INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED LEGAL RESEARCH

SOCIAL MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON PUBLIC OPINION AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION: STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY OR ENABLING MANIPULATION

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Abstract

Social media has transformed the way information is disseminated, influencing public discourse and shaping narratives of any political and social issues. As a powerful communication tool, it has democratized access to information, enabling individuals to express opinions, mobilize movements, and hold authorities accountable. The digital landscape has redefined freedom of expression, allowing diverse perspectives to thrive beyond traditional media constraints. However, this unprecedented accessibility comes with significant challenges. The spread of algorithm-driven content and misinformation has raised concerns about public opinion being manipulated. Social media platforms influence which narratives gain attention, often prioritizing engagement over accuracy. Governments and interest groups use these platforms for propaganda, shaping elections and policy debates. The distinction between genuine discourse and misinformation is becoming increasingly unclear, creating ethical and legal challenges. This paper critically examines the dual nature of social media—as both a facilitator of democratic engagement and a vehicle for narrative control. It explores the evolving legal and regulatory landscape surrounding freedom of expression in the digital age, assessing the challenges of balancing speech rights with the need for accountability. The study focuses on the evaluation of the existing legislative framework and its implication on social media influence on public

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opinion and seeks to propose feasible policy recommendations that safeguard freedom of expression.

A. Introduction

Social Media has brought a tremendous revolution in the digital era and has redefined communication. It has brought endless access to several information and data. India has over 500 million internet users by 2025 (Statista 2025), social media platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram play a crucial role in creating public opinion. This article analyzes about the intertwined relationship between social media, public opinion, freedom of expression, and how it impacts India's democratic framework. It creates a question: Does social media and freedom of expression strengthens the democracy, or does it manipulate and threaten democratic values? This question holds a key role for the nation and its betterment as sometimes we forget where to draw a line when it comes to exercising freedom of expression over social media. But at the same time, using the privilege of freedom of expression over social media has shaped many lives and has brought justice for people. Thus, we will be analyzing the topic with proper logic as well as facts, along with India-specific case studies and other major events.

B. Literature Review

Learned people and scholars have exchanged heated conversations regarding social media's democratic privileges and its risks. Sunstein (2017) says that social media limits the exposure to various perspectives, while Benkler et al. (2018) addresses its importance in grassroots mobilization. Chopra (2020) also addresses the dual purpose use of WhatsApp during election campaigns and the misinformation that gets circulated along with it. Kaur and Sharma (2021) display social media's strength when it comes to protest movements, like the farmer's agitation, whereas Singh (2019) talks about its role in carrying forward issues like #MeToo.

The rights like Freedom of Expression, enshrined in Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution (*Constitution of India, 1950*), gets opposed by the Government regulations like the Information Technology Rules, 2021 (*Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2021*), and other platform guidelines. This particular review amalgamates global as well as India-specific perspectives to build the analysis.

A study by Valenzuela (2013) explores the dual impact of social media on public opinion formation. On the positive side, it provides a platform for political debate, information sharing,

and civic participation. On the negative side, social media can be manipulated to spread misinformation, fake news, and propaganda, thereby shaping opinions based on misleading content. The study concludes that while social media can strengthen democracy, its misuse can significantly harm public trust and informed decision-making.

According to Loader and Mercea (2011), social media platforms have revolutionized political mobilization by enabling rapid dissemination of information, encouraging civic engagement, and fostering political participation. The study highlights how social media campaigns can drive democratic engagement by providing a space for discourse, particularly for marginalized groups. However, it also raises concerns about echo chambers and selective exposure, where individuals are only exposed to information aligning with their beliefs, which may hinder a balanced democratic dialogue.

Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) conducted a comprehensive study on the spread of misinformation on social media, revealing that false news spreads significantly faster and more broadly than true news. The research emphasizes the danger of manipulation, as malicious actors exploit social media algorithms to influence public opinion, often for political or economic gain. This manipulation poses a severe threat to freedom of expression and the democratic process.

