

Silent Voices: Changing Expressions through Social Media Platforms: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

The paper examines how social media influenced the way of expression of its users. The paper also explains the opinion of the users of different social networking sites in terms of the periphery of freedom of expression and censorship. The paper, further explains the Government's perceptions and policies on freedom of expression and censorship for social platforms. Social networking sites have created a new wave in the field of information. The real power of today's social networking sites is that it is available to anyone with smartphone without the restriction of geographical boundaries. Social platforms place in an individual's hand the power of information. People can share their views on such platforms and enjoy the freedom of expression mentioned in Article 19 (1) (a) of our Constitution which is restricted by eight reasonable restriction mentioned in Article 19 (2). Misuses of social platforms have been observed in last few years which raised the issue to decide the periphery of expression for its users. Survey method has been used for collecting primary data. Universe of present study is Delhi based students. For the purpose of study, 80 respondents were randomly selected while questionnaire was used to get the response of social networking sites users. To get government perception, secondary data is used with due references.

Key words-Freedom of expression, Censorship, Social Networking Sites, Youth, Social platform

Introduction

New media holds out a possibility of on-demand access to content anytime, anywhere, or any digital devices, as well as interactive user feedback, create participation and community formation. With the development of computer and internet system, people can access information throughout the world quickly. Creation of cyber world has provided a social platform where anyone can express himself. Social networking site is the expression used to describe any website (Facebook, Twitter etc.) that enables users to create own profiles within the website and form relationships with other users of the same website who access their profile. Social networking sites can be used to describe community-based websites, online discussion forums, chat-rooms and other social space online. Social networking sites have become the most important tools of sharing information for new generation. SNS have created a space in the lifestyle of youth. They use it for exchange or share their ideas with others in the forms of text, graphic, picture or video. User can also give comment as their feedback immediately. As famous lyric Prasoon Joshi says, "It is the era of 20-20 and capsule information. Youth like to understand matters in hurried which have been expressed in fewer words and for this internet is favorite medium for them. In upcoming days, it will be more effective." Social networking sites have capacity to create a new information society which is more interactive in nature; it also provides facility to disseminate information among followers without any restriction of geographical distance. Facebook which was founded in February 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg is an example of the social media model, in which most users are also participants. "Facebook is a social utility site that enables people to remain connected with each other through

sharing views on 'wall' and instant messaging and sharing of photographs or videos." Facebook has been used by different social groups to aware a specific sector of society. Blogging can be seen as another important platform of expression which is used by huge number of people.

Anna's movement can be seen as witness of the power of social networking sites especially of Facebook where a huge number of social media users raised their voice against corruption in India. Anna Hazare's agitation against corruption gained momentum with the support of social networking sites. During that phase, youth expressed their views and made a strong voice against corruption. Anna's speeches uploaded to the social platforms, reached millions of people across the globe. Among youth, social networking sites can be used to convey social messages on different social issues and to collect their opinion or suggestions. In the age of new media, democratization of the creation, publishing, distribution and consumption of content is possible through these networking sites. India is a democratic country where freedom of expression is the right of every citizen, a group, or media provided by democracy. Social networking sites are also providing help to government agencies and authorities to share their opinion on social platforms. PM Modi always uses social platforms to get connected with huge number of people. "As a positive step in India different government departments are logging into social networking sites to accept complaints and provide redressal against offenders of traffic violation or railway passengers." Ex Railway Minister Suresh Prabhu and Foreign Affairs Minister Ms. Shushma Swaraj responded and resolved many problems shared on Twitter.

Social networking sites have become a new platform for youth to share their views on an issue. They are free to express and enjoy the right of speech as our Constitution guarantees the freedom of speech and expression for every citizen. The heart of the article 19(1)(a) says, 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 any media and regardless of frontiers. But this freedom is restricted with 8 reasonable restrictions which have been mentioned in Article 19(2). Actually, freedom of expression applies equally to the internet as it does in the real world of information. In India, social responsibility is the periphery of expression which cannot be jumped out by any person. The Constitution of India states that it is the right of every citizen to gather information and express it to others, within as well as outside India. In a landmark judgment (SC/25 Jan. 1978) of the case *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court held that the freedom of speech and expression has no geographical limitation and it carries with it the right of a citizen to gather information and to exchange thought with others not only in India but abroad also.

