

## Host

Welcome Anjana to Mrigashira

I just want to ask you, what's your take on the Twitter, India controversy? We recently read reports about, you know, some of the accounts that government of India wanted being pulled down and they were also some information about how twitter wants to in the second phase bringing the labeling new labeling for government accounts and some of the official accounts in India is not part of that phase two. So, I just wanted to understand what's your take on this.

## Anjana

Radha thank you so much for having me on this podcast. So, um, you know, I think fundamentally governments everywhere, whether it is in India or in other parts of the world, because the battle between establishment and Twitter, this is not the first battle between establishment and Twitter also trivia the fundamental principle is that you cannot control what others are saying when you have no control over them. So, you know, Twitter with its millions of users, it's very hard for any establishment anywhere in the world to control each and every one of those voices, Twitter itself is, you know, it's grown largely as an unregulated platform. Right Even now there's no regulation over whether it's Twitter or Facebook, the rules that apply to a lot of other traditional media channels don't really apply to them. So it's kind of the culture of the collective and what I call, you know, couch activism of people, or couch, couch opinion of people. It, there's no cost to going on Twitter and saying what you want to, um, because you don't even know whether that account is here or whether that account is a bot, whether it's a fake account, you can cook up your hand. I mean, you know, just to put things in perspective, Donald Trump who had you know, 88 million followers and he was the first big take down of Twitter, the high profile down on Twitter, his Twitter handle for crying out loud was the real Donald Trump, fake Donald Trump's out there. Right? So I think that is where the primary problem lies with Twitter, which is identity. And, um, so if you want to, control voices or you know, put a heart to what they say, the only way to do that is to go off with the social media platform, because it's impossible to go after, you know, half a million people and have half a million different voices, which is like, you know, insta coffee. It's there all the time through the day, it's almost impossible to respond to everything. So I think to that extent, what has happened is that governments will try and, um, you know, go, go for what they can manage rather than what they can't manage. And that's true everywhere in the world.

Your second question was about Twitter saying that it's going to label handles to show that some of these handles and government handles versus non-government actors. And so on now again, um, you know, I'll go back to my first response, which is how do you, you know, how, how do you ensure that establishment anywhere in the world, if they want to persuade people are only going to use official handles. Oftentimes one of the biggest problems that Twitter faces is that the influence might not be coming from an official handles because when it comes from the people, it seems like it's more authentic, but there is nothing to say that those voices are not paid voices, or they're not voices that have been influenced by, you know, an official source. So on the face of it. Yeah, it's a great idea. You know, like Twitter says that we uphold democracy when at the end of the day, it's a business, uh, you know, uh, upholding democracy. Well, you know, that's kind of debatable because Twitter will serve its interest before it serves other interests. You know, it's a private enterprise Dorcy's amongst, you know, all, all of these influence, um, in people who control social media, but whether it's Zuckerberg or Dorsey, they're incredibly wealthy, resourceful individuals and they run a business first. When we assume that Twitter's going to take on great civic and social responsibility, we might be attributing too much to their role.

### **Host**

So do you see this entire regulation of social media by, you know, different countries in different ways? Is this something that is required or is it something that is, uh, it is, is adverse to free speech.

### **Anjana**

Okay. So does the social media need to be regulated? I firmly believe the answer is an absolute yes. Should the people who regulate social media be only state actors? Probably. No. Okay. so, you know, how do you, uh, you know, you know, for a start part of the problem is this whole thing is evolved in the last decade, right? Yeah. It it's fast changing, based on how people behave. Um, the companies are changing their algorithms based on the pressure they're under, they're changing the algorithms. So it's not as old as traditional media, which sort of, you know, through a system of Peyton trial will have some kind of regulation that is a self-censorship, but here you can't have self-censorship because, anyone and everyone can join and, uh, people are not going to self-censor and self-regulate. So it is imperative that you should have some sort of, regulation, but that should ideally follow some broad principles, A, follow principle of transparency. It should follow full of fairness and Hulu law where the same rule applies to everyone. It can't be selected. There must be a due process that's followed. So when there is regulation, that regulation mustn't be arbitrary. That regulation must, um, be transparent to start with. And that regulation must pull it up to exclude me from a civic society.

### **Host**

Is it that, you know, only one part of the media universe today is getting targeted, which is the social media and the rest of them are, you know, sort of left or, um, you know, left free?

### **Anjana**

So, you know, I think the way traditional media is consumed is slightly differently. People over a period of time choose the media that they want to consume. So, you know, for, in the Indian universe there, they're probably readers of say Indian express. Yeah. And we're dedicated readers who don't use read any other paper, but at the same time, maybe, you know, times of India has dedicated readers who will not read something else the same holds true for, um, television, you know, the people who will watch a particular channel because that is more in sync with their belief system. And, uh, will shun another channel because they feel it lacks neutrality or it lacks, um, you know, the ideology that they support that they are not that the channel isn't supporting the ideology that they personally support. So I think people do make informed choices. And to an extent that choice is also reflected on social media. If you looked at tweets and you look at the way people trolled people with a different ideology, it is, I wateringly bad.

