

## Anarchy at Social Media: A Critical Look at the Challenges and Opportunities

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### ABSTRACT

*Social networking has become a new obsession of internet users worldwide. Internet is flooded with social networking sites like Facebook, Orkut, Twitter, YouTube, MySpace, LinkedIn, Google plus and so on; most of them offering similar services but operating in different genres.*

*One has to accept the fact that the social networking sites are beginning to change the way we communicate with each other. Since social media apps are also available with mobile phones, which are affordable, the usage of networking applications has increased. Social networking sites have been touted as generation next public sphere, where people discuss issues of public interest with a lot of seriousness.*

*In recent times, there have been instances of social media playing a key role in activism. Many activists who played crucial roles in the 'Arab Spring' used social networking as a key tool in expressing their thoughts concerning unjust acts perpetrated by their governments; India against corruption (IAC) movement in our own backyard is another classic case in point with regard to effective use of social media for social activism.*

*Along with these positives, social media also suffers from some serious flaws. The freedom available to the people on these platforms has given rise to a new set of problems to deal with. Language is a big casualty on the social networking sphere. There are problems like obscenity, impersonation, morphing, hate mongering, and insensitive expressions on issues, people, places, and institutions. Clearly, there is a need to rein in such obscene expressions. This paper attempts to identify the problems of social media and presents a critical assessment of the same. It also discusses on the regulatory measures needed to bring in some sort of order in social media, which is the need of the hour, to maintain the dignity of this very effective media.*

**Keywords:** social media, social networking, internet

### INTRODUCTION

Social networking can loosely be defined as a process of communicating and sharing information between two or more individuals on an online community. It is also a process of building online communities, both through 'groups' and 'friends list' that allow greater interaction on websites. It is an interactive communication in which participants of online communities such as Facebook, Myspace share thoughts, photos, videos etc., with members of their own personal networks in a controlled way.

There has been a steady growth of social networking activities in recent years. In fact, social networking has become a new obsession of internet users worldwide. Internet is flooded with social networking sites like Facebook, Orkut, Twitter, YouTube, Myspace, LinkedIn, Googleplus and so on that have become popular among internet users, especially youth.

Services like chatting, text messaging, blogging and online communities are attracting new generation of computer and internet literates.

Since major social networking sites like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Yahoo Messenger, Google Talk are also available with mobile phones, which are affordable, the usage of these new modes of communication has increased in urban India. Since India's telecom network is also on the fast lanes of growth and mobile phone density is also on the rise, more and more people have started using social network applications.

### INTERNET REACH IN INDIA

According Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), the countrywide telephone subscriptions, which is crucial for wired internet, has increased from 846.32 million to 951.34 million, a growth rate of 12.41% during the year. The wireless subscriber base has increased by 107.58 million, with a total base of 919.17 million connections now. The overall teledensity in the country increased to 78.66 from 70.89 in the previous year. The rural teledensity increased to 39.22 from 33.79 and the urban teledensity increased to 169.55 from 157.32 last year.

As far as internet is concerned, TRAI annual report recorded that India had around 22.86 million wired internet subscribers in March, 2012, of which around 13.81 million had broadband connections. The previous year there were around 19.67 million wired internet subscribers, out of which around 11.89 million had broadband. So, the net addition was around 1.92 million subscribers during the year, which works out to a growth rate of 16.15%.

**Table 1. Showing wired internet subscription from 2007-12**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Narrowband</i>	<i>Broadband</i>	<i>Total</i>
March- 2007	6.93	2.34	9.27
March-2008	7.23	3.87	11.10
March- 2009	7.32	6.22	13.54
March- 2010	7.41	8.77	16.18
March- 2011	7.78	11.89	19.67
March- 2012	9.05	13.81	22.86

Source: TRAI Annual report-2012

Although Internet access has been increasing steadily, the current figures for Internet and broadband penetration (connection per 100 people) is very low of 2% and 1% respectively. However, the number internet users exhibits a more positive scenario as many people are able to access internet through shared connections at homes, offices and cyber-cafes. According to Pricewaterhousecoopers' Entertainment and Media Outlook 2012 report (PwC report), the number of internet users approximately stood at 121 million in December, 2011 compared to 100 million users in December, 2010. It has the potential to grow over the next few years on the back of rising income levels and better awareness of youth population in accessing internet continent.

