GS Paper 2

UPSC Syllabus Topic: GS Paper 2 Governance – Issues relating to Health

Impact of Social Media on Mental Health:

Background:

In 2017, a tragic incident unfolded in London when Molly Russell, a teenager, took her own life after being exposed to self-harm content on social media. This heartbreaking event shed light on the concerning issue of social media's impact on the mental health of young individuals. The Netflix documentary "The Social Dilemma," released in 2020, further emphasized the adverse effects of social media on youth.

On September 30th, 2023, a London coroner made a significant ruling, stating that exposure to harmful social media content had played a role in Molly Russell's death "in a more than minimal way." This ruling stands as a potentially unprecedented acknowledgment of the direct influence social media can have on the safety and well-being of children.

What is the issue with social media?

Harmful Effects on Youth:

Meta's social media platforms, with particular emphasis on Instagram, have faced allegations of causing harm to the mental health of teenagers. The constant exposure to curated content and unrealistic standards can contribute to feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and depression among young users.

Addiction and Exploitation:

Meta has faced lawsuits that assert their platforms are deliberately designed to be addictive, leading young users to spend excessive amounts of time online. This addiction is often linked to the exploitation of the brain's dopamine responses, which are triggered by the rewarding sensation of receiving likes and interactions on posts.

What are government actions?

Numerous lawsuits have been filed against Meta, highlighting issues that may be detrimental to the well-being of youth. These legal actions could result in substantial fines for the company. Additionally, President Biden has called for increased regulation of social media platforms, garnering global attention. The UK, EU, and India have also expressed concerns and signaled a tightening grip on social media practices.

What should be done?

Reform Business Models:

One potential solution involves reevaluating the current advertising-based business model of social media platforms, with a possible shift towards a subscription-based model, similar to what OpenAI uses for ChatGPT. This shift could reduce the reliance on data monetization and user engagement for profit, potentially alleviating the pressure to maximize user screen time.

Tools and Support:

Meta should continue its efforts in developing and implementing tools that support teenagers and their families in navigating social media safely. These tools could include content filters, well-being features, and educational resources to promote responsible online use.

Accountability and Transparency:

Social media platforms must be held accountable for the content they host and the psychological impact of their algorithms on young users. Implementing transparent content moderation policies and providing users with more control over their online experience can be steps in the right direction.

Global Cooperation:

Given the global reach of social media platforms, Meta should proactively collaborate with regulators worldwide to address concerns related to the impact of social media on youth. This cooperation can lead to the establishment of consistent and effective guidelines to safeguard young users across different regions.