### **Host**

Yeah.

### **Anjana**

So, um, I think the bigger problem with social media today is that instead of just being a, consumer, you're an active participator. So to that extent you sitting in trying to shape the discourse from your living room, What does traditional media, you know, you don't get to sort of call the studio and say, I have a response to what Bianca just said. You can invest, write a letter to the editor or, uh, you know, write to them, but that is not immediately social media the problem is that whatever you say can be add immediately accesses for all. And so it also does worst, the ordinary person who has not had a voice, ,

with the walls, which is, which is the other side of that is a balanced voice. Uh, then that is a good thing because that means that you're giving everyone voice. But how do you make sure that it's only going to be a balanced voice? I think that's where the big challenges

### **Host**

Yeah. Point basically in a way social media is not letting people be fence-sitters right. I mean, in some way they have to be on one, either side of the fence and they can't be fence-sitters,

### **Anjana**

You know, you could take a balanced view. Uh, but the point is, is, is there is the whole world so polarized now that there is a space for a balanced view. I think, um, this is true across the world. We've seen it in country after country, whether it's the U S where you have, uh, you know, you had, you prob probably still do, uh, the Republicans versus the Democrats pro Trump versus anti-Trump, uh, Brexit versus, non-Brexit. So, you know, remain versus leaving the UK, um, in India. it's, the polarization is more acute, um, sometimes on religious grounds, again, the form farmer protest, which is why Twitter is in the means. There are people who, who are pro the farmer protest, the people who are anti the farmer protest, and, uh, in many ways, a lot of these companies. And I think people also do forget this and expect probably too much of companies.

The way they monetize is by creating this interesting frenzy, the more people who come onto the platform, the better it is them in terms of their advertising revenue. So it's not really in their interest to have, um, you know, completely neutral debate, which is not going to be a raging debate. I'm not here at all, suggesting that the companies are, you know, um, built the structure in such a way that they're fanning this not that all I'm saying is that the nature of the beast is such that things tend to be very polarized and the vast majority of us want to raise our hand and say, I'm on the side of the debate, and this is why I am. And so the social platform gives them that opportunity.

### **Host**

A lot of people, uh, in India, particularly the police, some of the politicians and lawmakers have been, uh, you know, trying to promote the Indian platform or the Indian equivalent of Twitter, which is Koo. And many have started sort of saying that, you know, make an India, and this is our great platform to be on and let's shun on Twitter. So, do you see more and more adoption to Koo?

### **Anjana**

You know, it's really hard to answer that question because they answer, I think with technology is it's very difficult to tell what to take off when Twitter started. Nobody imagined Twitter will be here. You know, when Facebook started, it started as, you know, dinky didn't lab being used by a bunch of people in a bomb and look at where it is today. So it's very hard to, uh, predict how far it will go and how fast it will, and whether that's going to be organic growth, because people like the usability, like the features it offers, or is there going to be a set of people who say that, you know, this is not I don't want a platform that is actively promoted by a political class because they feel that, you know, it'll be more skewed and we'll help enstranded on the other hand, there could be people who joined in droves to say that I want to oppose that voice. So it's very hard to tell which way we go. If it has like all technology, like they say, if it has a good user interface, it's easy to use, it's fun to use. It's it gives the user what they want. It may take off, but you know, Twitter has grown to where it has after being around, for more than a decade. So the size does, you know, to grow to that size does take time.

**Host**

And also, I guess it's a question of habit, right? I really don't know how many people have actually, you know, completely stopped using WhatsApp. So, this is all, some of these things are also habits, right which is very difficult to shrug?

**Anjana**

One is a habit. And I think the other thing is need, it's like, um, you know, you looked at digital payments before and after demonetization digital payments before and after, you know, COVID there, the surges have happened when people have not had a choice. So typically, you know, that there is one which is the organic growth, the others, the one that is forced on you because you don't have choice. So it could go either way, will Twitter, you know, will cease to operate in India. I'm not sure on, I doubt it, given that people have built ginormous amounts of followers on Twitter, you know, running into 50, 60 million, some even more so, um, I'm not sure people want to lose followers, you know, including influencers and including people who have a voice on Twitter, some of who are decision-makers

**Host**

Cool. Um, let's hope, uh, that, uh, you know, there are more platforms and there is more discourses online and probably better sense prevails everywhere. Thanks Anjana. Thanks for your time. It was pleasure talking to you and look forward to more such interactions on Mrigashira going forward.