

## **PERSPECTIVES ON NEW MEDIA AS AN EMERGENT THREAT TO DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA**

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### **Abstract**

Democracy as a political system of governance is widely accepted as the foundation of a free and progressive society. It is recognized by most international institutions as one of the essential conditions for equitable economic growth and human development in modern times. Communication networks and mass media have always played an important role as the ‘fourth pillar’ of democracy in India. However, there are concerns and apprehensions regarding New media as a vehicle for promoting values of a democratic society. Unlike other forms of media, regulation and monitoring of content, particularly user generated content on the internet is neither feasible nor desirable in the context of freedom of expression. But there are potential harms that an unregulated and diverse medium of communication can cause to a society. This paper highlights the dichotomies, strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats related to new media technologies in the context of Indian democracy. Using the methodology of conceptual analysis, the paper points out the potential threats posed by new media forms to the functioning of a healthy democracy. The paper proposes a new concept linking the formation of ‘filter bubbles’ and ‘echo chambers’ in the context of social media and presents its implications. It concludes with suggested approaches to using new media to strengthen democracy and advocates media literacy campaigns as one of the effective ways to counter and proposes a few strategies to counter these negative effects.

**Keywords:** Democracy, new media, threats to democratic institutions, filter bubbles, echo chambers

### **Introduction**

Athens City in Ancient Greece during the 5th century BC is widely known as the cradle of Western civilization and the birthplace of a very important socio-political institution – democracy. Many nations that won independence after World War II, including India, embraced the democratic form of government with the hope of bringing justice, peace and progress. In the seven decades post-independence, Indian democracy has evolved through many social, economic and political changes. Its form, meaning and relevance have been questioned by many political and social science thinkers. Citing the numerous failures of governments elected by people the world over, there are voices asking for radical reforms, some even for its complete revocation. But the fact remains that in present times, there is no viable alternative to democracy, and however imperfect, it remains our strongest hope to achieve equality, justice and basic rights for every citizen. It is to be remembered that democracy is not an absolute but a relative concept – some countries are more democratic than others in the sense that they realize the principles of popular control and political equality in a greater measure (Beetham, 2005).

Democracy is a political concept that is hard to define or explain in view of its various social and political manifestations. Political scientists have given several perspectives on what comprises a democracy, but no one theory can describe all of its forms. One concept that finds consensus in most theories is that for a democratic government to function to its fullest potential, supportive social institutions that are independent of the state are essential. Mass media is one of the most important sustenance mechanisms for a democracy to flourish. The relationship between media and democracy in a sovereign nation is that of mutual dependence – one cannot develop its full potential in the absence of the other.

## **Scope and Need for Study**

The Indian Constitution guarantees freedom of expression as one of the fundamental rights of the citizens, and a 'free' media is a derivative of this. Before the Internet age, questions on freedom of mass media applied mostly to print and broadcast media. Today we live in the age of media convergence and conglomeration of private media ownerships. The earlier norms and beliefs of what comprises a free media are changing rapidly. Even when 'Freedom of Press' is applicable by law, questions arise on the competency of the media to uphold its social responsibilities, primary of which is to protect the institution of democracy and its functioning. The challenges to fulfilling this duty arise when there is a clash between ethical and commercial objectives of a media business unit, or if there is a strong political system of intolerance for diverse opinions. With the advent of online news, social media and other forms of new media, on one hand there is an overload of digital content available on different media platforms and on the other we have problems of misinformation and lack of credibility.

There is a need to reinterpret the classical tenets of democracy as a political theory and its connection with advanced human communications, particularly mass media. New media, and particularly social media is a rapidly evolving communication technology that has deep effects on functioning and perception of democracy among the people. India as the largest democratic country of the world and as home to one of the largest numbers of 'netizens', needs to assess the deep impacts of the use of social media on public opinion and narrative building.

## **Review of Literature**

Scholars of political science have struggled to find a universally applicable standard definition of democracy. While many of them have tried to define it in terms of the processes that make a democracy, Hood prefers the definitions given by Schumpeter and Dahl (Hood, 2004). According to Schumpeter, democracy is the system that arranges for political power, mainly as a power of decision-making to be vested in elected representatives of people. Also, the concepts of 'polyarchy' and pluralism are said to be essential for the functioning of a democracy as suggested by Dahl.

