

Freedom of Expression in Social Media: A Political Perspective

*¹D. Guna Graciyal and ²Dr. Deepa Viswam

^{*1}Department of Visual communication, Mother Teresa Women's University, Kodaikanal, Dindigul, Tamil Nadu (India)

²Department of Visual communication, Mother Teresa Women's University, Kodaikanal, Dindigul, Tamil Nadu (India)

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 19 January 2018

Keywords

Freedom of Expression, Media Power, Political Communication, Social Media, Technology

*Corresponding Author

Email: gunajustin@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Due to advancement of technology, people tend to use social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc. to read and share news and information. Social media is defined as a mobile- and web-based technology to create a social network in the virtual world through a collection of online communication channels. Social media technology made the world smaller because people from one part of the country can access information shared by a user from another.

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Freedom of expression is the right of every individual to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media—regardless of frontiers.

In a democratic country like India, each and every citizen has the right to express and impart information through social media. Because we enjoy this freedom, we can upload, uplink, comment, like, share, etc. through social media. These social media sites provide complete or absolute freedom of expression; but as netizens how are we using it?

The main aim of this research paper is to study the Freedom of expression through social media from a political perspective, analyzing the political communication through social media.

INTRODUCTION

Social media is a virtual space to get people to express themselves. Whether it be a Facebook status, Twitter updates, Instagram photos... these are all extensions of our personality. They help portray our interests, our views and help show people who we are. They offer a platform for us to be ourselves, to be creative, to be who we want to be and most importantly, have an audience for all of this.

Social media has become an inevitable part of modern life. It helps to connect with friends, real-time. Through these channels, users can interact, reconnect and socialize. Social media is a one-stop shop, for example, keeping up with current events, celebrity gossip; a tool to grow business; sharing ideas and information, etc. In a essence, social media offers the possibility of enhancing free speech, giving voice to millions

Freedom of speech and expression

According to the first amendment, Freedom of speech is the right to express any opinion without censorship or restraint. "Speech" is more than the written or spoken words; while the dictionary definition may be limited to the written or spoken word, we're really looking at types of expression. This applies to both, visual interpretations and artistic forms of speech.

Freedom of speech and expression is authorized to every person. Whether rich or poor, young or old, every person holds a different opinion and it's his/her right to express it. The definition of freedom of speech is that every person has the right to express his/her opinion without fear of government or society. Being individuals, we are all different with different ideas, tastes, and perceptions. Every person has the right to

follow his thoughts or conscience and that is when we hate someone expressing their ideas and opinions despite the fact that opinions are just opinions, never right or wrong.

Freedom of speech and expression in social media

From trivia to disasters, information reaches people as events happen, keeping them engaged like never before. But how they express themselves or react thereafter, makes social media a double-edged sword. Social media has changed the way we are able to communicate and behave, not only in groups and society, but with each other.

Unlike in the real world, where social etiquette and manners can sometimes seem restrictive and limiting, people feel they have a greater sense of freedom of expression and/or of speech when using online networks. Of course, content is monitored and can be removed, but with millions of user on sites such as Facebook and Twitter—even YouTube—not every single status, photo or comment can be watched, evaluated and completely controlled. This information shared in social media sites has arguably led to a rise in expressions, feelings and ideas from people who may otherwise find it hard to portray themselves as how they would like to in person and face-to-face with others.

Communication in social media

Social media primarily serves the purposes of connecting, networking and voicing out opinions. The Internet has been referred to judicially as "... the most participatory marketplace of mass speech that ... the world ... has ever seen". Social media is an interconnected network of various media that

makes information cross boundaries with different languages, different cultures and different political backgrounds.

Users can access information, in real-time, in a shorter time span than traditional media. Social media provide users with broad features like:

1. *Immediacy to comment:* Social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter allow users to share the information they receive and also allows people to express their views on a particular news item.
2. *Immediacy to Respond:* Social media platforms not only afford opportunity for commenting and sharing but also a faster response thereby creating a sphere wherein people can converse pertaining to a topic or a news item.

Political communication in social media

In recent years, the rise of technology has increased the relevance of the Internet in political communication. This growing relevance in communication in social media changed traditional communication to a great extent. This tremendous growth in social media is increasingly used in the political context—both by politicians and citizens. In this very short span of time politicians across the world have adopted social media as a premier means for engaging with public enabling vivid discussions and dialogs (Zeng et al. 2010).

