

Why it is time to curb some freedoms

It used to be common wisdom in older days that you don't handover a podium to anyone who has the tendency to go on and on without self-restraint. Podium grabbers made for excellent filibusters, but, they were not worth wasting time upon. They seldom knew when or where to stop. The podium had to be grabbed back. In modern times, the internet has given loudspeakers to anyone who has time to air an opinion, even if it is the literal mid-sleep burp or fart. And many have taken up the opportunity with élan.

Opinion mobs

Online news platforms are today characterized by the slushy undergrowth of highly opinioned, trigger happy hordes of online *vigilantes* who have a well-developed pastime, *Opiniating*. They sulk & lurk in the dark waiting for a sparkly news or article piece to be published, before they can come in swarms and devour it to its bare skeletons. The first to arrive might read the news and comment. The later ones get straight to the job of Opiniating. *Opinion mobs* are close cousins of Trolls. They could be regarded as trolls with a specialized pastime- defacing news sites. Their habits are similar, giving unasked for & unqualified opinions, deriding other's opinions and so on and so forth. While, having an opinion on everything is desirable, being informed, before airing these so called opinions need to be encouraged further.

Defacement of public space

Some form of feedback mechanism has to have a place in a news media platform, online or otherwise. This is meant for part public consumption through participation & partly for the agencies' own evaluation. But, what if dedicated nodes of information, such as a newspaper or a magazine becomes an interface for airing unqualified opinions, at times overshadowing the published item, as has come to be the case today? This is what needs drawing attention to. How much of the news does one remember, and how much of the extremes of opinions expressed just below them? Do they serve the purpose they were meant to be? Has this reached levels which could be deemed to amount to defacement of a public space?

What & why to regulate?

Personal attacks against the writer and the fellow commenters ranging from ethnic, linguistic, religious profiling down to the level of name calling, hate mongering and the ever so respectable simpleminded cussing are all commonly found across the online news platforms. It would not be wrong to say that people who don't have the time to sit and respond to these barbs no longer express themselves even if they have a valid point to make. And the ones who do express, seems to have nothing better to do. The overall outcome of these interactions is that the online news platforms have today become an extension of the social media and the *Opiniaters* thrive here as free members of the faceless *Opinion mob*. They bully & attack each other. Instead of being an interface giving the reader a chance to express his/her opinion, today it has come to be a platform to run down the fellow readers. The saner voices never get heard.

These platforms are also serving as tools to mainstream privately held misconceptions. Hate mongering against certain sections of minorities is certainly becoming more acceptable. One of the reasons is that once an opinion is given a run, it gains respect as being a commonly held opinion & hence more acceptability. It has a reinforcing effect. The fact that most of the lone wolves world over are outcomes of forums and hate chat should call for attention to regulate this space. It is here that we and they get defined. The online hatred is real.

Online Hatred

Sometimes, this behavior is related to the issue being reported upon. Recently, The Dawn had an article on how Sania Mirza has contributed to women's freedom & have become a role model for many. It mentioned five instances of her career and was all praises for her handling of male misogyny. Yet, after two-three comments expressing their gratitude to her for being an inspiration for both Pakistanis and Indians alike, the Opiniaters arrived and turned the whole debate into whose property Sania Mirza was. Since she was married to a Pakistani this was all the more important for either side. The very purpose that the article would have served stood diluted if not thrown upside down. It ended up being a space where the misogynies got cemented.

Another instance was when an IT employee in Chennai was found murdered on a morning in the Nungambakkam Railway Station in Chennai. It got all the attention it needed after the girl was allegedly left to die on the platform without care. Some Opiniaters speculated about the girl's character, while some gave it a communal tinge citing the similarity to ISIS executions and hence suggested hands of a particular community. These were the days when ISIS featured prominently in news. These Opiniaters found news about Swathi's murder fit to use it for their own purposes- adding proofs for their own closely held positions as to how the world is functioning. This was before singer Abhijeet had come out and tweeted his stretched out version of Love Jihad.

[@PMOIndia](#) Hindu parents want [#JusticforSwati](#) /revenge 4 our child [#SWATI](#) who ws butchered by [#LoveJihad](#) <https://t.co/dImCx9Bsy0> [@RituRathaur](#)
abhijeet (@abhijeetsinger) June 26, 2016

All Hindu parents Lets trend for our child Swati [#JusiceforSwati](#) <https://t.co/dImCx9Bsy0>
abhijeet (@abhijeetsinger) June 26, 2016

The site he quoted is <http://hindusentinel.com/20160625/chennai-brutal-isis-style-cut-throat-murder-infosys-girl-terrorize-love-jihad-victims/> It still carries the article.