There are two parallel and interconnected components of democracy in the modern world, both originating in the philosophy of liberalism. These are rights and duties, and it is futile to advocate one without the other. Democratic rights are political rights given to the citizens based on ideals of equality, liberty, justice and suffrage, as are enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Duties or virtues of the people are essential for the sustenance and progress of democracy, for a society without these would be destroyed by self-interest. Virtues that must be imbibed by citizens of a democratic society include self-restraint, loyalty, obedience to law, and a strong belief in democratic principles (Hood, 2004).

New media platforms of communication have a direct bearing on the balance between rights and duties. Let us try to analyse communication on social media platforms from a theoretical framework. Social media works on the basic idea of creation of messages, mainly text, images and videos by individuals that can be instantly accessed by large groups of people. Though several theories of mass communication can be applied to this form, the Personal Influence Two-Step Theory by Katz and Lazarsfeld is one of the most relevant. According to this, messages and influences are passed on from opinion leaders to opinion followers. The followers and leaders are often at the same horizontal level in terms of social status, but the leaders are more expressive, more knowledgeable about use of media technology and more socially well connected (Baran & Davis, 2015). Social media influencers, bloggers, political leaders and celebrities who have huge followings on their respective social media handles are the opinion leaders. But whether the followers use their own discretion when it comes to issues like politics and decision making is a subject that requires further research and empirical evidence.

Another important theory that finds relevance to social media is the Uses and Gratification theory. This is an audience-centred approach of mass communication that challenges the tenets of the 'limited-effects' theory (Baran & Davis, 2015). The concept developed by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumer and Michael Gurevitch in 1974 describes the uses and gratification model as comprised of five key components:

1. Audiences actively use the media for specific goals
2. The Audiences choose the specific media and content that gives them need gratification

3. There are other options available to the audiences to gratify the needs, so media has to compete with these choices
4. Audiences/users are very much aware of their viewing choices and patterns, and can contribute to research on the subject
5. It is futile to judge audience characteristics or values based on their choices of media content consumption

Each of these assumptions relate well with the context of social media usage. There are many examples of studies that directly link uses and gratifications sought by social media users to psychological and behavioural effects, which ratify the applicability of this concept.

The bedrock of Indian democracy is the Constitution of India. The following section highlights some of the important features of the Constitution and how the media can contribute in strengthening these.

The Preamble to Indian Constitution declares our nation to be 'sovereign socialist secular democratic republic'. It grants all citizens 'LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship (Government of India, Ministry of Law and Justice, 2023). This is the most direct validation of the link between democracy and free communication. Also, following are a few examples of how media – both online and new media can take up informative and investigative roles to uphold democratic functions:

- Supporting the Parliamentary form of Government: Media needs to play a crucial role in informing the public about their representatives and keeping a vigilant watch on electoral processes.
- Protecting fundamental rights of citizens: The fundamental rights are in fact prohibitions against the State to prevent laws that may be oppressive or against democratic norms. The media has an investigative role in bringing such infringements to public notice and supporting action against them.
- Supporting Pluralism, respect for expression of dissent: In a democracy, though the opinion of the majority is taken as valid, minorities also have a right to voice their views and be heard. The media must make efforts to give coverage and space to all kinds of opinions regardless of their orientation to the majority.
- Promoting accountable Governments: A democratic government must be transparent and accountable to the public, and the media has a critical role in investigating, verifying, and keeping track of government functioning.
- Promoting Welfare State: The Constitution directs the government to provide welfare to its citizens by optimum utilization of resources. Development journalism comes to the forefront in these aspects, and the media must include issues of human development in its role of informing the public.

Traditional media in India have demonstrated fulfilling of these roles during tumultuous periods in India's post-independence history, like during the Internal Emergency years 1975-1977. It remains to be seen how new media channels, particularly online news portals and social media platforms can adapt to these values in the near future.

## **Research Gaps**

The existing research does not categorically support or reject the formation and impacts of filter bubbles and echo chambers. There is a possibility of audience discretion and judgement that may mitigate the influence as was argued in the limited effects theory of communication.

