

The background of the image is a dark blue and purple night sky filled with numerous white stars of varying sizes. In the foreground, there is a silhouette of a forest of evergreen trees. The text is centered in the middle of the image.

TOPIC OF THE WEEK

DEC'18 (13 to 19)

Information Age and Privacy

This is an information age. Information and data is in abundance. We have immense knowledge about the world and the people. We are social beings but the focus earlier was on face to face interaction but today even communication is limited to social media for many people. People are falling in the trap of virtual relationships. In such an era privacy becomes a challenge. The focus on the right to privacy is based on realities of the digital age. Safeties and personal spaces that were previously possible by physical separation are no longer protected. The digital network challenges the accepted notions of privacy and enters the most personal spaces.

There are many incidences of commercial efforts to exploit data. The US retailer Target became so good at identifying expectant parents that it started to post coupons for deals on baby clothes and send it to them. Many people also dislike Google's practice of targeting advertisements based on analysis of private e-mails and web searches.

Ideally the private and the public must be separated in the digital world. It brings into focus new means of exercising social and political power. We require a constitutional definition and guarantee of the right to personal autonomy and privacy in this digital age. There must be clear terms by the apex court and this should be implemented with full force.

Right to privacy:

The notion of right to privacy for many people is basically against the state or government and not so much the digital corporations. A right is a substantive right if it works in all situations and for everyone. The role of the state is not just to abstain from preventing the rightful free expression but also to ensure that private parties are not able to block it. In the same manner, the role of the state in terms of the right to privacy in the digital age is not just to abstain from its violation. It is also to ensure that private parties are not able to violate such a right. The court must specifically direct the state to ensure this and work on its implementation.

The current discussion is according to status of data in the digital age. Excluding the state from any role with regard to society's data resources without constraining private corporations will lead to a future where corporations become the key organising actors for society. Such a situation is threatening to the interests of weaker sections of society that mainly depend on the state for justice.

The state must retain an important part in the organisation of social structures and play a significant role in the data ecosystem. The public sector will need to manage some infrastructural social and economic databases above which the private sector can run a competitive economy.

Citizens will require the assistance of a public interest agency to enable management of their personal data in a manner that they can obtain the best benefit of a data society and its personalised services.

The government's role

As discussed the government has a big role to maintain privacy in the digital age and it must be accompanied

with strict laws. While establishing a right to privacy, the Court must also direct the state to develop institutions for shaping the state's role in a digital society. This will require an independent branch of the state exclusively dealing with data issues and management.

This is important as otherwise the global digital corporations will become all-powerful social and political actors. They provide most of the digital services that appear to be of a public good and also control and shape entire sectors. This is very dangerous and can create extreme domination as information is very powerful.

A citizen should have options to use basic digital functions like information search, social networking and emailing without sacrificing one's privacy rights. But at the same time people need to be careful. There have been cases where people have been posting so much personal information on the internet. So it is the duty of the State as well as the citizens to ensure that the privacy of information is effectively maintained.

Suggested Reading:

- <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jan/21/the-guardian-view-on-knowledge-in-an-information-age-take-it-to-heart>
- <https://www.thehindu.com/education/in-the-digital-age/article18955282.ece>