Censorship on Social Platform

In past few years, information posted on social networking sites has been observed as violation of freedom of expression. Many time, social networking site users crossed the periphery of expression mentioned in Article 19 (2). In previous UPA government, it was urged social networking sites to monitor the third party content they published on their sites as defamatory content existed on social platforms. Ex Communication and IT Minister Mr. Kapil Sibal says, "If social networking sites don't cooperate then it is the duty of the government to think of steps that we need. We have to take care of the sensibilities of our people." Cartoonist Aseem Trivedi charged with sedition after

posting a cartoon on facebook while two girls were arrested for FB post questioning ‘Bal Thakrey Shutdown’ of Mumbai. A youth from Bareilly held for objectionable post against SP leader Azam Khan. In present NDA government many people have been arrested for their abusive posts on social platforms. A Kerala youth was arrested on charges of posting abusive comments and photos on facebook against PM Modi. Authorities in Kashmir have banned social sites including Facebook, Whatsapp and Twitter for one month in an effort to calm tension in Kashmir. According to government, “social media were being misused by anti-national and anti-social elements.” Cyber law experts are also against of such type of censorship. They say there is need to tighten existing regulations, social media sites should not be given the right to determine the definition of defamatory content. They say that any attempt for censorship too should be resisted. Popular novel writer Chetan Bhagat says, “I hate some of the stuff written on the internet, but I would hate it even more if they were not allowed to write it.” Twitter has been used as a tool to express individual’s opinion. Recently a twit of writer Shobha Dey hurt the sentiment of many people. On one hand, twitter is considered as a medium of expression freely while other hand it can be used to spread false or malicious content.

But can censorship be the solution? In democratic country like India, such type of censorship can create dictatorship like China and Pakistan. Mahatma Gandhi was also against of censorship on freedom of expression. In his autobiography, he has mentioned that freedom of expression cannot be restricted by outsiders force. He advocated self-regulation to solve such problems. In India, IT Act is sufficient and reasonable. As mentioned in IT Act, 2000 “Whoever publishes or transmits or causes to be published in the electronic form, any material which is lascivious or appeals to the prurient interest or its effect is such as to tend to deprave and corrupt persons who are likely, having regard to all relevant circumstances, to read, see or hear the matter contained or embodied in it, shall be punished on first convention with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to five years and with fine which may extend to two lakh rupees.” Most of experts are against of defamatory, offensive and dangerous content on social networking sites but they also forcedly oppose the idea of censorship. Recently Section 66 A of Information Technology Act has been scrapped. Present government has issued the statement that government is not planning to regulate content on social media. However they are in favor that content which hurts sentiments should be removed and apt laws to be created. Government agencies realize that content regulation on social platforms is an impossible task especially in a country which is the world’s biggest democracy.

Review of Literature

The big wave of social media has hit almost every corner of the world in cyberspace. It has affected millions of people in many ways. It has also affected information sharing process and created new challenges in front of government agencies. B. Asem (2013) in her study ‘Networked Publics and Identity Construction: Towards an Era of Virtual Socialization’ mentioned “The most recent development in digital age is the era of social media where the social networking sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Myspace, Instagram, snapchat, twitter etc. have increasingly become a platform for networking and sharing content amongst people from different walks of life.” Karnika Seth (2012) in her book ‘Computers, Internet and New Technology Laws’ has discussed the impact

