security.

India's social media regulation aligns with global trends but also faces challenges in balancing freedom of speech with security concerns. The country is also grappling with issues like privacy violations and the economic implications of restricting digital platforms.

- **Conclusion:**

While global social media bans and regulations emphasize protection and control, India's regulatory approach seeks to ensure digital safety without compromising innovation and free speech. The challenges of privacy, data security, and the effectiveness of these bans necessitate continued dialogue between governments, tech companies, and users to find an equilibrium that fosters responsible digital governance.



# UPSC INTERVIEW



## UPSC Interview-Based Questions

1. **How do you view the role of social media in modern governance, and what should be the government's approach towards regulating it?**

✓ **Answer:**

Social media plays a transformative role in governance by enabling direct communication between the government and citizens, enhancing transparency, and fostering civic engagement. However, it brings its challenges, such as the spread of misinformation, cyberbullying, and violations of privacy. The government's approach should strike a balance between regulation and freedom of expression. While protecting citizens from harmful content, the government must also encourage healthy discussions, digital literacy, and responsible self-regulation by platforms to maintain the vibrancy of online dialogues.

2. **Do you believe that India's social media regulation framework is in line with global best practices? What improvements would you suggest?**

✓ **Answer:**

India's social media regulation framework, under the IT Act and the Digital Media Ethics Code, is an important step forward in addressing cybercrimes, hate speech, and content moderation. However, there is room for improvement when compared to global best practices. For instance, there is a need to refine age-verification processes, address privacy



concerns more comprehensively, and ensure platforms maintain transparency in content moderation. Enhancing international cooperation on tackling cross-border misinformation, coupled with a stronger emphasis on digital literacy, would better align India's framework with global standards.

**3. How do you balance the protection of minors online with the need for digital freedom and innovation?**

✓ **Answer:**

Protecting minors online is essential, particularly given the growing risks of exposure to harmful content. However, this protection should not come at the expense of digital freedom and innovation. The key lies in educating children about safe internet usage through digital literacy programs while also empowering them to critically engage with online content. A regulatory framework that includes age-appropriate restrictions, parental control, and platform accountability can help protect minors while allowing for the flourishing of digital innovation.

**4. What do you think about the impact of global social media bans on economic and social systems?**

✓ **Answer:**

Global social media bans, especially those targeting minors, can have a profound impact on both the economy and society. On one hand, such bans can promote mental well-being by reducing exposure to harmful content, improving sleep, and fostering better in-person relationships. On the other hand, they can restrict access to essential platforms for education, job opportunities, and social interaction, especially for marginalized groups. It's important to approach these bans with a balanced strategy, combining them with education on digital literacy, mental health initiatives, and fostering alternative safe spaces for interaction.

**5. How should India address the challenges posed by misinformation on social media while ensuring the protection of free speech?**

✓ **Answer:**

Misinformation on social media is a growing concern, as it can undermine public trust and stability. However, tackling misinformation while safeguarding free speech requires a careful and balanced approach. India should focus on creating strong fact-checking mechanisms, ensuring platform accountability, and promoting digital literacy. Enforcing legal frameworks selectively, based on clear guidelines, can help prevent harm without curbing the constitutional right to free expression. In the long run, raising public awareness and working with tech platforms to improve transparency in content moderation will play a crucial role in combating misinformation effectively.