C. Methodology

The article has adopted a qualitative approach that relies on secondary data from academic journals, news stories, latest reports, and social media trends in India between 2019 and 2025. Case studies like the general elections 2019 and farmer's protest 2021 provide the empirical depth. The article manages to balance descriptive analysis with critical evaluation to showcase social media's democratic impact.

D. **Objective of the Studies**

- To examine the role of social media in shaping public opinion and influencing political discourse in democratic societies.
- To analyze the impact of misinformation and fake news on public opinion and democratic decision-making processes.

- To investigate the extent to which social media platforms facilitate freedom of expression while assessing the risks of censorship and manipulation.
- To explore strategies for mitigating the negative effects of social media on democracy while enhancing its potential for informed civic engagement.

E. Social Media's Influence and Public Opinion in India

The Democratic Manipulation

The influence that social media has over the public, especially in India is unparalleled. With the kind of digital growth and obsession to be visible over social media is being witnessed in the country, there's no wonder why so much of influence and manipulation is taking place in the nation. Running a PR, both positive and negative has become a cakewalk for people. Creating false narratives to make the audience emotional, or angry, or supportive, almost everything is a part of this social media culture.

During the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) took it to WhatsApp and Facebook to reach near voters. The party managed almost 250,000 WhatsApp groups to spread their ideologies (Chopra, 2020). The same method was followed by Indian National Congress (INC) as well. This propaganda and micro-targeting enabled the parties to spread their messages which mobilizes supporters and influenced the confused voters.

Other social media platforms like Instagram and X also played a crucial role, with hastags like #Modi2019 and #CongressMuktBharat. Memes were shared with sarcastic propagandas that created notions for parties. Such trends reflected real-time shift in emotions as well as sentiment. Such engagement showcased the manipulation and the power that social media has. People can be influenced and narratives can be planted inside the head without much effort.

Risks Involved in such Practice

Creating an influence and impacting lives is like a double-edged sword. In the 2019 elections, false propaganda and misinformation on WhatsApp such as false claims regarding corruption by the opposition party got spread rapidly, this impacted the voting results. Almost 25% of election related news were false, manipulative, and as well as misleading (Chopra 2020).

A similar thing happened during the 2020 Delhi Riots, where social media played a massive role in creating ruckus among people. Certain information got spread over WhatsApp and Facebook which were actually not true but the posts triggered communal violence and attacks took place in the religious sites. This false narrative led to 50 deaths (Bhatia 2021). Investigative reports revealed that false propaganda were spread in between religion communities to polarize them. The aim was to exploit India's religious diversities for political gain.

The 2023 Manipur Crisis also witnessed some similar events of manipulation. Due to some doctored videos and triggering posts that were circulated over X, a massive tension took place that created unnecessary outrage. For example, a fabricated video got circulated that showed an attack on Meitei Temple, intensifying the situation and creating ruckus in between the communities (India Today, 2023). These instances are the brightest examples of how social media can manipulate, brainwash, and trigger people, dividing them into groups, and creating social tension.

F. Analysis through Case Studies

The 2019 Election – A Proper Analysis

During 2019 elections, the real power of social media got revealed in both positive and negative ways. BJP came with a strategy, famously known as, "NaMo" (Narendra Modi), that took the Facebook and X by storm. This strategy projected Modi as a phenomenal leader, a common man with unparallelled potential, while WhatsApp circulated the content in local languages (Chopra 2020). Opposition parties came up with their own propagandas and tried spreading it through various campaigns, but the BJP's preparation, superior tactics, and coordination gave them an extra edge. However, false news regarding the manipulation in the voting sites and irregularities got circulated, forcing the Election Commission to work together with the Social Media platforms to remove the content. This case highlights social media's role in empowering voters and creating manipulative notions.

The Controversy of Hijab, 2022

The Hijab 2022 controversy showcased a massive role of social media. The Muslim students were stopped from wearing hijabs in school and this created a serious religion controversy. Social platforms like X erupted with displeasure and used hastags like #HijabRow & #UniformCivilCode, dividing people into two groups. People who supported religious freedom put stories of discrimination, while opponents used narratives like uniformity, combined with anti-minority ranting (Kaur & Sharma, 2021). The difference in opinion divided the society, while one section of the society supported the cause, another section of the society were against it. This illustrated how social media can unite as well as divide people.

