

Big tech vs State - Social Media Platforms

What is the issue?

- Union Information and Technology minister Ravi Shankar Prasad recently accused Twitter of “double standards”.
- The ongoing exchange between the government and Twitter highlights the need for responsible roles by both the big techs and government.

What was the Minister's charge?

- He was referring to the alleged difference in approach taken by Twitter with respect to the events at [Capitol Hill](#) in the US and the [Red Fort](#) in India on Republic Day.
- This comes after the government issued notices seeking the blocking of some social media accounts.
 - This was for allegedly spreading misinformation and provocative content in the aftermath of the violence witnessed during the tractor march by farmers on January 26.

What was Twitter's response?

- Twitter did block some accounts.
- However, it said that the accounts it had not blocked, either on January 31 or after the February 4 notice, were consistent with their policies on free speech.
- It reiterated that the platform believed that “the notices sent to it were not consistent with laws in the country”.

What is the larger concern?

- The seeming arbitrariness of decision-making of social media platforms is not an India-specific concern.
- A few days ago, French President Emmanuel Macron expressed his displeasure of social media platforms.
- He expressed concerns at the way the platforms which had “helped President Trump to be so efficient” “suddenly cut the mic” the moment “they were sure he was out of power”.
- Such lack of consistency and the absence of clearly defined rules on part of social media platforms are worrying.

- These platforms wield immense power as they contribute to shaping online public discourse.
- Considering this, how these issues are resolved will have far-reaching effects.
- The decision of when to “cut the mic” cannot arguably be left in the hands of a private player alone.
 - This is because they are made by unelected executives with questionable incentive structures and opaque systems of accountability.
- In all, social media platforms must be neutral, transparent and consistent in their decision-making process.

What should the government do?

- The government needs to be more transparent in its decision-making.
- When it asks a social media platform to block hundreds of accounts, that must be guided by a pre-defined and publicly disclosed set of rules.
- Failing to do so would mean that the blacklist could be used to silence critical voices.
 - This would work against all the government’s talk of freedom of expression and open democratic systems.

Source: The Indian Express