Contrastingly, India had a mobile telephone connection base of 919 million at the end of March, 2012. As per PwC report, adoption of mobile internet is also growing at a healthy

pace with 51 million subscribers at the end of December, 2011 as compared to around 23 million subscribers in December, 2010. In 2016, it would be approximately around 400 million.

It also says that affordable smart-phones and data plans driving growth in mobile internet. The Indian market already has handsets priced lower than Five thousand rupees that support mobile internet access. Several GPRS and EDGE compatible handsets are available at even lower prices. Over the next few years, prices are expected to come down further, paving way for adoption. Affordable data plans are also necessary for further growth in mobile internet.

Wider internet access is a necessary condition in measuring the impact of applications which are internet enabled. Social media, which is a web-based service, is not an exception to this. The above data doesn't present a rosy picture with regard to wired internet penetration. However, so far as mobile internet is concerned, the social media itself appears to be a game changer of sorts. PwC says, "...rising popularity of web-based applications such as email and social networks will propel the market (mobile internet) forward."

### **POSITIVES OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

One has to accept the fact that the social networking sites are beginning to change the way we communicate with each other. Thanks to these networks, physical distances that exist between people don't matter anymore as people are closely connected in a virtual network. Instant status updates, photo or video uploads help people, who are otherwise separated by space, to stay in touch with each other. As updates are instantaneous and swift, the time barrier is also removed. There is no more a delay in terms of access to personal information uploaded by your closed ones.

So far as news and views are concerned, micro blogging networks like Twitter has definitely altered the news making scenario in the country. Twitter, in fact now has become a major source of news for mainstream English television news channels. Unlike a mass medium like television or newspaper, Twitter allows its 'audience' (called as 'followers' in Twitter) to feel in proximity with the ones whom they follow. Their voices also being heard by the media persons, or any other intended people, who are on Twitter. If one's using Twitter, they would be familiar with the high speed news updates, which is far ahead of television news because one can access on the move at a relatively low price.

In recent times, social networking platforms are being used for organizing support to issues of public interest. In fact, social networking sites have been touted as generation next public sphere, where people discuss these issues with a lot of seriousness. There have been instances of social media playing a key role in social activism. Many activists who played crucial roles in the 'Arab Spring' used social networking as a key tool in expressing their thoughts concerning unjust acts perpetrated by their governments; India against corruption (IAC) movement in our own backyard is another classic case in point with regard to effective use of social media for activism.

### **PROBLEMS WITH SOCIAL MEDIA**

Along with these positives, social media also suffers from some serious flaws. The freedom available to the people on these platforms has given rise to a new set of problems to deal with. Language is a big casualty on the social networking sphere. There are problems like obscenity, impersonation, morphing, hate mongering, and insensitive expressions on issues, people, places, and institutions.

Clearly, there is a need to rein in such obscene expressions in social media. In this paper, only three social networking sites are put under the scanner, as it is virtually impossible to analyze all the social networking sites, they are; Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. All the examples cited here are taken from these websites.

### **Privacy**

Although social media allows users to get in touch with their friends and loved ones, they have to pay a big price for it; not in terms of money, but in terms of their privacy. Before opening a Facebook account for example, one needs to provide personal details like date of birth, age, gender, address, Email, phone number, education, occupation, and relationship status, likes and dislikes, political view and so on. Some of the fields like age, gender, date of birth are mandatory without which you cannot have an account.

The official Facebook marketing page states, "...there are already more than a billion people, more than 240 billion photos and more than a trillion connections on Facebook." Clearly, Facebook possess a huge personal data that are invariably used for marketing purposes. That is the business model on which social media thrives on. So there is every chance that your privacy is compromised or exchanged for commercial gains. Your data could also be handed over to some other networks with which you are not interested a wee bit. This comes in the form of applications like Farm Ville, Diamond Dash, TripAdvisor etc. If you are using any of these apps, your personal data is also handed over to them.

Entire personal data that you share could be seen by everyone unless you customize it to only 'friends on your list'. Facebook privacy setting allows you to customize it; you can limit it to only your close friends. You are also allowed to block users, invites, applications that you don't want to see. Despite taking these security measures, one is not guaranteed of secure, hassle free browsing on these networks.

### **Obscenity**

Obscenity is a major problem in Internet, so is in social networking sites. Obscene photographs, videos, texts, and hyperlinks are quite common here. YouTube is full of obscene videos and comments. Sometimes obscene links appears on Facebook pages as well. If you just type in a search word, 'Aishwarya Rai' or 'Manmohan Singh' for example, the results that appear will at least have one or two obscene videos. Once you start playing a video, in the other related videos panel more and more obscene videos starts appearing; sometimes it could be pornographic videos.

