



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Freedom Of Speech And Expression With Reference To Social And Electronic Media

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Abstract: Technological developments have made many changes in the communication sector. The advent of internet led to the development of virtual communication. Nowadays, social media became an integral part of people's life. Social media is one of the most popular means of computer mediated communication and it plays a crucial role in the decision-making process of people with regard to an issue. Nearly half of the population in India is using social media. The Covid 19 pandemic made social media and other online platforms more popular among general public. They express their views and opinions in social media under the Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression guaranteed by Article 19(1)(a) of Indian Constitution. However, it has also been increasingly used for illegal acts. Two recent incidents are cited in the introduction for better understanding of this issue. Cyber laws existing in India is neither appropriate nor adequate to address this issue. Therefore, it is the need of the hour to frame appropriate social media regulations. The regulations imposed should be in such a manner that it does not hinder the citizen's Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression. This article highlights the importance of striking a balance between these two. It discusses in detail the definition and types of social media, right to access to social media and the restrictions imposed on this right by the Constitution. It also analyses in detail the Information Technology Act of 2000 and the controversial Section 66A of the same. This article throws light into the current status of social media in today's society by tagging the recent incidents. This article ends with a handful of creative suggestions to address this burning issue. All the references in support of the theme are enclosed at the end.

Keywords: Social Media, Fundamental Rights, Speech and Expression, Restrictions, Information Technology

Introduction

Freedom of speech is a cornerstone of democratic societies, allowing individuals to express their thoughts, ideas, and opinions without fear of censorship or retaliation. In the digital age, this right has found new expression through social and electronic media, which have transformed how people communicate, share

information, and engage in public discourse. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and news websites have given voices to millions, enabling real-time conversations and global reach.

However, the rise of these digital platforms also brings new challenges. While they amplify freedom of expression, they also raise critical issues related to misinformation, hate speech, cyberbullying, and the role of platform moderation. Balancing the right to free speech with the need to protect individuals and maintain public order has become a pressing concern in the digital era.

Thus, understanding the scope and limits of freedom of speech in social and electronic media is essential for ensuring that these platforms remain spaces for open, responsible, and respectful dialogue.

The communal disruption in Baduria, in the state of West Bengal is yet another grim reminder of how the social media has become an agent provocateur for social discord. The riot on July 2017 was the result of a “blasphemous” post in Facebook by a 17-year-old boy which led to the death of one and 25 injured, including 20 policemen. The irate mob torched around 12 police vehicles, looted and ransacked several houses in the area.

In the former incident, the freedom of speech and expression of a person in social media is hindered and the latter shows how this freedom is being misused. These are two extremes we find in the world of social media today. It's high time to strike a balance between these two. Well framed laws to regulate social media without hampering the freedom of speech and expression is the need of the hour.

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Social Media

Social media is a computer-based technology that helps the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through virtual networks. It is internet-based media which gives the users quick information of content. Content includes photos, documents, videos etc. Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein define social media as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.” Web 2.0. refers to internet platforms that allow for interactive participation by users. Another variant of social media is mobile social media, that is when social media is used in combination with mobile devices it is called mobile social media. This is the most widely used variant of social media across the globe.

Social media has become a powerful platform for communication, enabling people around the world to share their thoughts, opinions, and experiences instantly. In the context of freedom of speech, social media plays a dual role: it empowers individuals to express themselves freely, often bypassing traditional gatekeepers like governments and mainstream media, while also raising complex questions about the limits and responsibilities that come with that freedom. As platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram shape public discourse, they also face pressure to moderate content, combat misinformation, and curb hate speech-creating ongoing debates about censorship, digital rights, and the balance between free expression and public safety.

