

Social Media and Freedom of Expression – A Study of User's Perception

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Abstract

The concept of social media emerged to bring a greater connect between and among people to share and exchange ideas on a given topic. The canvas for social media is as wide as the sky. This platform can be used for reacting to any event or happening under the sun. As a matter of fact, social media has given an alternative to sincere journalism where each one can express his views, reviews and criticism candidly. The media provided platform for uploading videos and photographs to substantiate what the user wants to convey. However, the issue is whether, the social media uses the liberty to speak their hearts out, and does the society have that much fairness in accepting whatever that is written. Whoever starts using the social media initially thought that it could be free and fair for all. Nevertheless experiences are shown that there is some kind of intolerance in accepting negative comments and negative remarks on a given issue. In some instances, it drew the ire of the ruling party resulting in punishment or in passing comments on the social media without decency. The users many a time fail to understand that it is only one man's view and one should respect it. But the recent trend is totally opposite. This paper precisely aims to investigate whether there is freedom of expression on the social networking sites. Whether our own users sit over the judgment of what one says and the action that follows? Since lot of youngsters get into this platform in millions everyday should they be taught the code of conduct while using this platform which are supposed to be free and fair? This paper tries to provide some answers.

Keywords: Social Media, freedom of speech, Intolerance

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INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning of civilization, humans have always been expressing their thoughts through one or the other way. Engraving their feelings in the wall of caves or usage of symbol language- there are a lot of proofs which exemplifies that nothing can stop their freedom of speech. Media is the most powerful platform that can conduct an individual's expressions in a proper effective way, make it eligible to bring out a change. The rapid development of new media has been the main force accelerating the trend of globalization in human society in recent decades. 'New media has brought human interaction and society to a highly interconnected and complex level' (China Media Research, 2012). Wikipedia defines Social media as computer-mediated tools that allow people to create, share, or exchange information, career interests, ideas, and pictures/videos in virtual communities and networks. The concept of social media emerged to bring a greater connect between and among people to share and exchange ideas on a given topic. It is the media where an individual can contact anyone at any extremity of the world; it is the platform where people tend to speak their heart out considering it the most powerful and kind platform of letting them expressing their views and reviews. But is it really kind when it comes under the right to freedom of speech and expression? Does it allow people to share their thoughts on any issue in any way they prefer? 'It provides an unprecedented volume of resources for information and knowledge and opens up new opportunities for expression and participation' (<http://www.unesco.org>). On the one hand, Internet empowers freedom of expression by providing individuals with new means of expressions. On the other hand, the free flow of information has raised the call for content regulation, not least to restrict minors' access to potentially harmful information.

The concept of freedom of speech can be taken as a philosophy of life, a political statement, a core concept in- democracy, human right, a basic idea through freedom of press etc. In a strong democracy freedom of speech must be ensured. In an ideal condition people's right to

speak of what they want or not, to express what they think is right or wrong is a necessity to establish a proper democratic system (Freedom House Report 2012).

According to the Freedom House's latest report 'Freedom on the Net, 2012', India's overall Internet Freedom Status is "Partly Free." India has secured a score of 39 on a scale from 0 (most free) to 100 (least free), which places India 20 out of the 47 countries worldwide that were included in the report. This observation is being made with regard to the exercise of the right of freedom of speech and expression in the context of social media, especially the Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, 2000. In recent years, we have seen a number of instances where some kind of intolerance in accepting negative remarks regarding any issue was shown resulting in the punishment of people.

There are few incidents that took place in India which compel a person to think twice before posting anything even on his/her personal social networking wall. From arresting two college students Shaheen Dhada and Rinu Srinivasan under section 66 of the IT Act by the Palghar police for the 'crime' of making and clicking like on a Facebook post regarding the shutdown of Mumbai following the death of Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray in 2012 to circulating anti Mamata Banerjee, Chief Minister of West Bengal content by posting a cartoon on the Internet by Ambikesh Mahapatra, a Professor of Jadavpur University, the nation has been the witness for some vindictive scenario where a normal post by a person on a social networking site became a controversial issue creating a lot of disturbance in the society.

