

Freedom to Speak, Right to Know: Rethinking Media Freedom under the Indian Constitution

Article 19(1)(a), Reasonable Restrictions and the Democratic Responsibility of the Press

Kumar Bahukhandi

Assistant Professor, Journalism & Mass Communication

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Abstract

Freedom of speech and expression is generally discussed as the liberty of an individual to speak, write, publish or communicate. In a democracy, however, communication does not end with the speaker. Expression acquires democratic significance because there is also a listener, reader, viewer or citizen who receives information and uses it to understand public affairs and form opinions.

This paper therefore examines freedom of speech and expression through three interconnected dimensions: **the freedom to express, the freedom to communicate through the media, and the democratic interest of citizens in receiving information.**

Within the Indian constitutional framework, freedom of the press has developed as part of Article 19(1)(a), although the Constitution does not separately enumerate a fundamental right called 'freedom of the press'. At the same time, freedom of expression is not absolute. Article 19(2) permits reasonable restrictions on constitutionally specified grounds.

The paper argues that the relationship between media and law cannot adequately be understood merely as a conflict between liberty and restriction. Journalism introduces another dimension: **responsibility**. A communication may sometimes be legally permissible and yet journalistically irresponsible; conversely, excessive restriction can prevent journalism from performing its democratic function.

For the purpose of this study, a conceptual framework termed the **Democratic Communication Triangle** is proposed:

Freedom to Express → Freedom to Communicate → Freedom to Receive

The paper uses this framework to examine constitutional protection, press freedom, reasonable restrictions, the citizen's informational interest, journalistic responsibility and the challenges introduced by digital communication.

Keywords: Freedom of Speech and Expression, Article 19(1)(a), Media Law, Freedom of the Press, Right to Know, Journalism, Democracy, Reasonable Restrictions, Digital Media, Media Ethics

1. Introduction: Freedom Belongs to More Than the Speaker

When freedom of speech is discussed, attention naturally turns towards the person speaking.

Can an individual criticise the government? Can a newspaper publish an investigation? Can a journalist question those holding public authority? Can a citizen express an unpopular opinion?

These are fundamental questions. But they represent only one side of democratic communication.

Every speaker presupposes a listener. Every newspaper presupposes a reader. Every broadcast presupposes an audience. Every act of journalism ultimately presupposes a citizen who has an interest in understanding the society in which he or she lives.

Freedom of expression, therefore, cannot be examined solely as the liberty **to say something**. It must also be examined as part of a larger communicative relationship in which information and ideas move between individuals, institutions, media and society.

Democratic communication is incomplete when the freedom of the speaker is protected but the informational position of the citizen is ignored.

This distinction becomes particularly important in journalism. The press does not merely exercise its own freedom. It also functions as an intermediary through which information concerning government, institutions, communities and public affairs reaches citizens.

The constitutional question of media freedom is consequently larger than the institutional interests of newspapers, television channels or digital platforms. It concerns the conditions under which citizens participate meaningfully in democratic life.

2. Research Problem

Much discussion of media law begins with Article 19(1)(a) and subsequently moves towards the restrictions permitted under Article 19(2).

This approach is constitutionally necessary but conceptually incomplete.

It can create the impression that media freedom involves primarily two actors: **the State that may restrict expression and the individual or media institution claiming freedom**.

There is a third participant - the public.

The democratic significance of journalism depends substantially upon whether citizens can encounter information, competing opinions and scrutiny of public institutions.

At the same time, describing media freedom as indispensable cannot mean treating journalism as institutionally infallible. Freedom does not automatically produce accuracy, fairness or professional responsibility.

The research problem is therefore located at the intersection of four concerns: **constitutional liberty, media freedom, citizens' informational interests and journalistic responsibility**.

3. Research Questions

1. How does Article 19(1)(a) provide the constitutional foundation for freedom of the press in India?
2. Can freedom of expression be adequately understood only as the speaker's right, or

- must the position of the recipient of information also be considered?
3. How should reasonable restrictions under Article 19(2) be understood in relation to media freedom?
4. What is the distinction between **legal freedom** and **journalistic responsibility**?
5. How has digital communication complicated the traditional relationship between the speaker, the press and the public?
6. Can media freedom be conceptualised as a communicative relationship rather than merely an institutional privilege?

4. Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to examine the constitutional position of freedom of speech and expression in relation to journalism; analyse the place of press freedom within Article 19(1)(a); explore the relationship between expression and reception of information; distinguish constitutional protection from professional journalistic responsibility; and develop a conceptual framework through which media freedom may be examined as a democratic communication process.

5. Methodology

This paper adopts a **conceptual-doctrinal and interpretative approach**.