Take for example, 'In conversation with Aishwarya Rai Bachchan on the Front Row,' a video uploaded by Star World India in YouTube; 'Front Row' is a program aired in Star World, hosted by Anupama Chopra. In this interview Aishwarya talks about her post motherhood, films etc. But if Aishwarya by any chance happen to read the comments given to this video, she would definitely be angry and sad. The comments by the users are obscene and in very bad taste. Eight comments out of top ten featured on the page are obscene remarks on the actress. She's been abused as 'Bachchan b\*\*\*h,' 'Moti r\*\*\*i' (fat slut) which reflects the cheap and cruel face of users masquerading with screen names like tomandjerry, royalprince and so on.

### **Hidden Identity and Morphing**

People appear online with different identities. Hiding the real identities is a prominent feature in the virtual world. Facebook, YouTube is full of people who hide their real identities for various reasons. The motive behind hiding one's identity could be either positive or negative. In Facebook, users tend to put profile pictures of babies, film actors, flowers, buildings and

the like to protect their original identity from the external world. Reasons for this behavior could also be inferiority complex about their looks, or deliberate masquerading.

The above behavior is harmless, but there are instances of misuse of photographs, which could be harmful. It is possible that your photograph might have been used as some other's profile picture. Somebody else could have a Facebook account in your name and be using the same for unlawful activities. It goes without saying that social media is also prone to hacking activities. Morphing of photographs and using them for unlawful activities is another danger that exists in social media. Morphed photographs of models, actresses, sometimes respectable women are being used for bad purposes on Facebook pages.

### **Misuse by Terrorist Organizations**

Talking about the role played by social media in 'Arab Spring', Ramesh Srinivasan (2012) says, activists and politicians in today's Egypt have now fully embraced the tools of social media not just to support the creation of political capital but also to subvert competition. Social media, which is being touted as great platform for pro-people activism, could as well be used for activities against the people and also for criminal and unlawful activities. Terrorist organizations like Jamat-Ud-Dawa, Al-Qaeda, and their members actively use social media, especially YouTube. It is a well-known fact that terrorists have become sophisticated on par with the advances in technology; Internet and social media is not an exception to this.

### **Hatemongering**

No doubt YouTube is a wonderful innovation with videos available on all sorts of topics of interest under the sun. But unfortunately, it has also become a platform for huge number of hate videos on people, places, institutions, religion, countries and the like. There are hundreds and hundreds of hate videos on India, Pakistan, Manmohan Singh, Sonia Gandhi, BJP, Islam, Hinduism and many more.

Along with these hate videos one could observe obscene and cheap comments, hatred and venom expressed by the users. For example, type in the name of 'Manmohan Singh,' and look at the title of the first video that appears in search results. It reads, "Manmohan Singh ke dimaag me suvvar ka gohar bhara hua hai" (Manmohan Singh's head is filled with pig's shit). Sometimes these videos have the potential to whip up communal sentiments and set off panic among the people. Videos on anti-Hindu, anti-Islam could work up communal tensions.

### **Language**

Use of English language is a tricky issue in social media. Words are abbreviated quite regularly. For example; U for You, Ur for Your, Grt for Great, Nt for Night, Tnx for Thanks, Hru for How are you, and many more. In fact, social media and mobile phone texting has given birth to a new script for English that is meaningful to the users communicating with each other. So one cannot find faults with this abbreviated script. But if one is using proper English without abbreviation and writing complete sentences, then hundreds of mistakes committed by the users could be identified. There is also a tendency of using Indian languages like Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Urdu with respective original scripts as well as English script while commenting. As social media is used for personal communication more often than not, the language used here smacks of personal tone, with colloquialism.

## **DILEMMAS OF REGULATING SOCIAL MEDIA**

In recent times, social media has been in news for more negative reasons. There has been contrasting call for and against censorship on social networking sites. On the one hand, there is an issue of freedom of expression and on the other hand the crucial issue of censorship of

social media. Freedom of expression should be protected, but not at the cost of hatred, irresponsible comments against people, institutions, communities etc.

The danger of allowing law enforcing authorities to have a crackdown on social media could have dangerous consequences. Recent Indian examples of Karti Chidambaram and Bal Thackeray affirms this point. While sharing offensive material is a crime under the law, sometimes, expressing objective opinions could also put you in trouble. But unfortunately it is also true that people misuse social media for various reasons. The exodus of North-East people from across India is a classic case in point of how an SMS and subsequent social media posts can trigger panic and disturb peace in the society.