Not only in a greater social context, exercise of Freedom of Expression on social media brings out problems in someone's personal life too. According to the report published by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), the number of internet users in India has reached 354 million by the end of June 2015. Facebook emerged the leading social media website with 96 per cent of urban users accessing it, followed by Google Plus (61 per cent), Twitter (43 per cent) and LinkedIn (24 per cent). Such a huge proportion of social media users has made the opinion sharing platform bigger than before. Every day in every second, someone or the other is posting about some issues on any of the social networking sites, while few people are trying to manipulate their views by criticizing those posts in the same pace. As a result,

therefore, people either start empowering their own points of view making the sites an online battlefield, or they just become less interested, sometimes completely unwilling to share anything due to lack of support and plenty of criticism which leads to the situation of “Spiral of Silence”. The crime like cyber bullying has made it more complex where the bullies seek to intimidate, control, manipulate, put down, falsely discredit, or humiliate the victims. These actions are deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior intended to harm another person resulting in depression and even suicidal attempt of the victim. Not only is this, lacking of any official code of conduct for the users of Social Networking Sites a big reason behind this crime. Recently Social intolerance has advanced significantly largely due to Internet. There is an increasing tendency in us to react furiously to the situation or statement, which is not in our favor. Then where do we stand? Even though article 19(1) (a) of Indian Constitution clearly mentions we have the right to freedom of speech and expression, do we see its practice in real life? If an individual just shares his / her personal opinion on any given issue then is it justified to criticize his / her point of view or trying to manipulate that just to show ourselves right?

The crucial question, therefore, is whether the social networking sites have truly envisaged freedom of expression to the extent that one decides? Several antecedents have shown that it has generated hate campaigns and animosities. However, one should also consider the positives that have come because of social networking sites. It should be credited for bringing the world together and making it global.

OBJECTIVES

This paper makes an attempt to examine the degree of freedom that the social networking sites have provided and people's perception about the freedom that they enjoy while using these sites.

The objectives are;

- To study the extent of social media usage
- Whether there is freedom of expression on social media sites
- To study the tolerance level of social media users.

Understanding that a majority of the population are accessible to New Media in one way or the other, it is time now think how this media can be used for creating a strong platform to express our thoughts without any obstruction. This study will be based on field survet research with a sample consisting of 150 respondents drawn from Bangalore city using simple random sampling method. Since this is a study on the perception and the practice, only primary data will substantiate the facts. The outcome will be the consolidation of the findings envisaged by the survey.

ANALYSIS

The data collected from 150 respondents was analysed. The analysis makes interesting revelations.

Table -1: Demographic Details of Respondents

Age group	Male		Female		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
16-20	12	8.0	40	27.0	52	34.66
21-24	21	14.0	38	25.0	59	39.33
25-29	13	9.0	12	8.0	25	16.66
30-34	6	4.0	3	2.0	9	6.0
35-39	1	0.7	4	2.3	5	3.33
Total	54	35.76	96	64.23	150	100

Table 1 signifies out of people interviewed 8 percent of the male respondents and 27 percent of the female respondents belonged to the age group of 16-20, 14 percent of the male respondents and 25 percent of the female respondents were from the age group of 21-24, 9 percent of the male respondents and 8 percent of female respondent belonged to the age group of 25-29, 4 percent of the male respondent and 2 percent of the female respondents were from the age group of 30-34, 0.7 percent of the male respondent and 2.3 of the female respondent belonged to the age group of 35-39. The respondents were chosen by simple random sample and care was taken for equal representation of respondents in all age groups.

Table -2: Occupational Status of Respondents

Occupation	Student	Teacher	Doctor	Engineer	Others
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f	103	13	3	11	20
%	69.0	8.7	2.0	7.3	13.3

Table 2 signifies that out of people interviewed 69 percent of the respondents are students, 8.7 percent are teachers, 7.3 percent are engineers, 2 percent are doctors, and 13.3 percent have some other occupation.