of social networking sites. She writes “These platforms have a positive socio- cultural impact as it allows people to share their views with their distant friends and relatives within few seconds. It has negated the effects of geographical distances in our social lives. Culturally, it extends an enriching experience as one can make friends on these sites and learn about important events and festivals and life styles of different countries within one virtual room and share this experience with a group of friends.” Ratnakirti Roy & Dipjyoti Das (2017) explained social reality on social platforms in their work ‘Dilution of Social Media Privacy: Security Vulnerabilities and Psychological Implications’. “In this era of advanced communication technology, social media has emerged as the most popular forum, intended to promote and accelerate human interaction and socialize with greater affectivity and efficiency. It not only facilitates rapid dissemination of wide range of information and messages but has also transformed our lives into an augmented virtual reality. They are designed to encourage the sharing of various information, views, pictures and videos which helps to expand our social space within the periphery of the online world.” R. Hakemulder (2005) describes the legal aspects of censorship in his book ‘Media, Ethics and Laws. He wrote “the spirit of free speech is the ability to think and speak freely and to obtain information from others through publications and public discourse without fear of retribution, restriction, or repression by the government. It is through free speech, people could come together to achieve political influence, to strengthen their morality, and to help others to become moral and enlightened citizens. Censorship is the process of filter the views of a person or an organization with the help of certain rule and regulation introduced by government. It not only restrict the freedom of expression but also harmful for democratic values.” On the basis of review of literature we can say that experts are not in favor of censorship on social platforms but they advocate self-regulation before posting content on such platforms.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this paper is to examine the opinion of social media users regarding freedom of expression verses censorship. What should be the periphery of expression for social media users is key concern of the study. How censorship can be dangerous in the way of freedom of expression is also key attention of this paper. Apart from this, legal aspects of freedom of expression for social networking sites users have been pointed out with the help of secondary data. What government authorities think over freedom of expression and censorship issues is also an objective of this study.

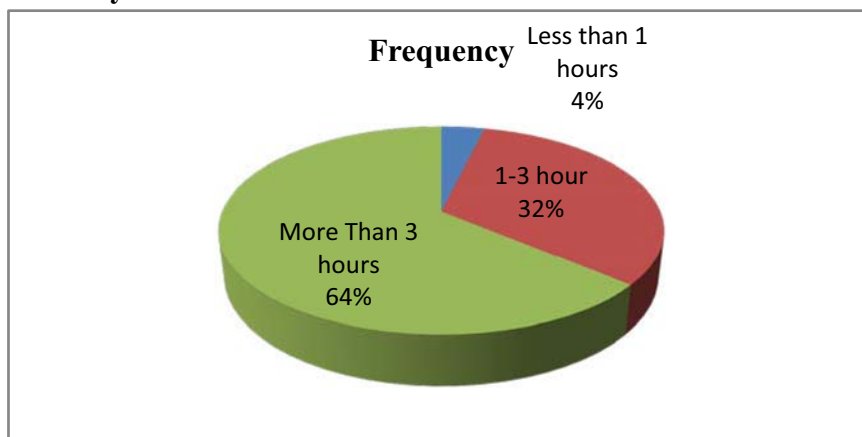
Research Methodology

The study is empirical in nature and follows a normative approach. Survey method has been used for the collection of primary data. The questionnaire structured focuses on collecting information through both open and close ended questions. The target location of the study has been Delhi, specifically Delhi University and Indraprastha University. The students of Delhi have been taken as the sample units. For this study, random sampling technique has been incorporated to get the feedback of 80 respondents as the total sample size. The respondents are within the age group of 18-32 years. Since, youth are the most active part of the society and familiar with new media, they easily adopt new technological changes. Secondary data is also used in terms of government records and policy documents on surveillance, privacy and censorship in media.

