

Freedom of Expression - Freedom of Connection

INFORMATION has the power to change our lives. It can increase the quality of human experience, create new environments to realize our dreams and help us to get beyond problems that trouble our world. Considering today's India, this is right time to discuss, advocate and strengthen that the right to access information is a basic human right for every citizen, and the internet is an effective medium to access the information.

Indeed, the internet is considered as one of the most democratic medium and ecosystem where the expression of one's view knows few barriers and borders. On the one hand, internet empowers freedom of expression by provisioning individuals with new means of expressions, on the contrary, the free flow of information has raised the call for content regulation, not least to restrict minor's access to potentially harmful information.

Internet Censorship

Even the use of internet has grown exponentially around the world, however, governments are attempting to regulate, control, and censor the internet in all forms – blogs, mobile communication, social media, etc. Across the globe, governments, private stakeholders and citizens are grappling with thorny issues of freedom of expression, content blocking, censorship and trust.

Of late, India has seen many instances, where citizens have been abandoned by posting opinions on social network websites. In 2012, the Indian authorities blocked number of websites, including some content in the public interest. More prevalent has been administrative censorship



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and requests for removal of content by both government and private actors. Such removals have increased after passage of new regulations governing intermediary responsibilities in April 2011.

The reason behind such draconian action lies in the Information Technology (Amendment) Act of 2008. And on several occasions, individuals have been targeted while questioning against credibility of public figures or political organizations. These regulations and content blocking have intensified public debate between free speech and protection of communities' religious sensibilities amidst a series of civil lawsuits—and at least one criminal case—against social media websites seeking to hold them responsible for content posted by users that some Indians found offensive.

These regulations raise the question of how to define the 'internet' in terms of 'public sphere' and how information can be provided freely and balance the online rights of expres-

sion against the restrictions in a democratic society. In other words, question is which level of content should be protection in communicative sphere of cyberspace.

Digital Divide and Freedom of Expression

In a well-connected world, the poor must finally have a place at the table. If the bottom billions is left out of the communications revolution, however, the world will become even more divided between rich and poor, North and South. That's nothing to shrug about.

Mahatma Gandhi once said that 'the soul of India lives in its villages'; 70 per cent population is living in 638,365 villages, represented by 245,525 Panchayat Offices, mostly located in the remotest regions of the country. However, most of rural regions are not able to access information due to a lack of infrastructure and medium to access information. At the same time, many communities don't have the right to access information. This part of India is still waiting for good service delivery and good governance, as well as medium to access their deserving and rightful services.

In an age of information power, India is home to over 100 million internet users, after the United States and China in 2012. The 'internet usage' in the country continues to increase, with tens of millions of new users getting online each year. With increasing number of mobile penetration in India, the number of Indians is accessing information through mobile devices. According to the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), of the 70 million active urban internet users, 26.3mil-

lion had access via their mobile devices in late 2011 .

On the development side, the priority of Government's Five-Year plan is to focus on national target schemes, state-level welfare programmes and all these programmes and initiatives veer towards achieving citizen service goals in a stipulated period. Acts like Right to Information, Right to Education, and draft bills like Right to Food security, 'Electronic Service Delivery Bill' and 'The Right of Citizens for Time Bound Delivery of Goods and Services and Redressal of their Grievance Bill' are promoting online delivering of services. The 'Right to Information', included in the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) calls for the internet to be used so that, "all information covering non-strategic areas [is placed] in the public domain to enable citizens to challenge the data and engage directly in governance reform".

The government is attempting to connect its 638,365 villages with telecom and broadband services through its various dream projects such as National Optic Fibre Network (NOFN) programme and providing telephone is everyone's hand. It is way to connect India that will give opportunity to improvise services in various sectors such as education, health care and agriculture. Subsequently, government is also trying to provide most of the public services, including e-Governance, tele-health services, ration card, public utility bills, etc. But there is a serious lack of scale.

Information Divide And Economy

Illiteracy limits people in developing countries and inner cities, stifles opportunities for innovation and dampens the economic potential of hundreds of millions. Reading and writing are essential skills for economic mobility.

Still 35% of population in India is



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illiterate, only 15% of Indian students reach high school and 40% population still live below poverty line. One way to look at these issues is that information deficits have aggravated India's backward and underdevelopment as most of the public schemes and programmes are not available locally or in a medium that even illiterates could access. Besides, several recent Acts and laws like RTI, RTE, NREGA et al, have given boost to the possibilities, it is the medium and access that could enable the true empowerment. Digital tool like Internet is certainly one of the mediums and other is mobile telephony as it has immense reach in rural communities of the country.

Discussion related to 'internet as a right', or 'internet freedom', is not limited merely as policy formulation, but internet availability and access has wider implications that under-

line equity, justice to access information, infrastructure availability and more. The approach towards 'the right to internet is more than enabling access to net or information but it is related to wider aspects of life both for social and economic growth of life. Freedom of internet enables dialogue and direct diplomacy between people and civilization, facilitates exchange of ideas and bolster economic and trade growth.

While it is heartening to be the third largest country in the world connected to Internet, but 100-120 million Internet connected India population is merely 10 percent of the country whose youth population is about 40 percent. Since Internet is an open and permanent medium, it is only common sense that it be available to other 90 percent of the people to make the society equitable.