Regulated Social Media in India: A Study of Media User Perception

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Abstract

This study offers a concise overview of perceptions of media consumers mainly students regarding controlled social media in India. The main objective of this study was to understand how individuals perceive and respond to regulatory measures implemented in the Indian social media ecosystem. By investigating the impact of these rules on user experiences, freedom of speech and overall satisfaction with social media platforms, the study employed a method pushed by survey method. Preliminary findings indicated that Indian social media users exhibited both positive and negative reactions to the adoption of regulatory laws. While some participants appreciated the efforts to combat the spread of misinformation, hate speech and harmful content, others expressed concerns about potential limitations on free expression and increased censorship.

Ensuring user confidence and equitable treatment, participants stressed the significance of transparent and consistent law enforcement. The study's outcomes offer valuable insights into the intricate interplay between India's social media landscape, user perceptions and regulatory initiatives. Policymakers, social media platforms and civil society organizations interested in shaping social media regulation must take into account the implications of these findings.

INTRODUCTION

The media landscape in India, as the world's largest democracy, plays a critical role in upholding democratic values such as freedom of speech and expression. The Indian Constitution recognizes the fundamental right to freedom of expression under Article 19(1)(a), which encompasses the right to utilize print, electronic and digital media to communicate ideas and opinions. However, this freedom is not absolute, as Article 19(2) allows for appropriate restrictions in the interest of preserving sovereignty, security and public order. Consequently, a delicate balance between media freedom and responsibility must be maintained through a regulatory framework. This article examines the relationship between the Indian Constitution and media regulation in India, focusing on existing laws, regulatory bodies, challenges and ongoing debates surrounding media regulation. In a study focussing on the debate around the social media regulation Abdullateef (2021) states, "[t]he fact that some members of the National Assembly advocate for the regulation of social media does not

mean that users are confident that the move is in their interest. The scepticism of Nigerians reflects a general perception about social media regulation..." (p.53).

India has established a comprehensive regulatory framework to govern various aspects of the media. Key regulatory bodies and relevant laws include:

Press Council of India (PCI): Mandated by the Press Council Act of 1978, the PCI is a statutory body responsible for upholding journalistic standards, safeguarding press freedom and ensuring the independence and accountability of the press. It acts as a self-regulatory mechanism for print media, addressing grievances and unethical practices.

The Cable Television Networks Regulation Act (1995): Governed by the Cable Television Networks Rules, this act regulates content standards, program codes and rules for television channels and cable television networks in India.

Broadcasting Content Complaints Council (BCCC): Established by the Indian Broadcasting Foundation (IBF), the BCCC serves as a self-regulatory organization to manage content control for television stations. It addresses complaints related to television content, functioning based on self-regulatory principles.

Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI): While primarily focused on regulating the telecommunications industry, TRAI also plays a role in media regulation, particularly in broadcasting and cable services. It formulates policies, rules and recommendations to ensure fair competition, consumer protection and high-quality services.

Digital Media Ethics Code and Information Technology Intermediary Guidelines (2021): Under the Information Technology Act of 2000, these regulations establish a legal framework for digital media platforms, including social media intermediaries, over-the-top (OTT) platforms and digital news media. They prescribe requirements for intermediaries, grievance redressal procedures and content regulation guidelines.

Despite the efforts to maintain a balance between media freedom and responsibility, media regulation in India faces several challenges and ongoing debates. Striking the Right Balance is of paramount importance. This is however not only limited to India but other countries and continents are facing similar dilemmas. "Determining what the regulation of social media content is in Latin America and how it is enforced is a constant challenge. The array of relevant issues, and their cardinal importance in the region - from privacy, freedom of expression, liabilities, disinformation, right to erasure, and copyright - is compelling, yet staggering in its expanse and substance" (Vasquez as quoted in Ashwini, 2021, p.233). This quote shows the global spread of the problem. The primary challenge is to strike the proper balance between media freedom and accountability. While freedom of speech is essential, it must be exercised responsibly, considering ethical obligations, public interest and potential social implications of media content. Similarly government interference and press freedom is also very important. Concerns have been raised about government pressure, censorship and interference with media organizations, posing threats to press freedom and media independence. Ambiguity and lack of uniformity is another concern. Some regulations, particularly those governing intermediaries and digital media, may suffer from ambiguity and lack of uniformity, potentially leading to regulatory overreach, curbing free speech and excessive state control. In addition to this, convergence and technological challenges are also very much prevalent. With the convergence of traditional and digital media, issues related to accountability, jurisdiction and adapting legal frameworks to rapidly evolving technology environments have arisen.