Data Presentation and Analysis

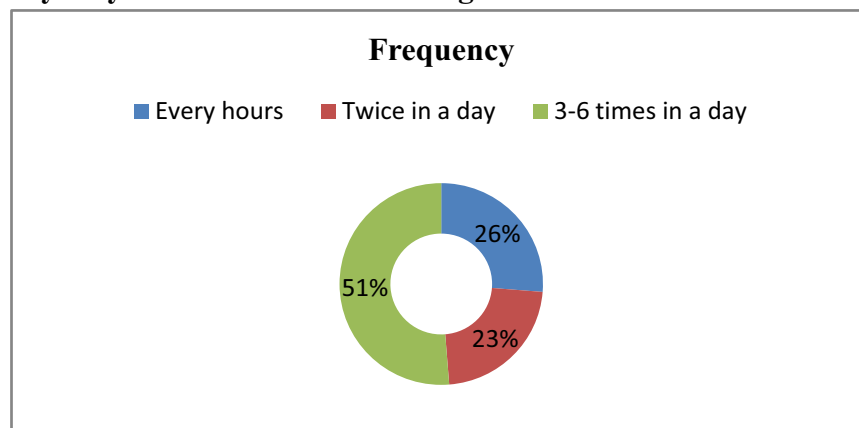
The huge popularity of social platforms created a new wave of information sharing. Social networking sites have been used as a powerful tool to disseminate information all over world. People also use social platforms to create social forum and discussion group. As numbers of smartphones are increasing, the numbers of social networking sites are also increasing. “According to a report of IAMAI titled mobile internet in India 2016, there were 389 million mobile internet users in India as on December, 2016. The number of mobile internet users in India is estimated to reach around 420 million by June, 2017.” All respondents had smartphones and internet facility with their phones. This research is based on primary data mainly which are presented and analyzed in following manner:

1. How much time do you devote to Internet?



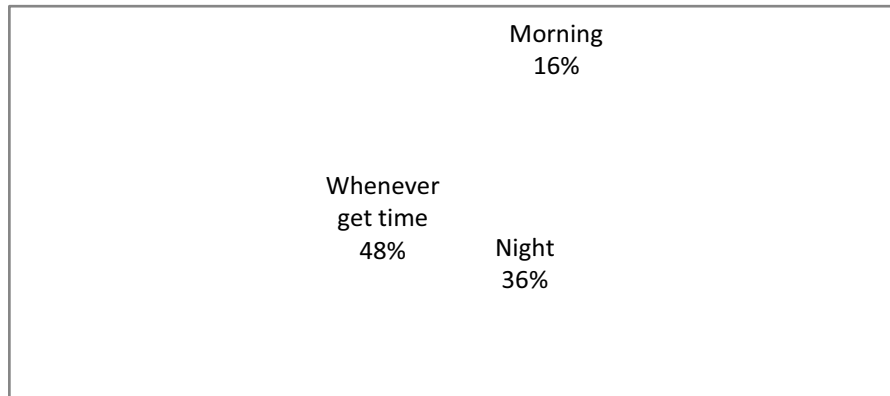
Most of respondents (64%) use internet more than three hours while only 4% respondents use it for less than one hour. It shows respondents spend their valuable time on internet. Availability of internet and reducing cost of net pack made it possible.

2. How frequently do you visit social networking sites?



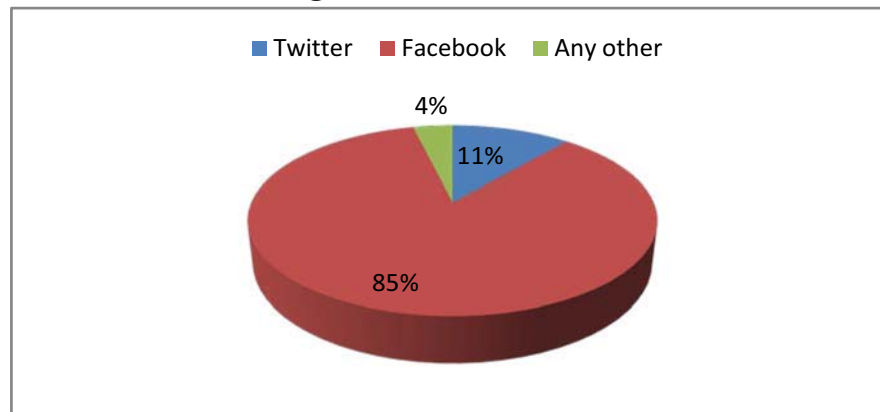
About half of respondents’ visit social networking sites for 3-6 times in a day which shows craving of social platforms among users. 26% respondents say that they are addicted of it as they accept they visit social sites every hour. Rest of them uses social platforms twice in a day generally.