It draws upon the Constitution of India, selected judgments of the Supreme Court of India and relevant international human-rights instruments. Judicial decisions are examined not simply as individual cases but as stages in the development of constitutional thinking concerning speech, circulation, press freedom and restrictions upon expression.

The paper does not present survey, interview or experimental data.

Its principal contribution is conceptual. It attempts to connect constitutional doctrine with communication theory and journalistic practice through an analytical model developed for this study.

6. The Democratic Communication Triangle

For the purposes of this paper, media freedom can be understood through what may be called the:

Democratic Communication Triangle

Freedom to Express → Freedom to Communicate → Freedom to Receive

Freedom to Express concerns the ability of individuals to articulate opinions, information, criticism and ideas.

Freedom to Communicate concerns the channels through which expression reaches a wider public. Journalism occupies a particularly important position here because newspapers, broadcasting and digital media make communication possible beyond immediate interpersonal exchange.

Freedom to Receive draws attention to the citizen at the other end of the communication process - the person who requires access to information and competing ideas in order to form judgments about public affairs.

International human-rights law expressly recognises this broader communicative character. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights encompasses the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas, while the UN Human Rights Committee has described freedom of expression as foundational to a free and democratic society and closely connected to transparency and accountability.

The triangle therefore changes the question.

*Instead of asking only, 'Is the journalist free to publish?' we may also ask:
'What happens to democratic citizenship when information cannot reach the citizen?'*

7. The Constitution Protects Expression, Not a Profession

One of the most important characteristics of the Indian constitutional arrangement is that Article 19(1)(a) does not separately enumerate a fundamental right called **freedom of the press**.

This does not mean that the press lacks constitutional protection.

The Supreme Court has repeatedly treated press freedom as an integral aspect of the freedom of speech and expression. It has also recognised that freedom of circulation is connected with that protection.

The distinction is significant.

The Constitution does not protect journalism merely because journalists constitute a particular profession. The stronger constitutional principle is that the communicative activity performed by the press falls within the broader freedom available to citizens.

Press freedom is powerful precisely because its constitutional foundation is broader than the press itself.

Journalists exercise freedom of expression professionally, but the democratic value of that freedom ultimately extends beyond journalists.

8. Freedom of the Press Means More Than Freedom to Print

A newspaper may technically be permitted to publish and yet find its ability to communicate substantially restricted.

Restrictions on circulation, availability of newsprint, economic burdens or other structural conditions may affect expression without directly censoring individual sentences.

This was an important dimension of the Supreme Court's press-freedom jurisprudence. In *Bennett Coleman & Co. v. Union of India*, the Court considered restrictions arising from the government's newsprint policy and their relationship with Article 19(1)(a).

The principle has considerable relevance to communication studies.

An idea that legally may be spoken but practically cannot reach its audience has limited communicative power.

Freedom of expression concerns not only the existence of a message but also the possibility of its communication.

That proposition becomes even more important in the digital age, where visibility, distribution and access may be influenced not only by governments but also by technological infrastructures and privately controlled platforms.

9. Freedom Is Not Absolute - But Neither Is the Power to Restrict

Article 19(1)(a) cannot be studied in isolation from Article 19(2).

The Constitution permits the State to impose reasonable restrictions upon speech and expression on specified grounds.

This is sometimes simplified into the statement that freedom of speech is 'not absolute'. While correct, the phrase can become misleading if detached from the constitutional structure.

The existence of Article 19(2) does not provide an unlimited governmental power to restrict expression.

The restriction must remain connected to constitutionally recognised grounds and satisfy the requirement of reasonableness. Constitutional scrutiny therefore concerns not simply whether the State possesses regulatory power, but whether the particular exercise of that power can be constitutionally justified.

The relationship is consequently not: **Freedom versus control.**

It is more accurately: **Freedom within a constitutional order that also defines the permissible boundaries of restriction.**

10. From Freedom of Speech to the Citizen's Right to Know

Journalism makes the receiving side of communication particularly important.

Citizens cannot personally attend every parliamentary proceeding, court hearing, administrative meeting, conflict zone, disaster site or political event.

Much of what an individual knows about public affairs is mediated.

The journalist therefore occupies an unusual democratic position: simultaneously exercising freedom of expression and facilitating the movement of information towards others.

This does not make the press the owner of public information.

Rather, it suggests that press freedom has a democratic purpose beyond institutional autonomy.

The journalist's freedom concerns the ability to communicate; the citizen's informational interest concerns the democratic value of receiving that communication.

The two interests frequently reinforce each other.

11. Legal Permission Is Not the Same as Journalistic Responsibility

This distinction is particularly important for journalism education.