Recent Developments and Reforms

Recognizing the need for comprehensive reforms in media regulation, India has witnessed recent developments aimed at updating and refining the regulatory landscape. Notable reforms include:

New Rules for Digital Media: The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, introduced new regulations for digital media platforms, mandating the use of grievance mechanisms, content moderation and transparency in content removal.

Self-Regulation Debates: Discussions have emerged about the creation of independent self-

regulatory organizations for digital media platforms, allowing industry participation and oversight to ensure accountability and address content-related issues. Ho (2019) touches upon serious concerns regarding the debates around self-regulations using survey data of 903 respondents residing in Singapore.

Recommendations for Broadcast Regulation: Organizations like TRAI have proposed changes to the broadcasting regulatory system, focusing on enhancing consumer choice, promoting transparency and simplifying content control.

Judicial Interventions: The judiciary has played a crucial role in interpreting and safeguarding media freedom. Court rulings have emphasized the importance of protecting free expression, promoting ethical journalism and curbing arbitrary government actions.

Regulating media in India is a dynamic process, aiming to preserve media freedom while ensuring accountability and responsible content dissemination. While the Indian Constitution upholds the right to freedom of expression, it permits restrictions for societal harmony. India has established regulatory bodies and legal mechanisms to tackle media-related issues, yet challenges persist, including finding the right balance between freedom and responsibility, addressing government interference and adapting to technological advancements. As India's media landscape evolves, striking this balance remains essential to uphold democratic values and foster an inclusive and vibrant media environment.

Overview of the Related Literature

As the Internet emerged, the potential for conflicts and offenses increased dramatically, leading to the need to define the boundaries of online freedom of speech. However, existing regulations have struggled to effectively address the challenges presented by this new social phenomenon. Assigning responsibility for internet content, protecting minors and managing participation-based systems have proven difficult tasks for legislators. Consequently, the rise of the Internet has led to certain limitations on free speech. Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognize that uniform standards may not be feasible due to the global nature of the Internet and variations in regional cultural norms.

The United States and India have taken different approaches to protect freedom of speech on the Internet. Both countries face challenges in regulating obscenity, particularly in light of the Internet's expansion. Attempts to set regulatory standards have been imprecise and potentially restrictive for adult rights while trying to protect children. Although new rules have been implemented to govern obscenity on the Internet, their effective execution remains uncertain, necessitating a re-evaluation of current regulatory approaches. The unique challenges posed by the Internet demand careful consideration in finding the right balance between freedom and regulation (Parcu & Silvestri, 2014). To ensure future generations are prepared for the civil society of tomorrow, critical media literacy is of utmost importance. Although it may not produce immediate changes or fully resolve issues within the marketplace of ideas, emphasizing critical media literacy in education can contribute to a healthier discourse. While most discussions focus on fixing social media, it is essential to cultivate the next generation to engage in productive discussions, fostering an honest marketplace of ideas that counteracts intense partisanship alongside technology's growth. Strong protection of freedom of expression on the Internet is essential for the development of an inclusive and people-centred information society. Freedom of expression serves as a catalyst for other human rights online and is a fundamental human right in itself, protected by international human rights law. Ensuring that internet-based traditional and citizen journalists are protected while upholding professional and ethical standards is crucial.

The Internet poses challenges to freedom of expression, as it empowers individuals but also raises concerns about content regulation. Defining the Internet as a "public sphere" is vital in safeguarding online expression rights on par with physical world rights. While self-regulation by private entities may prioritize commercial interests over expression rights, it is essential for state responsibility to strengthen the protection of freedom of expression on the Internet.

Research Methodology and Objectives

1. To understand the level of awareness among Indian social media users about the regulations governing social media platforms in India.
2. To explore how Indian social media users perceive the balance between freedom of speech and regulation of social media content.
3. The objectives of research on regulated social media in India, a study of media user perception, can include the following:

The data collected for this study underwent analysis utilizing both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. The descriptive analysis involved summarizing the responses and calculating frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. Additionally, inferential analysis techniques, such as correlation analysis and regression analysis, were employed to examine the perceptions of media users in India.

