

Why restricting social media is not a solution to dangerous behaviours in India

July 26 2018, by Amanda Gilbertson

Earlier this month, in the Indian state of Rajasthan, bystanders took [selfies](#) while three men lay dying after a road accident. The week before, two men were beaten to death by a mob in the state of Assam after false rumours of their involvement in a kidnapping were spread on [WhatsApp](#). And a [study recently found](#) that India is the world leader when it comes to selfie-related accidents.

Only around 30% of Indians [have access to the internet](#) and under 15% use [social media](#), but [social media](#) and selfies have captured the public imagination.

Some fear that the social media sensation has gone too far, encouraging dangerous behaviours and exacerbating tensions between groups. Others are using social media to bring about positive social change.

Selfies: from pop culture to politics

Selfies have certainly become a much more prominent part of Indian society in recent years.

Part of this has to do with [Bollywood actors](#) and other entertainers spreading the popularity of [selfie](#) culture through films, music and television. The chorus of the song "Selfie Pulla" from the Tamil movie Kaththi, for instance, is a catchy repetition of "Let's take a selfie, pulla (girl)". It also includes the lines, "Let's live in Instagram, let's shoot and

snap every moment of our life", and "Let's share on Facebook to get unlimited likes and shares".

India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, is also a skilled [social media](#) user who has the [second-highest Twitter following](#) of any world leader (after a certain @realDonaldTrump) and is the [most "liked" leader in the world on Facebook](#).

But with this enthusiasm for social media has come criticism. In 2015, Modi encouraged fathers to send him photos of themselves with their daughters via Twitter, using the hashtag [#SelfieWithDaughter](#). The initiative was part of efforts to reduce the preference for male children.

But feminists were [not impressed](#), taking issue with the failure of the initiative to adequately address the issue, the invisibility of mothers in the campaign, and the hypocrisy of some supporters who had otherwise misogynist Twitter feeds.

Actress [Shruti Seth](#) tweeted, "A selfie is not a device to bring about change Mr. PM. Try reform," with the hashtag #selfieobsessedPM.

Selfie culture turns dangerous

Such is the explosion of selfie culture that young Indians have gone to great lengths in pursuit of the perfect shot. Sadly, an 18-year-old woman [drowned](#) after she and her friends fell into the sea while taking selfies in a Mumbai suburb. A young man died while taking a selfie on [top of a train](#) in Delhi.

To curb this occasionally fatal quest for online "likes", authorities are starting to take action. The Ministry of Railways [issued a warning](#) to young people taking selfies near train tracks, while the Mumbai police identified and publicised [16 selfie danger zones](#) and the [Karnataka](#)

[government](#) in southwestern India announced plans for a safe selfie campaign.

Among other recent measures, the Hindu [Kumbh Mela](#) festival was declared a "no selfie zone" to avoid stampedes, and selfie sticks were banned at 46 [museums](#) across the country to protect archaeological artefacts.

The backlash has also extended to college campuses. At many university colleges, [selfies](#) and [mobile phones](#) have been banned for reasons ranging from destruction of the [academic culture](#) to facilitating kidnapping and [rape](#).

Mob violence fuelled by WhatsApp

Authorities have also targeted WhatsApp, the largest online communication platform in India with over [200 million users](#).

In recent months, some two dozen innocent people [have been killed](#) by angry mobs in India after false rumours of child kidnappings were spread on WhatsApp.

To try to curb incidents of mob violence, the [Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology \(MEITY\)](#) recently mandated that WhatsApp "ensure that their platform is not used for such malafide activities". In response, [WhatsApp](#) announced it would test a feature that would prevent Indian users from forwarding messages to more than five people or groups at once.

In the highly militarised state of Jammu and Kashmir, a [district magistrate](#) has gone so far as to order all WhatsApp group administrators to register with the police.

This idea that new media fans the flames of communal tension is also making [internet shutdowns](#) an increasingly common strategy in times of unrest.

New media, old issues

Are [social media platforms](#) really to blame for social ills, though?

In a recent [article](#), Divij Joshi, a research fellow at the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, argues that authorities in India should be focusing on the social issues contributing to mob violence, rather than the platforms used to inflame tensions and spread rumours.

A similar point is made by a team of researchers from a global social media research project called [Why We Post](#). Digital platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook make new forms of interaction between people possible. But, these researchers argue: "The platform is surprisingly irrelevant to finding explanations for why and how people use social media. It provides the place, but not the cause nor the explanation."

For example, in the South Indian field site for the project, researcher [Shriram Venkatraman](#) found that people connected mostly with others of similar social status online and some families restricted women's access to the internet to prevent relationships with men. Social media does not create these class and gender inequalities. It is simply a new space where these old problems persist.

Social media restrictions are not just ineffective solutions, they may also undermine India's democracy. There is evidence that such restrictions are being used to [silence voices critical of the government](#).

As researchers from India's [Internet Democracy Project](#) point out, the government and courts already have very broad powers to limit and

cancel online communication. Expanding these powers poses a serious threat to freedom of expression in the digital space.

Social media for positive social change

Restricting access to social media also overlooks its potential for positive social change. New media is being used in India to enable [young people](#) and [marginalised groups](#) to tell their stories, for example, and to provide information on sensitive issues like [mental health](#) and [sexual and reproductive health rights](#).

Social justice organisations have also begun adapting their social media use to reach greater numbers of people. Japleen Pasricha, founder and director of [Feminism in India](#), told me her organisation added WhatsApp to their social media repertoire at the end of last year, hoping to make their content go viral to "counter the sexist memes and jokes we all receive in various family and friends' WhatsApp groups".

Some of this social justice work is aimed directly at [transforming the way information technology is used](#) in India. This includes tackling the [gender gap](#) in access to technology (71% of internet users in India are [men](#)) and educating [young people](#) about staying [safe online](#).

Social [media](#) may often be a tool for exacerbating the conflicts and reinforcing the inequalities of the offline world, but people across India are working to change this.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Why restricting social media is not a solution to dangerous behaviours in India (2018, July 26) retrieved 16 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-07-restricting-social-media-solution-dangerous.html>

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