This paper primarily focuses on discovering how freedom of expression is experienced in social media platforms and how matters relating to political communication are happening in social media.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The specific objectives of the study are:

- To study the freedom of expression in social media platforms.
- To analyse the comments shared through these social media networks.
- To analyse the written word and graphical representations shared in these platforms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been an escalating level of research on the impact of social media on Political Communication. The World Wide Web, with regard to the effectiveness of social media has brought the world within reachable distance. From its birth, the Internet was visualized as a domain that facilitates free dissemination of ideas and information across boundaries.

Social media is a new venture in the field of mass media. It has proved to be more democratic than the newspaper and television. Social media provides an opportunity for netizens to express their views on a number of issues. In many cases, groups have been formed by likeminded people to discuss and debate on numerous governmental decisions and to seek new ideas for the future (Roy, 2015).

Another key contribution of this study is to propose social media as a preliminary tool for political expression. People keep in touch with friends and families, express themselves, and discuss various aspects of their lives on social media. In doing so, people tend to present a different aspect of

themselves to each social group they encounter (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998), and the more groups they interact with, the more aspects of themselves they may develop (Papacharissi, 2011).

At a glance, using the Internet and social media to seek information, including news, has been linked to greater political participation (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010, Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). But social media is used for much more than seeking information, due to advancement of technologies social media contributes to new models of citizenship as emerging in younger generations (Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011).

Research in this area has shown the importance of political expression in leading people to participate politically (Elin, 2003; Pingree, 2007), and we confirm these pathways by focussing on this idea of relating social media and political communication and how it promotes or builds peace in a country like India.

METHODOLOGY

Research Methods are used to determine, discover, interpret and formulate research facts. A quantitative research was proposed to find out the freedom of expression in social media.

The Questionnaire method was followed for data collection from users for this study. A total number of 100 respondents were used for data collection. The responses are used for further analysis for the outcome of study objectives by In-depth interview by renowned journalists.

The parameters used for this research were, sorted based on Social Media Integration Theory, as follows:

Parameters	Description
Exposure	Shares and likes
Feedback	Response to posts
Engagement	Connecting with people
Response	Sharing of information

ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION

The parameters of this study was analysed based on Social Media Integration theory:

Exposure:

People read news and commentary regarding politics through tweets and blogs, which supplement newspapers. The fabric of our day-to-day interactions is changing with the venture of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. In this digital age, users interact with each other through the generation and sharing of content. User-generated content is a material that the platform sources from its own end-users. Social media networks mainly consist of user-generated content and most of its users engage and communicate freely. This user-generated content created by the users mainly based on shares likes and comments for a particular post.

Feedback:

Social media is not only confined to common public but to politicians as well. Through different activities, politics and politicians in India have brought social media into the limelight. It is expected that social media will play a huge role

and influence the coming general elections to a greater extent. Many respondents felt that social media would be stronger and more persuasive than television in influencing people.

Engagement:

Regarding Social Media's influence future politics, respondents believe that through Social Media, there exists a wide publicity on every event that create an interest in people. Social Media platforms considered as a major support and media contact to public. The youth are more active in these issues and they have an opinion so they support the politics and also give ideas beneficial for the future. These platforms have a big impact on youth, paves an opportunity to express views, in future social media campaigns can decide voting decisions.

Response:

Social media platforms are seen as a form of participation and engagement. It helps to shape public narratives and understanding of political affairs. Many respondents felt that their political knowledge and awareness increased after they started using social media but they fear to engage in conversation with regard to political issues. Users follow political pages and blogs to read more about contemporary political issues.

Analysis of in-depth interviews

An in-depth evaluation was performed, from the report it was understood that:

Participant 1: Freedom of speech and expression is exercised in social media to a greater extent. With regard to political communication, many political leaders use social media for one-way communication by their tweets. Politicians show their active engagement in the happenings of the country through their tweets and posts, mainly in times natural disasters, like flood, cyclone, rain, etc. Apart from their presence in Social media in form of posts and tweets, many of the political leaders do not entertain face-to-face interviews or press meets, i.e., they hide themselves from media scrutiny.

Participant 2: Social media have a greater coherence with freedom of speech and expression as it helps in putting right content by right people in right platform. Social media is a vital tool to bring politics to people. This platform forces people to be always active, i.e., if they get a follower they tend to do something relevant and interesting to keep them active. Social media is a two-way communication, which makes conversations possible, help in translating politics to people's language. Social Media platforms help politicians to get in touch with the citizens.

FINDINGS

The major findings include:

REFERENCES

- [1] Abercrombie N, Longhurst, B. Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination. Sage, London, England. 1998.
- [2] Bennett WL, Wells C, Freelon D. Communicating Civic Engagement: Contrasting Models of Citizenship in the Youth Web Sphere. Journal of Communication 2011; 61(5): 835–856.