### **Karti Chidambaram Case**

In October 2012, a small scale industrialist in Puducherry was arrested for allegedly posting 'offensive' messages on the micro-blogging site Twitter targeting Union Finance Minister P Chidambaram's son Karti Chidambaram. Ravi had allegedly posted messages on Twitter stating that Karti Chidambaram had amassed wealth more than that of Rober Vadra, son-in-law of Congress President Sonia Gandhi. Ravi was arrested under Section 66-A of the Information Technology Act. Police wanted him remanded for 15 days. But, the Chief Judicial Magistrate Venkatakrishnan granted bail to Ravi, since the offence was bailable.

### **Bal Thackeray Case**

In November 2012, two girls were arrested for their comments on Facebook questioning the shutdown of Mumbai city, following Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray's death. On November 18, police arrested Shaheen Dadha, who posted a comment on her Facebook questioning the shutdown after Thackeray's death on November 17 and when she was given a public cremation the next day. Her friend Renu, who had 'liked' the Facebook comment, was also arrested.

A local Shiv Sena leader had complained against the girls and police arrested the duo, sparking a nationwide outrage. On November 29, two police officials involved in the arrests were suspended and others were given strict warnings. The Bombay High Court also transferred the magistrate who released the girls on a bail of Rs. 15,000 each. On December 18, owing to nationwide pressure, police dropped charges against the two girls and submitted a closure report in a Bombay court.

### **Social Media Censorship**

In 2012, various networking sites had come under government scanner for allowing circulation of inflammatory contents on North-East violence leading to exodus of people from the region from various parts of the country. Union government wanted to bring social media under the code of conduct. Telecommunication Minister Kapil Sibal went a step ahead, favoring a national law to stop the abuse of social media.

Owing to directions from the government, Facebook removed the inflammatory content. Facebook spokesperson said, "Facebook will remove content which breaches our terms as set out in our statement of rights and responsibilities. Content or individuals can be removed from Facebook for a variety of reasons including issuing direct calls for violence or perpetuating hate speech." In December 2012, the then minister said that the government does not want to interfere with freedom of press (expression), however, if social media sites such as Facebook, Google, Yahoo and Microsoft are not willing to cooperate with the government on stopping "incendiary" material, "then it is the duty of the government to think of steps that needs to taken."

Reacting to the minister, Facebook said in a statement, "...we will remove any content that violates our terms, which are designed to keep material that is hateful, threatening, incites violence or contains nudity off the service. We recognize the government's interest in minimizing the amount of abusive content that is available online and will continue to engage with the Indian authorities as they debate this important issue." Contrastingly Google, which owns Orkut and YouTube, said, "... when content is legal and doesn't violate our policies, we won't remove it just because it's controversial, as we believe that people's differing views, so long as they are legal, should be respected and protected."

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Social media is a great device for democratic participation. Social networks like Facebook and Twitter have come as a wonderful tool for the people who have access to them, to share their ideas and opinions not just on personal front but also on issues of public concern. In a way Twitter reflects the voices of the Indian middle class, who are concerned about the way India is run. The freedom available to the people on social media platforms has given a new hope to well-meaning sections of the country, to use them for public good.

However, social media is also prone to problems like obscenity, morphing, impersonation, hatemongering, offensive statements and comments on issues, people, places and institutions. Clearly, there is a chaos, so far as the content on social media is concerned owing to various reasons like huge amount of texts, photographs, illustrations, and videos. It is practically impossible to bring it under scanner, unless specific complaint is made.

As discussed in the earlier part of this paper, YouTube is home to thousands of hate videos as much of educational videos; same is also true of Facebook and Twitter, with sizable proportion of offensive and insensitive comments. Of course censorship is not the answer to this problem, which could act as a curb on freedom of expression. Freedom of expression should be protected, but not at the cost of misuse of rights.

Regulation could happen at the social network site level by the companies which are running them. At the same time, people who are using these media should not be undermining its dignity by posting offensive and obscene material on it. In the larger interest of freedom of expression, self-regulation by the users is very much necessary. Otherwise, government or law enforcing authorities will step in as discussed above, to have a crackdown on social media and its users for expressing genuine opinions as well, in the pretext of maintaining law and order in the society. It is high time to bring in some sort of order amidst this chaos, in order to maintain the dignity of these effective tools of expressions, which is facing the danger of derailment.

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