Another trend that can be a potential detriment to the relationship between media and democracy is social media platforms becoming an alternative to mainstream journalism. While there are obvious benefits of convenience and accessibility, there are less obvious dangers of misinformation, manipulated narratives and sensationalism. For instance, let us consider the practice of interviewing political leaders. Media organizations usually assign high-profile interviews of political leaders to experienced journalists. They are well trained to extract essential and relevant information for public discourse, enabling citizens to gain insights into the perspectives of their chosen leaders. But with citizen journalists and social media influencers taking up interviewing political leaders, this important form of journalism gets reduced to a popularity building exercise. This form of content contributes to

the phenomenon of filter bubbles. From the point of view of democratic process, this form of communication between the leaders and the masses provides a convenient excuse to the former for not answering the hard questions or addressing the real issues affecting the people and yet seeming to be accessible. This is another aspect that requires further research.

## **Objectives and Methodology**

The detailed discussion of several theoretical aspects related to democracy and social media now enables us to outline the main objectives of this study as follows:

1. To analyse potential and existing threats in the present usage of social media that can harm the foundations of democracy in India.
2. To recommend strategies and approaches to Indian media stakeholders and policy makers to reduce the negative impact and strengthen democratic values.

The research method used for this qualitative study is conceptual analysis. It can be explained as analysis of concepts, terms, variables, constructs, definitions, assertions, hypotheses, and theories, and identifying assumptions and implications based on these. Just like in empirical research, conceptual papers also seek to create new knowledge by building on carefully selected sources of data assimilated according to established norms of the discipline. The difference between the two is that unlike empirical research, conceptual papers do not work with primary data, but involve the analysis, assimilation and combination of previously developed concepts and theories (Hirschheim, 2008).

There are four types of conceptual paper approaches generally used: Theory Synthesis, Theory Adaptation, Typology, and Model Building (Jaakkola, 2020). The present study attempts to present a conceptual model on the effect of social media communication on its users at an individual and at group levels. A conceptual model is used to describe a phenomenon and identify its main components. It can describe an event, an object, or a process, and explain how it works by disclosing antecedents, outcomes, and contingencies related to the focal construct (Meredith, 1993; MacInnis, 2011). The model tries to explore conceptual connections between constructs, introduces new constructs, or explains why elements of a process lead to a particular outcome (Cornelissen, 2017; Fulmer, 2012).

In this study, the primary constructs used are content keywords, themes in social media messages, political references, references to particular groups, communities, or religious minorities, and images or video footage that support a particular opinion. Since new media has an unprecedented advantage of combining words, images and audio-visual clips, it is imperative to consider all forms of user generated content to get perspective. The constructs were identified by content analysis of posts, likes and comments on popular social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and online news portals. The time frame for analysis was from January 2022 to January 2024.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The above study revealed the presence in varying levels of the two theoretical concepts that are most discussed in the context of digital media and its impact on society are Filter Bubbles and Echo Chambers. The term ‘filter bubble’ was coined by Eli Pariser in his best-selling book on how new media is creating information and perception compartments for users (Pariser, 2011). The basic argument put forth in his work is that the Internet is channelling flows of information selectively to users based on algorithms and personalization tools. It enables users to search selectively for information they like or agree with, and filters out the contrary. In the Internet communities, each user of the new media lives in his/her own bubble of information and is either unaware or uninterested in views that give different points of view. This poses a threat to informed decision-making and objectivity in forming opinions, both of which are essential for a democratic system. The algorithms of social media platforms keep showing users content that supports their opinion and mindset.

Echo Chamber is a similar concept, except that it takes the bubble created at individual level to a systemic level. When people come in contact with others who hold similar viewpoints or ideologies on digital media platforms, they connect immediately and exchange information.

The exchange of ideas brings more reinforcement to their beliefs and may harden their stance. They then find other people who give similar positive feedback, or in other words, echo their sentiments, and

eventually there is no scope for rebuttal or considering alternative points of view. In the present study, there are posts and comments in a single ‘thread’ of social media conversations identified in the sample that simply reaffirm, rephrase, and reflect strong opinions on major political and social issues without adding new information or evidence.

While the filter bubbles may be broken by deliberate or accidental exposure to the ‘other side’ of the story, an echo chamber is formed at a deeper cognitive level and is not easily changed. The phenomenon of echo chambers has a great potential to damage democratic foundations of a society by undermining divergent voices and opinions (Chen, 2021).

Based on the above discussion, the focal construct of this conceptual study is identified as ‘the manipulation of information in social media platforms that affects democratic processes in the respective nation states. This relates with the first objective of this study.