To ensure ethical research standards, informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement in the study. Throughout the data collection and analysis stages, confidentiality and anonymity were strictly upheld. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines and regulations concerning research involving human subjects.

The population under consideration for this study consisted of students who uses social media. The sample size used for the study was 82 and the sampling technique employed was non-probability sampling technique (specifically, purposive sampling). The research method employed for data collection was a survey and the tool used for data collection was questionnaire via Google Forms. The tool utilized for data analysis was Microsoft Excel.

Data Tabulation and Analysis

The data was gathered on the frequency of social media platform usage among participants. The majority (79.3%) reported using platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube daily, indicating high engagement. A smaller percentage reported weekly (13.4%) or monthly (2.4%) usage, while a few respondents (4.9%) stated they rarely accessed these platforms. These findings highlight

Table 1: Media Usage Frequency

How often do you use social media platform like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube?

Periodicity	Frequency	%
Daily	65	79.3
Monthly	2	2.4
Rarely	4	4.9
Weekly	11	13.4
Grand Total	82	100.0

the prevalence of daily social media interactions in the participants' lives as shown Table 1.

One of the objective of this research was to study the peoples social media preferences. Tge table above shows participants' social media platform preferences. Instagram emerged as the most frequently used platform (59.8%), followed by Facebook (17.1%) and YouTube (14.6%). Other platforms, such as Twitter, LinkedIn, Snapchat and WhatsApp, were less popular, each constituting a small percentage of usage. These findings highlight Instagram's dominant presence among the participants as shown Table 2.

The participants were asked about their encounters with fake news or misinformation on social media. The table above shows a significant majority (90.2%) reported having come across such content, indicating a prevalent issue. A smaller percentage (9.8%) responded that they had not encountered fake news, underscoring the widespread presence of misinformation on social media platforms as shown Table 3.

Table 2: Preferred Social Media Platforms

Which social media platforms do you use the most?

Platform	Frequency	%
Facebook	14	17.1
Instagram	49	59.8
LinkedIn	2	2.4
Snapchat	1	1.2
Twitter	3	3.7
WhatsApp	1	1.2
YouTube	12	14.6
Grand Total	82	100.0

Table 3: Social Media and Misinformation

Have you ever come across fake news or misinformation on social media?

Response	Frequency	%
No	8	9.8
Yes	74	90.2
Grand Total	82	100.0

Table 4: Social Media Fake news / Misinformation and Audience Concern

How concerned are you about the spread of fake news and misinformation on social media?

Response	Frequency	%
Not at all concerned	3	3.7
Not very concerned	13	15.9
Somewhat concerned	34	41.5
Very concerned	32	39.0
Grand Total	82	100.0

Table 4 assessed participants' level of concern regarding the dissemination of fake news and misinformation on social media. The majority (89.1%) expressed varying degrees of concern. Notably, 34.8% were very concerned and 37.0% were somewhat concerned, highlighting substantial apprehension. A smaller proportion reported being not very concerned (14.1%) or not concerned at all (3.3%) about this critical issue.

The statement asked and shown in table above aimed to gauge public perception regarding the regulation of social media platforms in India. The data indicates diverse opinions, with 29.3% respondents being uncertain (Can't Say). However, a considerable proportion expressed agreement (23.2%) and strong agreement (26.8%) that social media platforms should be regulated. Conversely, 20.8% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the notion as shown Table 5.

Table 6 shows participants' perceptions about content regulation on social media platforms in India. The majority (47.6%) emphasized the need to regulate fake news, indicating growing concern about misinformation. Cyberbullying and hate speech were also significant concerns, each garnering 14.6% of responses. Terrorism-related content and pornography received 12.2% and 8.5% of support, respectively.

Table 5: Social Media and Regulation

Social media platforms should be regulated in India

Perception	Frequency	%
Strongly Disagree	8	9.8
Disagree	9	11.0
Can't Say	24	29.3
Agree	19	23.2
Strongly Agree	22	26.8
Grand Total	82	100.0

Table 6: Content Regulation and Audience Perception

Which of the following types of content should be regulated on social media platforms in India?

Perception	Frequency	%
All of the above	2	2.4
Cyberbullying	12	14.6
Fake news	39	47.6
Hate speech	12	14.6
Pornography	7	8.5
Terrorism-related content	10	12.2
Grand Total	82	100.0

Table 7: Disclosure of Media Algorithms

Should social media platforms be required to disclose their algorithms that determine what content users see?