3. When do you prefer to use social networking sites?



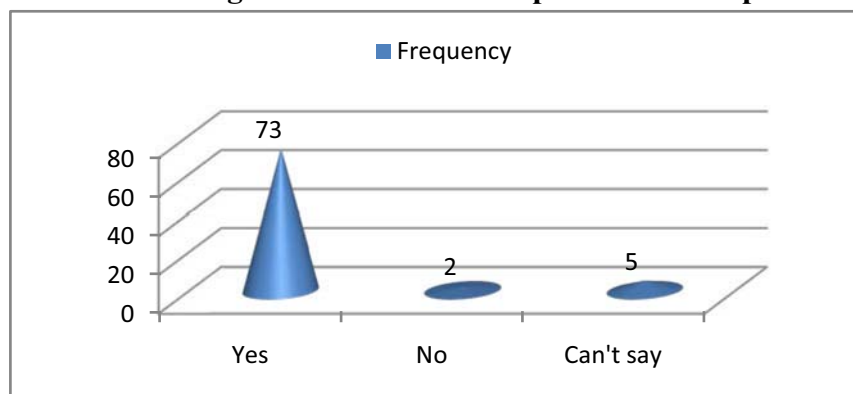
Most of respondents use social platforms whenever they get time while a good number of respondents prefer to use social platforms at night. Very few respondents prefer morning time to use such platforms to express.

4. Most preferable social networking site is?



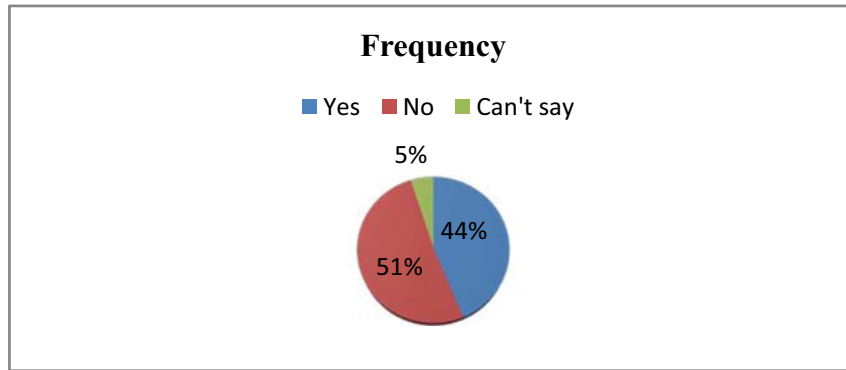
Facebook is most popular and preferred social networking sites for 85% of respondents. Micro-blogging sites Twitter is preferred by 11% of respondents. Interactive features make Facebook more popular among youth.

5. Do you feel social networking site is most effective platform for expression?



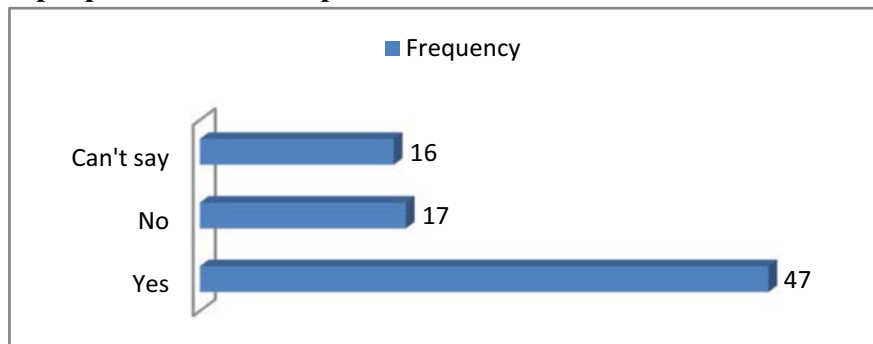
Most of respondents accept that social networking site is most effective platform for expression where they can freely share their views and express themselves on social platforms without geographical boundaries.