To further explore and identify the existing and potential positive and negative outcomes from social media usage in the Indian context, a framework of SWOT may be used, as depicted below.

<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Speed, accessibility across time and space, freedom of expression.</li> <li>● Audience participation and involvement in issues of public interest, including politics.</li> <li>● Rapidly increasing reach and impact due to expansion of Internet resources – cuts across traditional barriers like social class, income, education level etc.</li> <li>● Provides opportunity for positive reinforcement of democratic values via citizen journalism, social media activism, etc.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Concepts of selective exposure to information – filter bubbles created and expanded.</li> <li>● Corporate transnational ownership and control of most of the major social media networks, sometimes undermining sovereignty and laws of the land.</li> <li>● Lack of regulatory mechanisms to moderate harmful content or induce diversity of opinions organizational structure and standardisation across different media which makes it difficult to take a stand on an issue.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Increasing new media coverage to remote and poorer sections of society</li> <li>● Promoting concepts and themes related to development, national integrity and upholding the norms of democracy.</li> <li>● Planning and implementing media literacy interventions</li> </ul>	<p><b>Threats</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Influences from opinion leaders with vested personal or political interests</li> <li>● Formation of ‘Echo Chambers’ that reinforce stereotypic thinking and undermine democratic ideologies</li> <li>● Use of social media to subvert due processes of democracy, particularly elections.</li> <li>● Use of social media to spread misinformation, propaganda and biased narratives</li> </ul>