Types of Social Media

In 2010, Kaplan and Haenlein classified social media into six different types:

- a. Collaborative projects
- b. Blogs and micro blogs
- c. Content communities
- d. Social networking sites
- e. Virtual game worlds
- f. Virtual social worlds

Freedom of Speech and Expression

According to Thomas Friedmann, “The more time you spend in India, the more you realize that this country is one of the world’s greatest wonders- a miracle with a message. And the message is that democracy matters.” India is one of the largest countries in the world which protects all the fundamental rights of the citizens. Every citizen has the right to express their thoughts through any medium including social media. Comparing to fellow citizens in other nations, this picture is really soothing or mesmerizing. In this twenty-first century, the role of social media influenced the life of people all over the world and they started to express their opinions through virtual world. COVID -19, pandemic also enhanced the opportunities of virtual arena.

Personal liberty is the most important of all Fundamental Rights. Article 19 to 22 of the Indian Constitution deal with different aspects of this basic right. These four Articles provide the backbone of the chapter on Fundamental Rights. The foremost among this is the right to speech and expression, which is guaranteed under Article 19(1)(a). By virtue of 19(1)(a), all citizens shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression. But this right is subject to limitations imposed under Article 19(2) which empowers the State to put ‘reasonable’ restrictions on specified grounds.

Freedom of speech and expression includes the right to express one’s own convictions and opinions freely by words of mouth, writing, printing, pictures, theatre or any other mode. It thus includes the expression of one’s ideas through any communicable medium or visible representation such as gesture, signs and the like. Communicable medium includes social media where people express their views. This right connotes also publication and thus freedom of press is included in this category.

Freedom of expression has four broad special purposes to serve: it helps an individual to attain self-fulfillment, it assists in the discovery of truth, strengthens the capacity of an individual in participating in decision making and it provides a mechanism by which it would be possible to establish a reasonable balance between stability and social change. All members should be able to form their own beliefs and communicate them freely to others.

Freedom of speech and expression is an internationally recognized right and Article 19 of UDHR states that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through media and regardless of frontiers.

Right to Access Internet /Social Media and Freedom of Speech and Expression

We are living in a time where everything is linked to internet. COVID-19 pandemic has made internet an essential component of our lives. Social media or internet is a vital communication tool through which individuals can exercise their right to freedom of speech and expression and exchange information and ideas. In many of the movements that attracted global attention recently, social media played a key role by enabling people to connect and exchange information instantly and by creating a sense of solidarity.

Emphasizing the importance of internet, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of speech and expression in his report, which was submitted before the Human Rights Council, stated that the internet has become a key means by which individuals can exercise their right to freedom and expression and hence, internet access is a human right. Report further stressed States should ensure that internet access is maintained all times, even during times of political unrest. The States were also reminded of their positive obligation to promote or to facilitate the enjoyment of the right of freedom of expression and the means necessary to exercise this right, including the internet. The States were also instructed to adopt policies to make the internet widely available, accessible and affordable to all. Moreover, Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [UDHR] and Article 19(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights [ICCPR] also provides for freedom of speech and expression even in case of internet and social media.

In its recent judgement in *Faheema Shirin R K v. State of Kerala & Ors*, the High Court has recognized that mobile phones and access through it are part and parcel of the day-to-day life. The court looked at resolutions adopted by UNHRC and the General Assembly which unequivocally point to the fact that how internet access plays a key role in accessing information and its close link to education and knowledge. The court took the view that the right to access the internet has been read into the fundamental right to life and liberty, as well as privacy under Article 21. The court added that it constitutes an essential part of the infrastructure of freedom of speech and expression.

In *Anuradha Basin v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court held that freedom of speech and expression through the internet is one of the integral parts of Article 19(1)(a). It also ruled that an undefined restriction of internet services would be illegal and that orders for internet shutdown must satisfy the tests of necessity and proportionality.

Thus, we can conclude that freedom of speech and expression is recognized as a fundamental right in whatever medium it is exercised under the Constitution of India and other international declarations. And in the light of increasing use of internet and social media as a medium of exercising this right, access to this medium has also been recognized as a fundamental human right.

