

Cyber Freedom and Social Media in India (A Study)

Abstract

The free flow of information is must for a democratic society as it helps the society to grow and to retain a continuous debate and discussion among the people. No democratic government can survive without accountability and the basic postulate of accountability that is the people should have information about the functioning of the government.

In democracies all over the world especially in India, the concept of Cyber freedom and social media need to be given importance. There should be a clear balance between freedom of speech and expression guaranteed by our constitution as a fundamental right and freedom of expressing views on Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp. This article is an attempt to understand Cyber Freedom and how people should utilize this type of freedom in a positive way. Cyber Freedom can only be achieved when there is availability, affordability and accessibility of network in addition to computer literacy.

Keywords: Cyber Freedom, Social Media, Democracy, Computer Literacy and Governance.



Abhishek Kumar Sharma

Research Scholar,
Deptt.of Legal Studies,
M.J.P. Rohilkhand University,
Bareilly, U.P.

Introduction

In India, a large section of society is still not familiar with the cyber network, social media and its multi-purpose usage. India is the second largest populated country of the world with a population of over 1.30 billion. Computer literacy is sparse especially in rural areas. Thus, this makes the concept of 'Cyber freedom' and social media a subject for discussion.

Common man and government authorities both do not have enough awareness and skill to demarcate the actual line between Cyber freedom and the view of people on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. In society, there are different perceptions about the usage of social media and their implications on society in a democracy. In a democracy, there should be a clear demarcation between Cyber freedom and social media.

In December 2011, Aseem Trivedi's website cartoonagainstcorruption.com was blocked following a complaint from the Mumbai Police stating that the websites was used to display texts and objectionable pictures related to Indian flag and emblem. Later in September 2012, He was arrested on charges of 'sedition' though later on, he was released. Nevertheless, this incident raised several questions about the prospect of 'Cyber freedom' in India.

In India, due to the technological revolution the cyber freedom has become a phenomenon and this phenomenon was further accelerated after the introduction of Smartphone's, however, the cyber freedom still remains limited to certain demographic constituencies. This issue of cyber governance should not be overshadowed by the need for large debates on availability, accessibility and affordability of this.

Role of Social Media in Society

At the present time, Social media plays a very important and significant role in democratic societies. For example, in India in 2011 Anna Hazare's movement against corruption saw as much success as it did because the media, especially social media played a pivotal role in mobilizing people. Similarly, Social media played an important role in the 'Arab spring's by showcasing and broadcasting revolutionary waves of demonstration, protest and movements that began in December 2010 in the Arab world. Social media acts in both horizontal methods are movements among citizens and the state. These networks are extraordinary assets.

There have been many implications to the concept of public sphere in modern societies ever since the 17th and 18th centuries. In this matter the mode of communication is very important. At present the Cyber and social media play an important role in the public sphere, this is called

cyber transformation.¹ As the times Change oral culture has been replaced by print and then been replaced by electronic communication in quick succession.²

In democracies, awareness of the cyber freedom and social media increasing day by day. Large sections of the society especially the youth have become more aware about their rights duties and are more informed about the functioning of the elected government and the issue of governance. Through the cyber and social media citizens who feel disengaged and disturbed (the sense of powerlessness and helplessness) have been given a voice to express their views about the functioning of the government and bureaucracy. As more and more people are inclining themselves towards social interaction based on electronic devices the status of social interaction has also changed.³ Due to this change the government machinery also ensures that it takes steps to improve governance.

Now a days we see all over the world an important shift from a group based to a network based society that is developing community and geographic propinquity.⁴ There is no doubt that technology has transformed not only societies but also the lives of individuals. But one should understand that technology does not change basic human nature. So there is always a possibility of a bad civil society and its attempt to create discourse in counter public spheres cannot be denied.⁵ Now a days Cyber Network and social media influence democracy in a significant way. There is more transparency on the working of government departments and a practice in clarity has also started in the policy making process. On the contrary this has not made much of a difference in the ideological political landscape. There is a lot of traditional institutionalization and people who are non-netizens are not mobilized by social media.⁶

In 21st century India, one cannot deny that the internet and social media have entered discourse and significantly impacting it. In India there is very minimal computer literacy.