Table -3: Preferred Mode of Accessing Internet

Internet Access	Laptop	Computer	Mobile Phone
f	89	15	135
%	59.33	10.0	90.0

Table 3 shows that 59 percent of 150 respondents access Internet from laptop, 10 percent of them access Internet from computer whereas 90 percent of the respondents prefer their mobile phones for accessing Internet. This is a significant revelation as majority of respondents are students and study reveals the change in media habits of younger generation who prefer mobile phones over computers to access Internet.

Table - 4: Respondents using Social Networking Sites

Social Networking Site	f	%
Yes	146	97.33
No	4	2.66

From the Table 4 it is evident that the majority of the respondents i.e., 97.3 percent of them use Social Networking Sites while negligible percent (2.66 percent) of the respondents do not prefer using Social Networking Sites. The study endorses the recent trend seen in SNS usage.

Table -5: Frequency of using Social Networking Sites

Frequency	f	%
Daily	103	68.66
Alternate Days	25	16.66
Weekly	10	6.66
Rarely	12	8.0

Table 5 indicates that 68.66 percent of the total respondents use social networking sites whereas 17percent of them use it in every alternate day. Very few (7 percent) of the respondents access social networking sites on a weekly basis and 8 percent of the respondents rarely use those sites.

Table -6 Purpose of using Social Networking Sites

Purpose	f	%
(a)To get connected with friends and family	58	38.66
(b)To use social networking sites as a platform for discussing serious issues	2	1.33
Both (a) and (b)	78	52.0
None of the above	12	8.0

The above Table 6, indicates that 39 percent of the interviewed people use Social Networking Sites to get connected to friends and family, while 1.3 percent of them use these sites as a platform for serious discussion. Over 52 percent out of the total respondents use social networking sites for both social connections and serious discussion and 8 percent of them does not use these sites due to any of the above reasons. Primarily, it is used more for getting connected with family and friends than for discussion, says the study.

Table -7: Where Respondents are More Comfortable in Sharing Views

Place for Sharing Views	f	%
(a) Real world i.e., speaking or writing directly to the person you want to	46	30.66
(b) Virtual world i.e., through social networking sites	17	11.33
Both (a) and (b)	83	55.33
None of the above	4	2.66

Table 7 signifies that the 31 percent of the respondents are comfortable in sharing their views in real world whereas 11 percent of them are comfortable to express their thoughts in virtual world. Interestingly, 55 percent of the total respondents do not hesitate to speak their heart out in both real world and virtual world while 3 percent of the respondents do not feel comfortable to share their views anywhere at all.

Table -8: Respondents like to get Comments on Posts – Positive/ Negative

Likes in SNS	f	%
Always	44	29.33
May be	30	20.0
Sometimes	61	40.66
Never	15	10.0

Table 8 indicates that 29 percent of the total interviewed people expect comments on their posts irrespective of whether it is positive or negative, whereas 41 percent of them sometimes like to

get comments, 20 percent are not sure about their expectations and 9 percent never like to get any kind of positive as well as negative comments regarding their posts.

Table –9: Respondents' Reaction to Negative Criticism on Posts

How respondents react to negative criticism on their posts?	f	%
Making points to prove yourself right and the other one wrong	23	15.33
Just ignoring the comment	39	26.0
Depends on the topic of your post	87	58.0

Table 9 indicates that most of the respondents' reactions to negative comments depend on the topic of their post. When 58 percent of the respondents agree to this point, 15 percent says that they try to make points supporting their views and 26 percent just ignore others' comments.

Table -10: Respondents' Reaction to Negative Attitude of People

Respondents' Reaction to Negative Attitude of People towards their thought	f	%
Coolly because it cannot change your personal opinion	127	84.66
You get upset due to less popularity and people's disagreement with your point of view	21	14.00

Table 10 signifies that 85 percent of the respondents take other's negative comments to their posts in a cool manner since those comments cannot change their personal opinion whereas 14 percent get upset to see people's disagreements with their thoughts.