Restrictions on Freedom of Speech and Expression

The freedom of speech and expression does not confer on the citizens right to speak or write without responsibility. While freedom of speech and expression is a fundamental right in many democratic societies, it is not absolute. Governments and institutions often place certain restrictions on this freedom to protect other

important societal interests. These limitations are generally intended to balance individual liberty with the rights and safety of others. Article 19[3] of the International Convent on Civil and Political Rights [ICCPR] imposes restrictions on the following grounds:

- A) Provided by law and
- B) Necessary for respect of the rights or reputations of others, for the protection of national security, public order, or public health or morals.

Right to freedom of speech and expression is not an absolute right and it allows the government of India to frame laws and impose restrictions on reasonable grounds. As per Article 19[2] of the Indian Constitution, restrictions on the freedom of speech and expression can be imposed on the following grounds:

- a. Sovereignty and integrity of India
- b. Security of the State
- c. Friendly relations with foreign countries
- d. Public order
- e. Decency or morality
- f. Contempt of court
- g. Defamation
- h. Incitement of an offence

Cyber Laws in India and Social Media

Cyber laws are legal measures designed to regulate activities conducted via the internet, including those on social media platforms. With the rise of digital communication, cyber laws have become increasingly important to address issues such as data privacy, online harassment, cyberbullying, defamation, misinformation, and national security threats. Social media, due to its widespread use and influence, is a major focus of these laws. The legislations and the relevant provisions are listed below:

Information Technology Act – 2000

- (a) Under Chapter XI of the Act, Sections 65, 66, 66A, 66C, 66D, 66E, 66F, 67, 67A and 67B contain punishments for computer related offences which can also be committed through social media viz. tampering with computer source code, committing computer related offences given under Section 43, sending offensive messages through communication services, identity theft, cheating by personation using compute resource, violation of privacy, cyber terrorism, publishing or transmitting obscene material in electronic form, material containing sexually explicit act in electronic form, material depicting children in sexually explicit act in electronic form, respectively.
- (b) Section 69 of the Act grants power to the Central or a State Government to issue directions for interception or monitoring or decryption of any information through any computer resource in the interest of the sovereignty or integrity of India, defense of India, security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, for preventing incitement to commission of any cognizable offence, for investigation of any offence.

- (c) Section 69A grants power to the Central Government to issue directions to block public access of any information through any computer resource on similar grounds.
- (d) Section 69B grants power to the Central Government to issue directions to authorize any agency to monitor and collect traffic data or information through any computer resource for cyber security.
- (e) Section 79 provides for liability of intermediary. An intermediary shall not be liable for any third-party information, data or communication link made available or hosted by him in the following cases-
- his function is limited to providing access to a communication system over which such information is transmitted, stored or hosted.
 - He does not initiate, select the receiver and select or modify the information contained in the transmission.
 - He observes due diligence and other guidelines prescribed by the Central Government while discharging his duties.

Again, an intermediary shall be liable in the following cases:

- He has conspired, abetted, aided or induced by threats, promise or otherwise in the commission of the unlawful act.
 - He fails to expeditiously remove or disable access to the material, which is being used to commit the unlawful act, upon receiving actual knowledge or on being notified by the Government.
- (f) If any intermediary fails to assist, comply with direction and intentionally contravenes provisions under Sections 69, 69A and 69B respectively, he shall be liable to punishment.
- (g) Section 43A provides that where a body corporate possessing, dealing or handling any sensitive personal data or information in a computer resource owned, controlled or operated by it, is negligent in implementing and maintaining reasonable security practices and procedures thereby causing wrongful loss or wrongful gain to any person, it shall be liable to pay damages by way of compensation to the affected person.
- (h) Section 70B provides for an agency of the Government to be appointed by the Central Government called the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team, which shall serve as the national agency for performing functions relating to cyber security.