G. Whether Freedom of Expression is Empowering or Restricting

Elevating Unheard Voices

When Social Media witnessed a massive rise, suddenly everyone started expressing themselves both in good and bad ways. People started sharing their bitter experiences, everyone became vocal about their sufferings and in no time social media became a bridge for expressing things. Marginalized communities received maximum benefit out of this. A movement that saw massive outrage was of #MeToo, when women just decided to raise their voices up against harassment and started sharing their experiences on X, challenging the patriarchal taboos (Singh 2019).

Similarly, in the year 2021 farmer's protest took a huge jump and farmers posted about their issues on X and Instagram to receive support from worldwide. It was so on trend that big celebrities like Rihanna also supported the cause and #FarmersProtest became a mantra for people supporting it. (BBC News, 2021). The protest continued and the social media got flooded with news, memes, hastags, and this forced the Government to repeal the laws in November 2021.

Another example that took the social media by storm is the 2024 Dalit protests in Uttar Pradesh. The harassment that happened due to caste-based differences in Hathras is still something that the social media hasn't forgotten. Dalit activists used Facebook Live and X to bring forward the evidences against Police and their brutality. The issue witnessed global outrage and hastags like #JusticeForHathras were used (The Hindu, 2024).

All of these instances fall under Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution and it also shows how social media has become a powerful tool for democratic expressions.

State Restrictions and Platform Limitations

Even if social media gives an opportunity to the suppressed people to express their displeasure and agony, yet this freedom has certain limitations. The Information Technology Rules, 2021 orders the platforms to trace down any kind of unlawful and obscene content that raises censorship fears (*Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2021*). During the protest by farmers, X had to suspend more than 250 accounts that included journalists due to continuous pressure from Government (Twitter 2021).

During Manipur Violence that took place in 2023, Government had ordered to shut the internet down, content were blocked and people were silenced forcefully. This was massively criticized by the public and people opposed regarding the same (Amnesty International, 2023). Platform policies also have certain restrictions, for example the algorithm of Facebook is such that it generally prioritizes sensational information over official news (Sunstein 2017).

Thus, even if social media is considered as a place where people can be vocal about anything that's happening in their lives, in practicality it is not the same. The state and the platform have certain limitations and this complicates the entire scenario.

The WhatsApp Lynching Case

WhatsApp's encryption has protected expression but at the same time has hampered it too. In between 2018 and 2019, several rumours flooded the WhatsApp, and one of those was regarding child abductions. This fake news triggered a situation of lynching in which many innocent people got killed (Bhatia, 2021). The Government asked for traceability and countered that this would stop the violence but people opposed it by saying that it would hamper the privacy as well as free speech. The situation is like a paradox that shows the tension between security and liberty.

Responsibility of Social Media Influencers in the Digital Era

As the world is rapidly learning how to be more visible in social media platforms, the risk of exposure and misinformation is also increasing. Gone are those days when social media was just being used for passing the time and entertainment purpose. Today, the value of social media platforms is much more than just passing the time. With the growth in technology and easy access to internet, people started portraying themselves as stars. Almost everyone wanted to do something unique on the social platforms in a hope that people would accept them in those avatars. That's how the glorification of social media influencers came into the picture.

People slowly understood that the social media platforms can fetch them good money and a career can be made out of social platforms through content creation. During the early days of content creation, people just focused on creating good content, but soon enough platforms like Youtube, Facebook, and WhatsApp became a medium of earnings. The masses started idolizing social media influencers, they were treated like some movie stars and this led to their massive name as well as fame. Due to the massive fan following of these influencers, they were approached for brand endorsements, paid collaborations, paid guests, and much more than that.