**Figure 1.** SWOT Analysis of New Media and democracy in India.

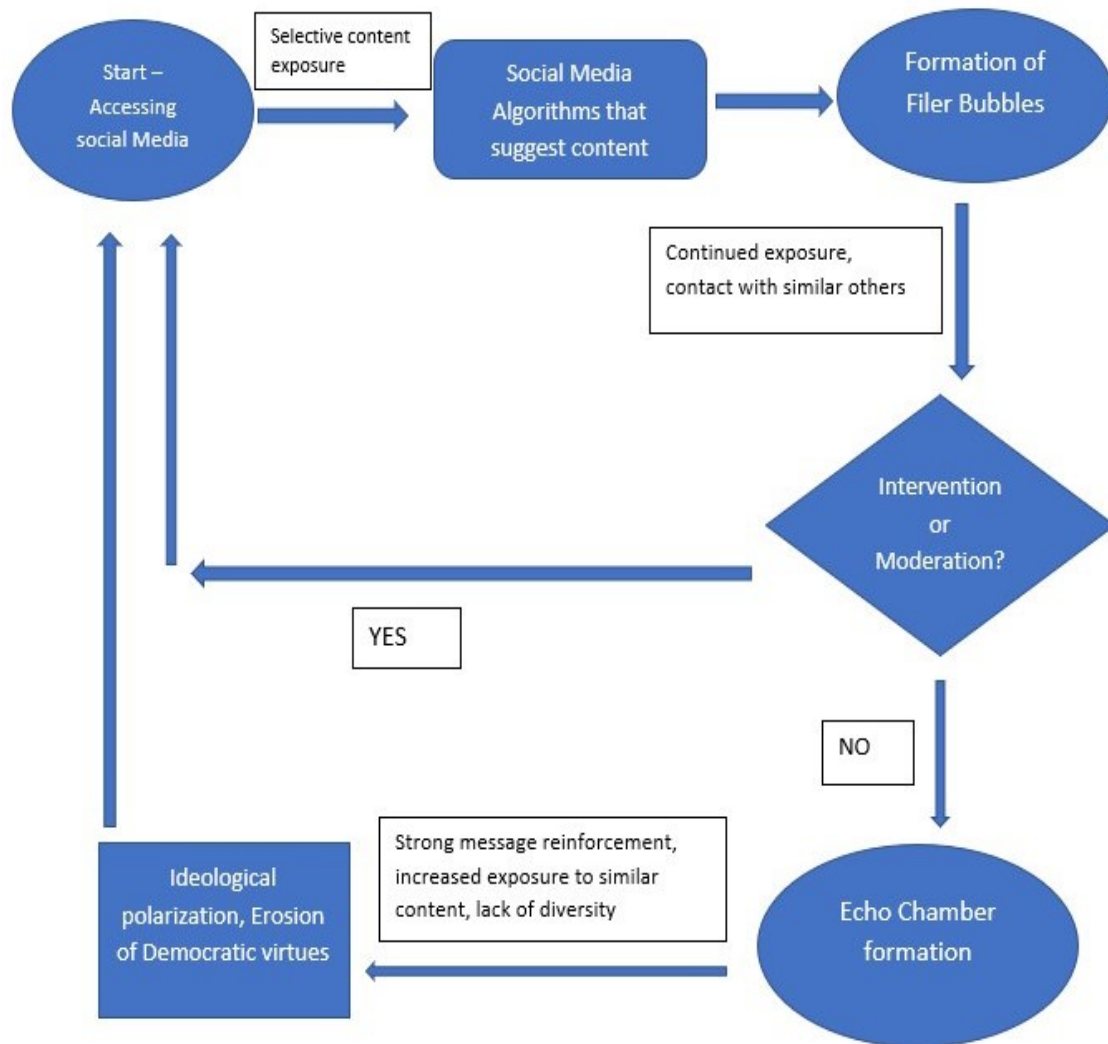
Source: Author

The findings of the study enable the suggestion of a conceptual link between the theories of ‘filter bubbles’ and ‘echo chambers’ as discussed in the earlier sections. Echo chambers have been described as detrimental to democratic values and liberalism. This study proposes the idea that instead of viewing echo chambers as a related phenomenon, it may be viewed as a logical progression of effect of individual filter bubbles. The diagrammatic representation of the idea is presented in Figure 2.

The Model begins with the individual user accessing selective information or content depending on variables like age, gender, education level, location, interests, etc. He/she is led by algorithms and personalization/customization tools used by social media platforms to consume more of ‘similar’ content. At this stage, contrary viewpoints are either filtered out or toned down in visibility to the user. The user is also predisposed to consume content feeds that he/she ‘likes’ or finds agreeable. This leads

to creation of a communication ‘filter bubble’ that on one hand strengthens one set of viewpoints, and reduces chances of accessing diverse information on the other.

The stage of filter bubble is critical because there are two possibilities after this. If there are media literacy interventions, or a chance access to contravening information at this stage, the bubble may break and go no further. But if the user spends more time on social media and comes in contact with several other users holding similar viewpoints, aided by technical tools like ‘hashtags’ and online forums, the process goes to the next stage. Exchange of ideas and discussions in these online groups are likely to be in the same direction of affirmation, due to the individual filter bubbles already existing. Many of these views and statements are not critically examined for accuracy or source credibility, leading to the next stage: the formation of ‘echo chambers’. The user receives only echo of his/her viewpoints, no new information is exchanged.



**Figure 2.** Proposed Model depicting conceptual link between filter bubbles and echo chambers in social media interactions.

In the echo chambers, the continuous reaffirmation of the same messages over a period of time prevents members from exploring or acknowledging other viewpoints. The members become more polarized and resistant to opposing views, and at this stage even evidence to the contrary may fail in changing their perception. This isolation from diverse perspectives is particularly dangerous for the health of democracy, as it undermines informed decision-making and marginalizes minority voices.

*This is the specific danger from social media to the health of democracy of that nation, because giving voice to the minority and informed decision making are critical to functioning of this political system.*

In conclusion, the proposed model provides a basic framework for understanding the progression from filter bubbles to echo chambers. While it has strengths in clarity, empirical grounding, and relevance, it also has limitations that need to be addressed through further research and empirical testing. By elaborating on these processes and considering potential countermeasures, we can better navigate the complexities of the digital information landscape and its implications for democracy.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Proposed Model**

Strengths of the model are discussed below:

1. **Clear Causality:** The model effectively outlines a clear causal pathway from individual behaviours and algorithmic influences to the formation of echo chambers. By starting with the individual user's selective exposure to information based on personal variables (age, gender, education level, interests, etc.), the model logically progresses through the impact of algorithms that reinforce these preferences. This clarity helps in understanding how personal and technological factors interact to shape information consumption.
2. **Empirical Basis:** The model is grounded in observable phenomena. The selective exposure to content driven by personalization tools and algorithms is a well-documented process in social media research. By building on this empirical basis, the model provides a robust framework for understanding the formation of echo chambers.
3. **Relevance to Current Media Landscape:** The model is highly relevant in the context of the contemporary digital media landscape. With the proliferation of social media platforms and personalized content, understanding the mechanisms behind filter bubbles and echo chambers is crucial. This relevance makes the model a valuable tool for researchers, policymakers, and media practitioners aiming to address the challenges posed by these phenomena.
4. **Focus on Democratic Implications:** By highlighting the potential dangers to democratic values and liberalism, the model underscores the broader societal implications of filter bubbles and echo chambers. It emphasizes how these phenomena can undermine informed decision-making and marginalize minority voices, which are essential for a healthy democracy.