The central government has also enacted rules and timely amendments to give effect to various provisions of this Act, that includes The Information Technology (Procedure and safeguards of interception, Monitoring and Decryption of Information) Rules – 2009, The Information Technology (Procedure and Safeguards for Blocking for Access of Information by Public) Rules – 2009, The Information Technology (Procedure and Safeguard for Monitoring and Collecting Traffic Data for Information) Rules – 2009, The Information Technology (Intermediaries Guidelines) Rules – 2011, The Information Technology (Reasonable Security Practices and Procedures and Sensitive Personal Data or Information) Rules – 2011. The Information Technology Act was also amended in 2008, 2015, 2018 and 2020 to bring about adequate changes. On 29th June 2020, the Indian Government banned 59 Chinese mobile apps and on 24th November 2020, another 43 Chinese mobile apps were banned supported by section 69A of IT Act and citing national security interests. This move of the Indian Government has been criticized for possibly being in conflict with Article 19(1)(a)

of the Constitution of India as well as with WTO agreements. The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules - 2021 is secondary or subordinate legislation that suppresses India's Intermediary Guidelines Rules – 2011. The 2021 rules have stemmed from Section 87 of the Information Technology Act, 2000 and are a combination of the draft Intermediaries Rules, 2018 and the OTT Regulation and Code of Ethics for Digital Media.

Section 66A of Information Technology Act, 2000

Of all these provisions, Section 66A has been a matter of widespread discussions in recent times. Section 66A of Information Technology Act was inserted by the Information Technology (Amendment) Act of 2008 which provides punishment for sending offensive messages through communication channels and states:

Any person who sends, by means of a computer resource or a communication device, —

- (a) any information that is grossly offensive or has menacing character.
- (b) any information which he knows to be false, but for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience, danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred, or ill will, persistently by making use of such computer resource or a communication device,
- (c) any electronic mail or electronic mail message for the purpose of causing annoyance or inconvenience or to deceive or to mislead the addressee or recipient about the origin of such messages shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years and with fine.

Explanation: For the purposes of this section, terms "electronic mail" and "electronic mail message" means a message or information created or transmitted or received on a computer, computer system, computer resource or communication device including attachments in text images, audio, video and any other electronic record, which may be transmitted with the message.

A glimpse into this provision clearly shows that there is an inherent inconsistency between the phraseology of Section 66A and Article 19(1)(a) of the constitution which guarantees right to freedom of speech and expression to all Indian citizens. Grounds for reasonable restrictions on freedom of speech and expression are clearly stated under Article 19(2). But under Section 66A, restrictions have been placed on freedom of speech and expression on several other grounds, apart from those mentioned in the constitution. There are several anomalies in the provision, which are conflicting with the free speech requirements. Words like “gross offensive”, “menacing character”, “annoyance”, “danger”, obstruction”, “insult” and “injury” do not have any precise definition.

Adding fuel to the fire, several incidents of misuse of this provision was reported across the country. In November 2012, a Puducherry businessman Ravi Srinivasan was arrested under Section 66A for his tweet accusing Karti Chidambaram, son of then Finance Minister P. Chidambaram, of corruption. In September 2012, a freelance cartoonist Aseem Trivedi was arrested under Section 66A of the IT Act and other Sections under IPC and Prevention of Insults to National Honor Act, 1971 on the ground that his cartoons depicting widespread corruption in India were offensive. In the same year, two Air India employees were arrested by the Mumbai Police for posting content on Facebook that was against a trade union leader and some politicians and were in custody for 12 days.¹⁶ These are a few incidents which attracted public attention in this regard.

As result, a lot of petitions challenging the constitutionality of this provision was filed across different courts in India. In November 2012, a Delhi based law student Shreya Singhal filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Supreme Court of India.¹⁷ The petition challenged the constitutionality of the section wherein she argued that the section was vaguely phrased, as result it violated Article 14, 19(1)(a) and Article 21 of the constitution. Similar petitions were filed by founder of MouthShut.com and NGO Common Cause. The PIL was accepted on 29th November 2012 and on 24th March 2015, the Supreme Court ruled that Section 66A is unconstitutional in entirety. The court said that Section 66A of IT Act, 2000 is “arbitrarily, excessively and disproportionately invades the right of speech” provided under Article 19(1) of the Constitution of India.

Current Scenario

With the ease of internet access, the number of social media users in India stood at 440 million in January 2021. Furthermore, the social network users in the country were expected to be almost a billion or more by 2040. This statistic reminds us the importance of properly regulating the world of social media. Social media is playing a unique role in the functioning of democracies all over the world. Through social media and internet, citizens can unite despite territorial limitations. Although everyone is not physically present, the force of protest is not diminished in any way.