Perception	Frequency	%
No	11	13.4
Not sure	27	32.9
Yes	44	53.7
Grand Total	82	100.0

Interestingly, only 2.4% advocated for regulating "All of the above," suggesting a nuanced approach to content moderation. These findings shed light on the public's priorities and preferences in addressing the challenges posed by potentially harmful content on social media platforms in India. Policymakers and platform operators can use this information to develop more targeted and effective regulatory measures.

This table above shows participants' perspectives on whether social media platforms should be obligated to disclose their content-ranking algorithms. A majority (53.7%) supported transparency and believed that such disclosure is necessary. However, a significant portion (32.9%)

remained uncertain about the matter, while a smaller proportion (13.4%) disagreed with the idea of algorithm disclosure. These results highlight the varying opinions on this critical issue of algorithmic transparency in the context of social media platforms as shown Table 7.

In the table above, participants' perceptions of concern regarding the spread of fake news and misinformation on social media were explored. The data indicates a diverse range of responses, with 41.5% expressing a positive sentiment, possibly indicating a sense of vigilance or optimism in addressing the issue. Meanwhile, 40.2% remained neutral and 18.3% held a negative viewpoint, possibly indicating a lack of significant worry or awareness. These findings provide insights into the public's attitudes towards combating misinformation on social media platforms as shown Table 8.

The table above explains the participants' perceptions regarding the potential impact of regulations on their freedom of expression on social media. The data reveals diverse viewpoints, with 37.8% responding with uncertainty (Maybe). However, a significant number (34.1%) believed that their freedom of expression would not be affected, while 28.0% expressed concerns that regulations might indeed limit their freedom of expression.

Table 8: Fake News Spread and Concern

How concerned are you about the spread of fake news and misinformation on social media?

Perception	Frequency	%
Negative	15	18.3
Neutral	33	40.2
Positive	34	41.5
Grand Total	82	100.0

Table 9: Regulation and Freedom of Speech and Expression

Do you think these regulations will affect your freedom of expression on social media?

Perception	Frequency	%
Maybe	31	37.8
No	28	34.1
Yes	23	28.0
Grand Total	82	100.0

These responses provide valuable insights into public sentiments on the delicate balance between content regulation and individual expression on social media platforms as shown in Table 9.

Conclusion

The research findings reveal intriguing insights into the complex relationship between social media and its users (particularly students) in India. Students /respondents demonstrated high engagement with social media platforms. Majority respondents reported using them daily. Instagram emerged as the most preferred platform, indicating its dominant presence among the participants, followed by Facebook and YouTube. The prevalence of fake news and misinformation on social media is also seen as a major concern. A significant majority of participants reported encountering such content, highlighting the urgent need for measures to address this issue. Moreover, participants expressed varying degrees of concern about the spread of fake news, with a substantial proportion being very concerned or somewhat concerned. Regulating social media platforms sparked diverse opinions among the participants. While a considerable number expressed support for regulation, others were uncertain or disagreed with the idea. This reflects the complexity of balancing media freedom and responsible content dissemination in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Concerns about freedom of expression also surfaced in the research findings. Participants demonstrated mixed perspectives regarding the potential impact of regulations on their freedom of expression on social media. Some believed that their freedom would not be affected, while others expressed worries about possible limitations.

Regarding content regulation, participants emphasized the need to tackle fake news, cyberbullying and hate speech. While terrorism-related content and pornography were also mentioned, they were less frequently highlighted. Notably, only a small percentage advocated for regulating "All of the above," suggesting a nuanced approach to content moderation.

Transparency in algorithm disclosure received significant support from the majority of participants.

They believed that social media platforms should disclose their content-ranking algorithms to foster greater trust and understanding among users. These findings underscore the complexity and dynamism of media regulation in India. Striking the right balance between media freedom and accountability remains crucial for upholding democratic values and promoting a vibrant and inclusive media environment. Policymakers and social media platforms must work together to address the challenges posed by misinformation and ensure responsible content dissemination while respecting users' freedom of expression. As India's media landscape continues to evolve, it is essential to develop targeted and effective regulatory measures that address the concerns expressed by the participants. This requires a comprehensive and adaptive approach that considers technological advancements, user perspectives and societal needs. By doing so, India can foster an environment where media freedom is respected, misinformation is curtailed and a healthy digital space is cultivated for all.

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