"Friend Request from Education": The need for Social Media Policy for Educational Institutions in India

Ajita Deshmukh

School of Education and Research, MIT-ADT University, Pune

Email- ajitadeshmukh13@gmail.com

Abstract

The ubiquitous presence of Social Media in all fields in the current times cannot be denied. Exploring the possibilities of social media and its innovative use has become a fundamental skill in this era. The field of education, which had always distanced itself from social media, has finally come to accept social media at least as a channel for educational communication, especially during the COVID-19 scenario. This has raised several concerns ranging from privacy issues, cyberbullying, and surveillance to muffling of voices under the guise of discipline in educational institutions in India. This paper recognizes the lack of awareness of rights in digital spaces. The paper points out instances of social media policy framing becoming restrictive. This paper calls attention to the glaring absence of such guidelines and highlights the need for social media policy guidelines for educational institutions in India in order to overcome these concerns. This paper recommends the formulation of guidelines for educational institutions in India by an autonomous panel of experts from multidisciplinary domains.

Keywords: social media policy, social media in education, social media, education policy 2020

Introduction: Social media penetration

The last decade has seen the ubiquitous presence of social media networks which has transformed our daily lives. From information updates regarding an emergency situation to delivering messages, from networking to participating in a community, the shift in the role of social media has been speedy and overwhelming. The remodelling of the meaning of 'wealth' to 'information and knowledge' has accentuated the role of media in everyday life with an unprecedented ascent in the use and power of social media. The students- mostly digital natives are immersed in social media, in particular using it for everything from news and updates to gaining knowledge and supplementing their educational experiences. There have been rising concerns regarding misinformation and safety since then and it is imperative for media literacy to be identified as a fundamental skill in the current times of moving to a knowledge-based society. Most stakeholders, including the policymakers from educational systems, have largely viewed the disadvantages of social media, thereby not being keen to incorporate it as an educational scaffold. It is quite understandable considering the backdrop of instances that have brought out the murky side of social media (Clarance and Perera, BBCNews, 2020). This, in actuality, highlights the gap to be catered to by the educational systems, that of formulating guidelines, undertaking measures to instil awareness about the risks and benefits of usage of social media and tapping the potential of social media for optimising reach and access in education.

There has been a steady increase in the breadth and depth of research efforts on varied aspects of social media for educational purposes. Studies on behavioural aspects, immersivity, perceptions, use cases, and their impact have shown positive and negative results. Studies and practises have recorded Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter being leveraged for educational purposes. Social media is widely used for the purpose of socialisation and informal learning as well as building a community of learning (Deshmukh.A, 2019). Like everything else, social media comes with its own set of disadvantages. Research points out its role in establishing a sense of belonging, support, networking, and means of communication in distress and calamities on one hand (Kryvasheyeu.Y. et al., 2016; Muhammad. I., et al., 2015; Ogie, R.I., et al, 2022) and in the spread of misinformation, defamation, hate speech, cyberbullying on the other(Zachos, G.; Paraskevopoulou.K., 2018). Studies also point out that though students are enmeshed in social media use it extensively and are open to its usage for learning, educators do not support the use of social media in education (Connolly, T.; Boyle, E.; MacArthur, E.; Boyle, J., 2012). This contradiction and the double-edged nature of social media necessitates that education professionals including educators and administrators, draw consensus for formulating a social media policy for educational institutions and their stakeholders.

Concerns about the challenges like social media usage being excused for targeting people, restricting citizen's access to information and media usage, and freedom of expression have been vocalised (UNESCO news, *WSIS Forum,* 2018). On the other hand, these disruptions have also brought to light the fear of accountability, uncontrolled processes, and disruptions that social media brings. Social media is seen and hailed as a free space. Its rise to popularity had two major reasons amongst others, viz not being under censorship and the ease of access. Social media including online petitions, allows people to have a platform for a collective voice of their problems, concerns and discontent (Deshmukh.A., 2017). There have been several instances where people came together for common causes and concerns without being manned or led by any 'leader' as such. Multiple mass movements across the world have been impacted by social media (Smidi.A.,Shahin. S., 2017; Meral K., Meral.Y., 2021) to an extent. At the same time, the very same social media is being used as a tool to manipulate public opinion (Oxford Internet Institute, 2019). It is for this very reason that students, in particular, as young citizens, should be aware of the ways and implications and be cautious of covert and overt manipulations using social media.

Such out-of-control and unaccountable disruptions lead to varied reactions. While some could see this as "freedom", with certain grey areas looming around, on the other hand, Governments and administrators usually react to things out of their control by calling a "ban" on such platforms (Kelly.S., et al 2017). Such reactions tend to do more harm than good since the call of the hour is to strengthen the usage of social media in order to create a safe and responsible internet space for all. A safer internet-based space, being a collective responsibility, various organisations in countries around the world have their own social media policies in place that describe and lay out desirable behaviour.

There have been instances of disciplinary action taken on posts by people, including sports personalities (Belson. K, The New York Times, 2012) amongst others with some academicians almost

losing their jobs (Ingeno.L, Inside Higher Ed, 2013). Similar incidents in academia have also been reported in India (Nath.S, News18, 2019). It was easier to take disciplinary action in the case of sports personalities since there are a set of guidelines on their conduct that make disciplinary action by the concerned Committees easy and justified. The dearth of such social media policies in Higher Education Institutions is striking, though guidelines about cybersecurity for school sections by NCERT have been in place since 2019.