Social media campaigns have brought about many positive changes in society. A recent example of productive use of freedom of speech and expression in social media can be stated from Kerala. A one-and-a-half-year-old child named Mohammed was suffering from the rare disease of Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA). The curative for this disease is a drug named Zolgensma which costs 18 crore rupees. A massive campaign took place via social media to save the life of the child and a total sum of 46 crore was collected within a week. Social media played a crucial role in the time of natural calamities and other calamities. Social media campaigns also help in bringing out fraudulent practices in society and to curb them. In modern times, social media became a place for the voiceless to raise their voice, a place where people with similar mindset can come together and where people can effortlessly use their freedom of speech and expression. We have seen great movements in the recent past which started on internet and took the world by storm, one such movement which gained worldwide support and engagement was “Black Lives Matters”. This movement started off as a mere hashtag spread like wildfire. This was an eyeopener to the world in addressing issues regarding racism. It is also important to look at the other side of the coin. It is true that social media is a platform to voice one’s opinions and thoughts on any subject. There have been instances when social media has been lauded for playing a major role in overthrowing oppressive governments or bringing activists together, for various social issues. However, if the idea of or content posted and disseminated is capable of igniting ill-feelings and violence among people, it becomes exploitation of the freedom of speech and expression rather than exercising it. In such cases, social media does not actually play the role of a liberator as it ought to, but instead, causes public menace. This is an issue of high relevance in a country like India which is a combination of hundreds of languages, traditions and varied religious beliefs. A small spark can be dangerous if it is left unattended especially in case of social media. There for in some cases it becomes essential to censor social media contents by government to ensure public harmony.

“Freedom of speech and expression is one of the most abused rights in recent times”, then Chief Justice of India S A Bobde said in reaction to center’s affidavit filed in Tablighi case. Several incidents of cyber-crimes, defamation, invasion of privacy, incitement of offences, racist and sexist remarks, stalking, abuse, hacking, bullying, victim blaming, harassment and many more are committed through social media. Targeting a person or spreading rumors to deteriorate the image of a person in general public is a widespread negative trend in social media. The most vulgar form of abuse can be seen in the comment section of social media pages and the culprits shields themselves by stating their freedom of speech and expression. Many have lost their harmonious and peaceful life due to the attack of this faceless people. Toxic influencers spreading fake news, stereotypes, racism and misogyny in society is a problem to be addressed. Social media posts have triggered communal violence and mob lynching in many parts of the country. Investigations revealed that hate contents circulated on social media has sparked communal riots in Muzaffar Nagar. Two YouTubers, who are brothers, were arrested in Kerala recently for causing ruckus in government office with the support of the followers and have registered cases against other two who had called for a riot through social media following the arrest of the brothers. All these incidents highlights that it’s high time to frame social media regulations without hindering the basic right to freedom of speech and expression.

Conclusion

Social media is a very powerful means of exercising one’s freedom of speech and expression. However, it has also been increasingly used for illegal purposes, and this made it essential to regulate social media. This regulation should not be violative of people’s right. Government, service providers and the users should work hand in hand to develop a new healthy social media culture in our nation. Service providers can help in bringing out the best of government regulations by providing timely updates.

As a result, there is a growing need to strike a careful balance between protecting the right to free speech and addressing the responsibilities that come with it. Governments, technology companies, and civil society must work together to create frameworks that uphold this fundamental right while ensuring that digital platforms do not become spaces for abuse or harm.

The existing cyber laws of India are neither appropriate nor adequate in curbing the issues. An alternative for Section 66A of IT Act is the need of the hour. There are many practical difficulties in framing social media regulations in a vast and diverse country like India. Suggestions can be invited from citizens and successful regulative models of other nations can be incorporated. Government can form a committee including technical experts, to look into different facets of the use and misuse of social media and recommend a suitable manner in which it can be regulated without hindering the civil rights of citizens.

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