6. Are you aware of ethics of freedom of speech and expression?



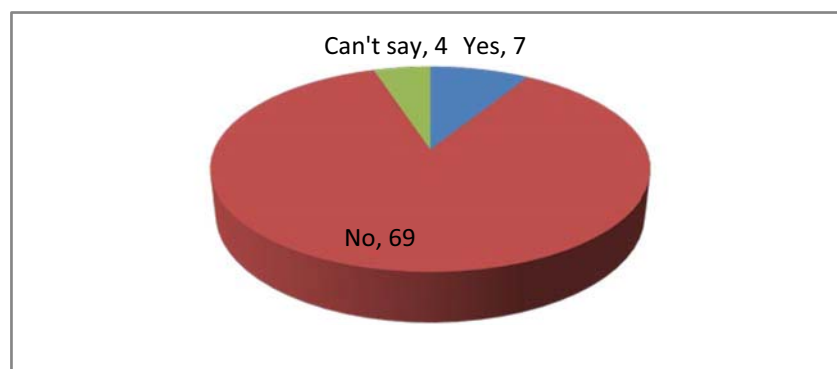
About half of the respondents are not aware of ethical aspects of freedom of speech and expression as they are not aware of eight reasonable restrictions mentioned in Article 19 (2) of Indian Constitution. However a good number of respondents have knowledge of ethical aspects of expression. Only few of them denied to response as they opt can't say.

7. Do you agree people misuse social platforms?



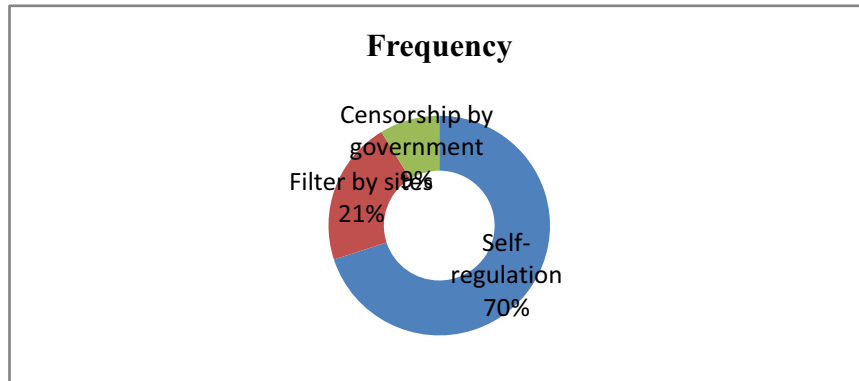
About 60% of respondents accept that people misuse social platforms as they post objectionable content on such platforms. However, rests of them are not agreeing regarding the misuse of social platforms as they respond 'no' or 'can't say'.

8. Do you in favor of censorship on social platforms?



Most of the respondents oppose censorship on social platforms as they say it will harm freedom of expression and democratic value of our country. Only few of respondents are in favor of censorship on social networking sites.

9. What will you suggest to check defamatory and indecency content on social platforms



70% of respondents suggest self-regulation to check defamatory and indecency content on social platforms. 21% of respondents suggest developing filter system to check any indecent content. Only 9% respondents suggest going with strong action by government as develop censorship mechanism for social platforms.

Conclusion

Social platforms have given a new outline to freedom of speech and expression especially for young generation. With technological advancement, social platforms are available for large number of population. Social networking sites have been established as powerful medium to exercise one's right to freedom of speech and expression. They want to express freely and strongly oppose the idea of censorship by government. Majority of them don't want any interference in the way of expression on social platforms. Self-regulation can be periphery of expression for social networking sites users which can scan any hate speech or abusive language or objectionable content which can hurt religious sentiments of others. Social platforms have been used by anti-social elements which is main concern of government. Freedom of expression is the strongest pillar of democratic system. It can be enjoyed as our constitutional rights but we must think about boundaries created by our social and ethical values. To keep social platforms clean, self-regulation will be most suitable thing. Periphery of expression of social sites users can be decided by users themselves not by government. It will definitely help freely expression on social platforms.

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