- Freedom of speech and expression is exercised in social media to an enormous extent; it helps in information exchange through accurate channels.
- The Critical Analysis of comments shared on these platforms based on the social media integration theory, the information flow through these channels is two-way communication in particular whereas in some cases politicians prefer one-way communication to escape media scrutiny.
- Feedbacks are mostly portrayed as comments, which naturally build up to conversations. Sometimes feedbacks are represented by emojis, memes or trolls.

CONCLUSIONS

When the first amendment was put to place, freedom of speech and expression was born, we were all given the right to express any opinion without censorship or restraint. When a person is let with this right, words just roll off of our tongue without having to second guess our thoughts. Although we are free to say what we want, we are not allowed to express any opinion that offends, threatens, or insults groups, based on race, color, religion, national orientation, or disability.

"Free expression is one of the foundational elements of the internet," said Michael Chertoff, former U.S. secretary of Homeland Security and a co-author of the internet governance report.

Through the advent of Social Media, "We are creating a world where anyone anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity." (John Perry Barlow, 1996)

Freedom of speech must always, without any kind of exception, be absolute. If it isn't absolute, it isn't 'freedom'. Some time people and media take the advantage of this beautiful right (Article-19) but it doesn't mean that it happens always. It has a huge significant coverage for people.

Social media has opened up the possibility of information sharing across boundaries, real-time. Freedom of speech and expression is exercised to a greater extent on all social media platforms. Freedom of expression that thrives through the internet must be understood as a form of limited rights. Users should not think that, "It's my account, I'm free to say what I want?" Though individuals should have the freedom to express their opinions on cyberspace, we have to make sure to regulate social media activity to an extent in order to preserve harmony among people and communities.

In an ideal world, social media is a safe place for us to express ourselves and to voice out our opinions. Social media is also an excellent resource for enabling the freedom of speech and expression.

- [3] Thomas, C. 2013. The development of journalism in the face of social media: A study on social media's impact on a journalist's role, method and relationship to the audience. University of Gothenburg, Sweden, Report No. 2013:115 ISSN: 1651-4769.
- [4] Elin L. The radicalization of Zeke Spier: How the Internet Contributes to Civic Engagement and New Forms of

- Social Capital. In McCarthy M, Ayers MD. Editors. *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice*. Routledge, New York, NY. 2003; pp. 97–114.
- [5] Gabrielle Byrd, Does Freedom of Speech Exist on Social Media. 2016. Available at: <http://www.loyola.edu/academics/emerging-media/blog/2016/freedom-of-speech-on-social-media>
- [6] John Perry Barlow. A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace. 1996. Available at: <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>
- [7] Kwak H, Lee C, Park H, Moon S. What is Twitter, A Social Network or a News Media? In Proceedings of the 19th International Conference on World Wide Web, 2010; pp. 591–600. Retrieved from <http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1772751>.
- [8] Peters, N. Social Media and Free Speech, The Good, The Bad and The Ugly. *Social Media Today*, July 29, 2011. Available at: <http://www.socialmediatoday.com/content/social-media-and-free-speech-good-bad-and-ugly>
- [9] Papacharissi Z. *A Networked Self: Identity, Community and Culture on Social Network Sites*. Routledge, New York, NY. 2011.
- [10] Pingree RJ. How Messages Affect Their Senders: A More General Model of Message Effects and Implications for Deliberation. *Communication Theory* 2007; 17(4): 439–461. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2007.00306.x.
- [11] Rajshree Chandra. Free Speech on Social Media May Not Be Civil But Let Us Not Use the Law to Curb It. 2017. Available at: <http://thewire.in/125581/free-speech-social-media>
- [12] Rakesh Singh B. The scope of free speech of social media. 2017. Available at: <http://lexhindustan.com/the-scope-of-free-speech-of-social-media/>
- [13] Roy D. Social Media—The New Weapon in Indian Democracy. *International Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies (IJIMS)* 2015; 2(7), 49–54.
- [14] Shah DV, Cho J, Eveland WP, Kwak N. Information and Expression in a Digital Age Modeling Internet Effects on Civic Participation. *Communication Research* 2005; 32(5): 531–565. doi:10.1177/0093650205279209.
- [15] Yasmeen A and Alastair S. Restrictions on internet free speech are getting tighter all over the world, 2016. Available at: <http://www.businessinsider.com/r-proposals-to-curb-online-speech-viewed-as-threat-to-open-internet-2016-6?IR=T>