Following are some of the limitations of the conceptual model:

1. **Oversimplification due to limitations of content analysed:** The present study is based on only a small sample of content on social media. One of the limitations of the model is its potential oversimplification of the complex processes involved in information consumption and belief formation. While it provides a clear pathway, it may not fully capture the nuances of individual agency, the diversity of content available, and the varying degrees of susceptibility to algorithmic influences.
2. **Need for empirical testing by other research methods for validity:** The model, as presented, is largely theoretical. For it to be validated, it would require empirical testing through longitudinal studies and experimental designs. Without such validation, the model remains a hypothesis that needs further exploration.
3. **Effect of Counteracting forces:** The model does not sufficiently account for the counteracting forces that may mitigate the formation of echo chambers. For instance, individuals might encounter diverse viewpoints through offline interactions, public debates, or proactive information-seeking behaviours. These factors could play a significant role in preventing the complete isolation of users within echo chambers.

### **Implications and Course of Action**

The advent of new media technologies has brought boundless opportunities for growth and development of journalism. It is making a level playing field for all netizens by removing traditional barriers of language, accessibility, and social stratification. Many scholars are of the opinion that freedom of expression has a much better representation in new media platforms, including social media as compared to traditional media. While all of these advantages of new media are well acknowledged, we must also pay attention to the unique challenges they bring to society.

Just as with any scientific and technological breakthrough, digital media also has its downsides. This paper has put forward some of the potential dangers it may lead to, particularly for democracy, which is considered to be the best hope for mankind to live with freedom and dignity. The following steps and courses of action may help in mitigating these dangers:

1. Including greater scope for content diversity in designing algorithms for social media users is one way to lessen the formation of filter bubbles. Social media companies must spend more resources to include this on their respective platforms.
2. Content moderation strategies by social media companies: It refers to monitoring and regulating user-generated content on social media platforms to ensure that it complies with community guidelines, legal requirements, and standards set by the platform itself. The criteria to take suitable action against objectionable content must be reviewed and made stricter.
3. Establishing laws and regulatory bodies at different levels of government to ensure balance between freedom of expression and maintaining a safe online environment is required. The companies that own and operate social media apps must be held accountable for misinformation and other damaging effects emerging from their platforms.
4. Designing appropriate media literacy interventions to be implemented in the form of awareness campaigns by colleges, universities, non-governmental bodies and other stakeholders can be another strategy. A media literacy intervention is an educational or awareness program designed to teach individuals critical thinking skills and strategies for analyzing and interpreting media messages. It can take various forms, including classroom instruction, workshops, online courses, or public awareness campaigns. The right interjection of awareness can stop the formation of filter bubbles and echo chambers by conscious choice of the social media user.

## Conclusion

The discussion presented in the paper points towards the following two important propositions:

1. New media technologies are here to stay, and their impact on democratic institutions ranges from positive to detrimental. These effects should be the focus of intensive research by media scholars and students.
2. Filter bubbles, echo chambers, and social media being used as substitutes for journalism in present times seem to present a potential harm to democratic values, and must be addressed with regulation and intervention as suggested in the paper.

Revisiting the essence of a true democracy, ‘the most effective check on the abuse of power is the ballot box and the free distribution of and access to information’ (Hood, 2004). Most of the fast-developing nations of the world, including India, have earned the democratic form of self-rule and sovereignty at a great cost of supreme sacrifices of their people over hundreds of years. It is now our duty to use digital technology and information revolution to strengthen and vitalize our democratic values, principles and systems as enshrined in our Constitution.

*“Democracy is a great institution and therefore it is liable to be greatly abused. The remedy therefore is not avoidance of democracy but reduction of possibility of abuse to a minimum.”*

*M. K. Gandhi (In ‘Young India’, 1931).*

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