Due to massive fan base of these influencers, gradually people started following them and their ideologies. In no time, people started believing to what these influencers would say and from there on the misuse of social media platforms began. For instance, in the 2024 general elections, influencers like Elvish Yadav and CarryMinati endorsed candidates. These influencers along with several others, created content according to the requirement of the parties. These content supported certain parties which ultimately got into the minds of Gen Z voters, brainwashing the confused voters (Chopra 2020).

That's why such influencers have huge responsibilities on their shoulders. They have to be sure about what they talk, support, and endorse over social media, as their action impacts the lives of millions. For example, in the 2020 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests, influencers were held liable for spreading fake information that created wrong notions and gave birth to unnecessary propagandas (Bhatia, 2021).

In a very recent case Ranveer Allhabadia, a famous influencer got into serious problems for using a platform namely "India's Got Latent" to spread his ideology. When he apologized over

the social platforms after realizing his mistakes, he got bashed worldwide. The matter became so serious that Government had to take an entry to resolve the issue and the influencer was interrogated for the same. This shows how important it is for the social media influencers to behave properly and talk with much more maturity as well as awareness in social gatherings and platforms.

The social media influencer culture can be a big boost for influencers because they take up this role as their full time job profession but with big power come bigger responsibilities. Thus, influencers have to be really careful regarding what they say, which ideology they follow, and what kind of opinions they give. They just can't say anything in front of millions of people and undo it. This shows the need for media literacy and how ethical standards can be maintained in between the influencer community.

H. Maintaining a Balance between Freedom of Expression and Risk

Social Media is like a double-edge sword, it has its pros and cons. But as we are progressing to a much more digitalized world, the presence of social media platforms is inevitable. In a country like India, where the crime rate is increasing massively, where corruption is taking place in each and every department, where social taboos and caste-based harassment still exists, where religion tension is a major issue, and where government tries to take control over everything, having an unbiased platform where everything can be shared is absolutely important. Since social media is that platform, it has to be safeguarded and has to be kept clean.

Social media strengthens India's democracy and gives an opportunity to each and every citizen to exercise his/her rights. As seen in the cases like #MeToo, farmer's protest, and Dalit Activism, the platform was used for all good reasons. People from all over the world came together on social media platforms to extend their support. This reflects that even if people might just fail to come together physically, they can always be together virtually. It was because of this cumulative effort as to why Government took some progressive and responsible steps. This showcases the positive side of freedom of expression over social media.

However, it has a negative side as well which is about manipulation, wrong influence, fake information, false propaganda, and so much more. For instance, the case of 2019 elections, 2020

massive riots, 2023 Manipur crisis, and many more scenarios as such. These kind of situations breaks the unity in the society, creates wrong notions in the minds of people, breaks the trust, creates ruckus among people, and the list can go on.

What's important is to maintain a balance, social media and its privileges has to be used more for productive works rather than destructive works. Political parties have to be more careful regarding their actions. They should focus more on giving genuine information rather than creating false propagandas to gain votes. Influencers should used their power and position to educate people and not gaslight them in any manner. To preserve democracy, India must regulate platforms without any manipulation. The task is challenging in every way but to maintain it, we as a single community should realise the importance of keeping transparency over social media platforms.

I. Conclusion

Thus, to conclude, it can be said that Social Media in India is both a democratic tool and a medium for manipulation. It can empower as well as divide people. It can make or break a country. If it is used in good faith, then a lot of people can be benefitted out of it, but if it is used for wrong purpose, then situations like riots, protests, violence would also arise. It is a fact that social media can no longer be erased from anyone's life, it would definitely get closer to people in the upcoming times and would even affect their lives, that's why it is essential to use the platform for progression and not destruction. For India to use this tool properly, strict guidelines have to be made so that no one exploits the platform unnecessarily, transparent policies should be taken into consideration so that each individual gets an idea regarding what are allowed and not allowed while using social media platforms. Government as well as influencers should come together to make people aware about how social media can be used to manipulate people and how one has to avoid it, this would educate the mass and would keep them updated with latest social media frauds. To be precise, balancing out the pros and cons can actually safeguard the democracy, and with time the platforms should also be upgraded with more advanced technologies so that the issues can be curbed right from its root and not from any outside force or element.

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