The law asks: May this be published?

Journalism must sometimes ask an additional question: Should it be published in this form?

Something may escape legal prohibition and nevertheless be inaccurate, sensational, unnecessarily invasive, poorly verified or unfairly presented.

Similarly, ethical criticism of journalism should not automatically become an argument for governmental censorship.

Law and ethics therefore perform different functions.

Law establishes enforceable boundaries.

Journalistic ethics concerns professional judgment within those boundaries.

Constitutional freedom creates the space in which journalism operates; professional responsibility influences what journalism does with that space.

Freedom without responsibility may damage credibility. Responsibility without freedom may reduce journalism to permission. Democratic journalism requires both.

12. The Digital Complication

The traditional understanding of press freedom emerged in an environment where distinctions among publisher, journalist and audience were comparatively visible.

Digital communication has disturbed those boundaries.

A citizen can now publish to millions. A journalist can communicate without a traditional newspaper. A social-media platform can influence the visibility of political speech without producing the speech itself. Information can cross national boundaries instantaneously, while misinformation can travel through the same infrastructure.

The democratic communication triangle therefore becomes more complicated:

Who is the speaker? Who controls communication? Who determines visibility? Who receives the information? And increasingly: Who controls the pathway between expression and reception?

These questions suggest that twenty-first-century debates about freedom of expression cannot be confined entirely to the historical relationship between the State and the newspaper.

13. Freedom, Misinformation and the Temptation of Control

Misinformation creates one of the most difficult contemporary problems for freedom of expression.

False information can cause genuine social harm. Yet the existence of misinformation also creates a temptation to expand institutional control over communication.

A democratic society therefore confronts two dangers: **informational disorder** and **excessive control exercised in the name of correcting informational disorder**.

Neither danger should be ignored.

The challenge is to protect legitimate regulatory interests without transforming contested truth, criticism or dissent into matters decided merely by administrative preference.

For journalism, the strongest defence against misinformation remains not simply restriction but professional verification.

The appropriate response to unreliable information must include more reliable information.

14. Media Freedom and Media Accountability Are Not Opposites

Freedom and accountability are sometimes presented as competing ideas. They need not be.

A journalist who verifies facts, corrects mistakes and distinguishes reporting from opinion does not surrender freedom. Such practices can strengthen the credibility necessary for that freedom to retain public legitimacy.

Similarly, accountability cannot be allowed to become a convenient vocabulary for intimidation.

The important distinction is between **accountability for professional conduct** and **punishment for inconvenient journalism**.

Democratic societies must remain capable of distinguishing the two.

15. Discussion: Who Is Freedom of Speech Ultimately For?

The constitutional language begins with the citizen. The professional discussion frequently moves towards the journalist. The institutional discussion moves towards the media organisation. But democratic theory eventually returns to society.

Why protect political criticism? Why protect circulation? Why resist prior restraints? Why permit competing viewpoints?

One possible answer connects all of them:

Because democracy requires citizens capable of encountering information and forming judgments for themselves.

Freedom of expression is therefore simultaneously personal and social.

The speaker requires liberty. The journalist requires communicative space. The citizen requires access to information and ideas.

The democratic communication triangle attempts to place these interests within the same analytical frame.

16. Conclusion: Freedom Must Complete the Journey

Freedom of speech and expression is sometimes imagined as beginning and ending with the person who speaks.

This paper has argued for a broader understanding.

In democratic communication, expression begins with a speaker but acquires its social significance when it can travel.

The Constitution protects freedom of speech and expression. Judicial interpretation has placed press freedom within that protection. International human-rights instruments similarly recognise expression as involving the ability to seek, receive and impart information and ideas.

Yet constitutional protection alone cannot guarantee responsible journalism.

Law can establish boundaries. It cannot substitute for verification, fairness, editorial judgment or professional conscience.

This is why media freedom must be understood through the relationship among **liberty, communication and responsibility**.

Freedom to Express → Freedom to Communicate → Freedom to Receive

The Democratic Communication Triangle places the citizen back into the discussion.

A newspaper's freedom is important. A journalist's freedom is important. An individual's freedom is important.

But democracy ultimately asks something larger:

*Can information and ideas travel sufficiently freely for citizens to hear,
question, compare and decide for themselves?*

Perhaps that is where freedom of expression completes its democratic journey.

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Declaration on the Nature of the Study

This paper is a **conceptual-doctrinal study** based on constitutional provisions, judicial decisions and international human-rights instruments. It does not present original survey, interview or experimental data. The **Democratic Communication Triangle** is employed in this paper as an interpretative framework developed for the purposes of the present study.

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