Table -11: Respondents Like to Comment or Criticize on SNS

Frequency of comment	f	%
Always	16	10.66
Rarely	64	42.66
Very often	34	22.66
Never	36	24.0

Table 11 signifies that out of people interviewed, 11 percent always like to criticize or comment on other's post, 23 percent very often comment on other's post, 43 percent rarely

prefer to criticize other's thoughts whereas 25 percent of the respondents never want to comment or criticize other's opinion on Social Networking Sites.

Table -13: Opinion about freedom of speech and expression on SNS

Opinion	f	%
Always	58	38.66
May be	27	18.00
Somewhat	58	38.66
Never	7	4.6

The above Table 13 clearly shows that there is almost an equality of opinions of the respondents regarding the freedom of speech and expression on social media whereas 38.6 percent of the total respondents think that we always or somewhat get enough freedom of speech on social media to express our views. When 18 percent are not sure about the fact, 5 percent think that we never get enough freedom to speak our heart out on Social Networking Sites.

Table -14: Respondents' Perception about Intolerance to Divergent Opinion

Level of Intolerance	f	%
Increases	87	58.0
Decreases	12	8.0
Remains the same	17	11.33
Not sure	34	22.66

Table 14 shows that majority (58 percent) of the interviewed people perceive that the intolerance of public to one's opinion will increase with time, whereas 8 percent thinks the rate of intolerance will decrease, 11 percent opines that it will remain the same and 23 percent are not sure about the growing intolerance of people on Social networking sites.

People have given different opinions about the status of Social Networking Sites in the upcoming years. Even though most of the respondents did not hesitate to state that social media has a bright future since people will be more dependent on these sites day by day because of its advanced technology and it will be difficult for the upcoming generation to even survive without Social Networking Sites. Many of them feel that this virtual world will completely take over the real life in near future if people start getting addicted to it at this pace and give less importance to

reality. Yet, ultimately, the future of Social Networking Sites depends on its users who hopefully will handle it maturely enough with its pros and cons.

The social media networks commonly referred to as our virtual best friends, are not in fact our “best” friends. Everything and anything we post is scrutinized by a million eyes. According to the majority of the interviewed people, the contents of the social media must be regulated. People have demanded more restriction and filtration for the contents being posted on Social Networking Sites so that obscene posts cannot be circulated by any means. Truthfulness should be encouraged more and freedom of speech should not continue to give birth to fake news. Though we tend to being social on social media, it is making us isolated in reality, therefore there need to be some limitation in the time of usage. People want the privacy settings stronger so that hacking or any other kind of cyber crime cannot take place. On the other hand, few respondents opined that since personal opinion matters from individual to individual and most often it cannot be contained in ‘acceptable content’, the contents of social networking media should not be regulated otherwise it will be as restricted as other media.

In this 21st century, our huge dependence on social media has created many expectations in our mind. We want more and more from this virtual friend. While most of the respondents demand for more freedom of speech, few think that too much freedom can be dangerous since people need to have a clear idea of what all contents can be expressed in public. This virtual friend should not get the power to snatch our real friends and we cannot let the humanity lost in the crowd of tech savvy minds.

CONCLUSION

With above observations we can understand that there is a maximum usage of social networking sites and the status of freedom of speech and expression on these sites. Even though we think that our virtual friend can be our best friend, our best companion in any situations of life, let it be happy, sad, challenging or inspiring, it is not actually that kind when we want to speak our heart out with this friend. Indian constitution has given us the right to freedom of speech and expression, but some always try to snatch those rights. It is hopeful to study that though a majority thinks that we become deprived of our rights on social media, they at least do

not want to interfere in the personal thoughts of an individual. However, their sad opinions about the future of growing intolerance to one's opinion make us think about the future of social media. On one side, people depend too much on this media but on the other side, they tend to lose their faith on this media because of its circulation of lots of fake affairs. If truthfulness cannot be encouraged, then the credibility of social media will be questioned which ultimately create a doubtful unpredictable future of the social networking sites.

A healthy criticism is not always bad, but an offensive abusive comment may cost someone's life. On the other hand, many people do not have a proper acknowledgement of the contents can be posted on social networking walls as a result of which some obscene fake pictures or news are still being circulated. Lack of particular code of conduct for social media is a major reason behind this.

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