There is extensive research literature available on various aspects of social media, including the effect on teenagers, privacy concerns as well as the role of social media in political movements (Tufekci, Z.and Wilson,C., 2012). However, literature on social media policy reveals that they cover utilitarian aspects like leveraging for the expansion of business or cautionary in the purview of legalities. Most of the social media policies are framed by the corporates, trying to separate the official and personal use. Surprisingly, there have been rare instances of the analysis of the content of the social media policies framed. It is found that the policies framed by various institutions regarding social media evolve through three stages- mitigation, information, and differentiation (Pomerantz J, Hank C, Sugimoto CR (2015).

It is also worth the attention that social media policies cannot be blanket policies for all users. Rather, they have to be for specific cohorts since their usage, application, and impact vary age-wise (René.C., 2019; Pew Research Centre, 2019) as well as according to the culture of the respective region (Koiranen et al. 2020). The legal age of usage of social media, though averagely considered as 13 years, also varies according to countries (Vincent. J., 2015). There are also instances that we see around us of users falsely reporting the age of a social media account, though this may be due to a lack of awareness. This, therefore, highlights the need to have policies on guidelines of usage as per the specific groups.

India and Social media

India has taken to social media as fish takes to water. It tops the usage chart of social media worldwide. The IT Act 2000 and its amendments look forth to define cybercrimes and electronic transactions. Several cases (PIL- Public Interest Litigations) have successfully sought to strike down certain articles of the above Act that curb the freedom of speech. Though the larger cause of freedom of speech has to be protected at all costs, there are certain grey areas left around that are manipulated by cyber criminals (PYMNTS, 2020). The need for protection of the fundamental rights of individuals and providing for a safe cyberspace is not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, that forms the backbone of the policy on social media.

And yet, when it comes to framing policies for usage of social media, it leaves a lot to ask for and to be met. The Ministry of Electronics and Telecom, Government of India lays down guidelines for social media usage by government institutions (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Govt. of India, 2021), where it hints at the 'institutionalisation' of social media and the types of social media that can be used. It largely remains at a mitigation level and focuses on the outreach and managing interactions and perceptions of the individual citizens with the government. There has been an instance of the Indian government attempting to link the social media handles of students to that of their institutions, which was met by severe criticism citing invasion of personal space and surveillance (Joshi.S., VICE, 2019). The fears of using

personal data and surveillance, amongst others, are well-placed apprehensions. Even for the purpose of regulation of abuse or hate speech, there needs to be a nuanced understanding of the *"Spectrum of various online activities"* as opposed to an oblate concept of acceptable speech (Udupa, 2019). The fine line of 'invasion of private spaces', 'freedom of speech' needs to be defined with the backdrop of Constitutional Rights and the Indian Penal Code (IPC) sections. This necessitates the guidelines to be framed by autonomous bodies with a sound understanding of Laws and the Constitution as well as Education. It is worthwhile to note the steps taken over the years in the legal and policy framework of the country to strengthen the use of safe cyberspace (Sharma.D., et al, 2022). The focal point here is that autonomous bodies would ensure that there will be neutrality and academic integrity and keep commercialisation away.

When left to the organisations, including the educational institutions, the social media policies are at the mitigation stage. Not many educational institutions have social media policies per se, and the ones that mostly suggest responsibilities are listed (Central University of Tamil Nadu, 2019). While institutions are concerned about their reputation over social media, some of them state very clearly the disciplinary action that would be taken if the students speak against the institutions and/or the staff and services provided (Social media policy of some institutions noted here-All India Shri Shivaji Memorial Society, 2020; National Institute of Fashion Technology, 2020). This could be considered a gag policy on the student's freedom of expression as there are chances that their voices could never be heard. Surprisingly, mention of hate speech, cyberbullying, and ways to report cybercrime is largely unspoken, which remains the major cause of concern in the cyber world. Such restrictive, mitigative policies

could be a deterrent to a student being harassed to file a complaint.

The lower rate of literacy, little awareness of cyber security, cybercrime, hate speech, and rights related to such incidences in a growing democracy should lead to educational institutions being the torchbearers in the framing of guidelines that inform students and staff about the specific laws, their implications and their protection. Yet, this role by the educational institutions remains largely in taking only awareness programs and not developing a strong policy document which could be due to a number of reasons- administrative and practical.

With the COVID 19 situation, educational transactions have been forced to go online, thereby necessitating the urgent need to frame and development of a social media policy for educational institutions. Social media no longer remains a frill but a scaffold in education due to reach and minimum bandwidth requirements. The pandemic of COVID 19 has seen social media being used as a platform for information dissemination and its usage for academic communication - synchronous, lectures and asynchronous to carry out discussions, send notifications and other academic purposes. This has highlighted a number of gaps which need to be addressed, including the awareness of the age at which using social media is legal and the attitude of the teachers towards the usage of social media in education that ranges from hostility to over-enthusiasm. It has also brought to the forefront the demographic challenges that are unique to the field of education thus underlining the need for overarching policy guidelines for appropriate usage of social media in education.

Thus, there is a need for policy guidelines to be drafted by autonomous bodies in sync with legal expertise and NGOs to

involve multiple perspectives. The social media policies in education have to consider various points, the basics being the age group. The social media policies will have to be framed considering the cultural diversities, literacy rates and socio-cultural-economic aspects. Additionally, the impact on, and of the groups active on social media has to be of prime focus while framing such policy guidelines. The social media policy, while upholding the rights of students and faculty alike, should ensure to provide for a safe cyberspace. Therefore, this paper recommends the formation of a committee comprising experts from autonomous bodies or institutes of excellence such as NCERT, IITs, National Law School related to the domains of Education, Educational Psychology, Technology, and Law. While this paper strongly advocates the autonomy of educational institutions to draft their own policy, it recommends that educational institutions need clear guidelines by such a committee and possibly a system of regulation for the same in order to ensure fairness of usage in terms of providing a voice as well as maintaining professional requirements.

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