Sadly for Abhijeet, he was kicked left, right and centre, and rightfully so. The crime he did was stretching what was otherwise being slandered over the news websites apart from the site he quoted, and tweeting it out of his own account. Being a celebrity, his views were picked up, while the Opiniating crowd went scot free on the numerous web platforms.

Within a week, the alleged culprit was arrested and it came out that it was a young stalker who was living on rent at a mansion near Swathi's house. Ram Kumar, the accused, was arrested from his village in Sengottai near Tirunelveli. But does truth stand in the way of Opiniaters? Some suggested the police had framed this poor boy and went down the conspiracy theory path of protecting the real culprits. Where does opinion stop and conspiracy theories begin? The question that should have been raised naturally is, if Abhijeet was at least publicly mocked for his views, what about the Opiniaters who say much the same, frequently on a daily basis on public platforms? Why are there no checks?

Mob Approved Target List

At times, it is the journalist and his/her own views on totally unrelated issues that are being pulled into the discussion. This has much graver implications. Unless a journalist is able to satisfy the mob and their requirements, he/she may end up being badmouthed every time he/she writes. Harthosh Singh's articles are chased for the special hate treatment of this category. To the extent that, were he to write for a children's Alphabet book, it wouldn't be surprising if a horde of people may be found finding fault with every letter of it. And so is the case with Arundhati Roy & strangely, the polar opposite- Chetan Bhagat. It just shows that this behavior cuts across the ideological spectrum. It is the platform which encourages such behavior. A time could come when writers would stop expressing on certain topics out of not wanting to drain one self.

What If this online hatred later converts into a physical threat? Glimpses of this were displayed when Rajdeep Sardesai was in USA covering Modi's visit. Why is an already vulnerable environment for journalists being allowed to further deteriorate? A healthy respect for the 'other' opinion is what needs to be promoted. The warfare that takes place online involves attacking the 'other' opinion for "winning" the argument not defending one's own opinion. The one, who gives up first, loses. Perseverance and a slightly psychotic nagging are qualities which ensure success. This only solidifies the dogmas deeper within.

A worst case scenario would be when journalists starts writing keeping the mob's taste's in mind, just so that his/her opinions comes out unscathed. This is already happening on Prime Time Television, if one were to draw a parallel with the TRP's. This is where a line needs to be drawn. And it needs to be drawn immediately.

Bhakths & the Aaptards

It would be safe to say that there are only two kinds of people who are alive online in India- The Bhakths & the Aaptards, as they call each other. If you are not one of these, you will be cornered and painted as one, until you eventually become one. The battle lines have been drawn out for a long time now. Preset patterns of behavior have evolved. They come like swarms of locusts, lay their opinions to hatch and attack anyone from the other side who even makes a passing remark & trivializes even the most serious of issues. Like the Judges on TV who at the end of debates every night declares victory, they too declare themselves victorious without having listened to the other side ever. What purpose does this serve? Opinion formation is certainly not happening.

Opinions need to be sought on social issues and how to solve them or for articles such as these which is basically dealing with policy building. But should the same facility be available for every article? What use is a platform for character assassination of the victim? Does this not amount to defamation by a faceless mob? Isn't this rumor & gossip mongering tendency an outcome of the easiness with which any Tom, Dick or Harry can type just about anything onto a platform which renders it wide reachability and yet carries absolutely no accountability for being morally & factually wrong?

Need to make the distinction clear

News organizations are risking converting themselves into another social media platform where anyone and everyone can say just about anything and everything and get away with impunity. It is like sticking hate notes on a person one doesn't agree with. It is ok that this is so on social networking sites and platforms; it is exactly what it is meant to be. But news outlets have a whole together different purpose. It is high time the distinction became clear to both the consumers as well as the news outlets themselves so that the purpose of their existence is not lost.

The Way forward: Do we need Censorship?

Censoring or moderating opinions is not a healthy practice to begin with, nor is it effective. Opinions are always subjective and its correctness would change from person to person. It is not opinions that needs to be regulated but the pointless banter. There could be easier ways these could be achieved.

Regulating the at-the-fingertip commenting tools such as Disqus, curbing the number of comments allowed per article for each ip-address, to maybe 1 or 2 would go a long way in curbing the habit of obsessive rants. A slight delay before each comment becomes visible could also serve the purpose. Reverting to an older mode of accepting opinion, wherein one has to fill a form giving details about one's name, e-mail etc for each time one has to make a comment could also be an option.

Another model that should be considered is that of the BBC, which renders respectability to the whole platform. Where you there? Do you have anything to share or say? E-mail us. We will get in touch with you. The trigger happy *Opinion mobs* aren't patient enough to finish a mail, let alone wait for a reply. This should serve as a mental filter. This would also prevent the drowning of genuine voices in the chaos.

Everyone needs to be heard, not just the shrill & loud. It is also time we stopped encouraging defacing of public spaces with pointless banter.