The actual number of real users as compared to the total population is still very low and the penetration rate of Internet and social media is also very slow. But as it is becoming popular, it has started changing lives. It is very essential to change the mind set of people in realizing the importance of Internet and social media in democracy, especially its power to create alternative politics.⁷

Impact of the Cyber Network on Indian Society

The cyber network has a huge impact on Indian society. Services in banks schools and hospitals have considerably improved with the introduction of the internet in the functioning of the Government. But Internet are some serious challenges faced by the Internet. There is an extraordinary gap between and a resultant technological overdevelopment and social underdevelopment. The way it prevents the equitable flow of benefits in society has been a major cause of worry for developing countries.⁸ In India there are some divides which are multifaceted and explicitly

visible. These are based on region language education gender and disability.

Region

According to the internet and mobile Association of India (IAMA) 25% of the Indian population (266 million) live in cities and approximately 20% are active Internet users (52million). In contrast of the 75% population in rural areas only 4.18 million are active users and what is disturbing is the fact that out of the non-users 78% are not even aware of the existence of the Cyber network.⁹

Language

In India the English speaking population is 125 million which is 12.16% of the total population and English is the ex-officio language of cyberspace.¹⁰ So language also creates a barrier in the spread of internet facilities in India.

Education

When we talk about literacy in India according to the 2011 census our literacy rate is 74.04% with a huge gap between urban areas (89.9%) and rural areas (68.8%).

Gender

In India the literacy gap between the male and female population is also very huge. The National average is 74.04% but literacy rate amongst the male population is 82.14% as compared to the female population where it is at 65.46%.

Disability

There also exist disabilities in Indian society such as economic cultural and psychological disabilities which curtail the benefits of the Internet where availability accessibility and affordability are concerned.

In recent Era democratic countries of the world faces an important challenge. Due to the introduction of basic internet facilities and with the advent of Facebook, Twitter and whatsapp people are expressing their views freely. But things really become difficult when it is not just freedom of speech and expression that is at stake but lives as well. The issues of liberty and national interest come in direct conflict and pose a new kind of challenge for the state to intervene and yet try and create a balance.

Law and the scope for Cyber Freedom in India

India is the largest democracy in the world. Our constitution has granted freedom of speech and expression to all the people of India. But to control the misuse of the cyber freedom, authorities have adopted two different methods: direct and indirect. The direct way is by making laws through legislation. These include legislations for "users" and legislations for 'Intermediaries and internet service providers (ISPS) In the Indirect method, there is a concept of consultation of the intermediaries or Internet companies Where They are asked to act Guided by the government on the blocking or removing of some content from the domain.

The laws passed in the field of Information and Technology are the Information Technology Act of 2000, the Information Technology (Intermediaries Guidelines) Rules of 2011. The IT Act was passed in an era when the country was transitioning to an

electronic age. E-commerce was the topmost agenda in the minds of policymakers. The Act of 2008 was passed in the wake of the terrorist attack in Mumbai. National security and intelligence were key issues and people questioned some of the provision of the law.

These laws posed a serious threat on freedom of speech and expression, which is one of the fundamental right of citizens in India. The example of the blocking of the website of Aseem Trivedi cartoon against corruption and also the arrest of Aseem Trivedi is clear evidence of the above mentioned law.

Regulation of Cyber Freedom

In India, there is a clear discourse and debate about "regulation versus control" On the one hand, Some participants are convinced that neither the libertarian nor the authoritarian model can operate in the vastly complex Indian Society. On the other hand there is still no consensus on how much freedom is too much freedom. Lack of Knowledge is also a very important factor in the regulation of Cyber freedom. The line between regulation and control is blurred. Any misuse of the Cyber Network can pose a serious threat to national security and communal harmony in the country.

In the Googlization of Everything, Siva Vaidyanathan (2011) warned that Google in Particular, represents a new ideology that he calls "techno-fundamentalism" This, he believed, encourages a dangerously "blind faith in technology" by People Who use Google services.¹¹ Such blind faith, he added could be harmful for the whole society and leads to them developing a biased approach. Also due to the absence of net neutrality law, an alliance between companies and governments may be much easier to implement and much less publicly visible. It is very essential that in a democracy the digital right of citizens need to be safeguarded against Violation by governments and corporations.

Conclusion

There is a need to fully Study of Cyber freedom, the role of social media and its effect on democracy. We should look at the issue of Cyber freedom beyond the construct and constraints of law. There should be availability, affordability, and access to Cyber Network by all people and a conducive environment where this freedom can be enjoyed by each and every citizen. Cyber freedom requires a change in the mindset of people and the right to freedom of speech and expression should be used in a balanced manner. Once this is achieved, only then can Cyber freedom and social media proliferate a democratic county like India.

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