

## Old censorship on a new medium

**O**n November 12, as India woke up to celebrate Deepavali, an under-construction tunnel collapsed in the early hours of the morning in Uttarakhand, trapping 41 workers. The Silkyara tunnel, about 30 km from the district headquarters, is part of the ambitious Char Dham all-weather road project of the Central government; it is being built to ease the journey of pilgrims to Uttarakashi's Yamunotri shrine. On November 24, more than 10 days after the workers were sealed into the tunnel, the effort to free them faced a major setback.

From the day of the tunnel's collapse, newspapers have been publishing detailed reports on rescue efforts. On the other hand, television coverage of the incident during the initial days was sparse. The Uttarakashi tunnel collapse poses troubling questions on environmental clearances, and faulty public works and civil contracting, all of which directly impact human lives. This is perhaps why news channels did not dare to cover the incident or host "debates" questioning the government. This silence was broken only when the prolonged captivity of the workers could not be ignored for long. Television news coverage peaked when rescue efforts began to bear fruit, and the Chief Minister of Uttarakhand and the Union Minister for Roads visited the site. A story of gross negligence transformed into a story of a heroic rescue.

### The control tower

This narrative change by television media is achieved due to a mix of ideological partisanship, economic models, threats, and the regulation of the media and entertainment landscape. This is a regular feature of a command-and-control media



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The engine of censorship has been overhauled for the digital age, as the Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill shows

landscape. Even popular culture, such as movies and television shows, is scrubbed of "bad words" and "controversial themes".

The answer to breaking this lack of media diversity in news and general entertainment has been the Internet. As per this year's FICCI-KPMG Frames report, TV is still the primary medium beamed in approximately 165 million homes. But growth is slowing, as per Nielsen's India Internet Report of 2023: for instance, at least 85 million viewers in rural India share smartphones and huddle together to stream YouTube videos. The government knows this and is erecting a censorship system for everything you watch online. This control tower for it is called the Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill, 2023.

On November 10, the Ministry for Information and Broadcasting released a copy of the Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill. On the Ministry's website, this Bill finds space right below an advisory to TV channels and self-regulatory bodies on the Uttarakashi tunnel collapse. As per Union Minister Anurag Thakur, the principal objective of the Bill is to achieve "the Prime Minister's vision" through specific provisions that "modernise" and "replace outdated" laws. Greater reasoning is contained in a Press Information Bureau release that notes an intention to repeal the "three decades-old" Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995.

### Increasing government powers

However, as has been noticed in other legal proposals such as the Indian Telecommunication Bill, 2022 or even the more recent set of three "Bharatiya" criminal justice proposals, there is continuity on core legal principles. Changes, if present, only serve to increase government powers, reduce transparency and accountability processes, and erode fundamental rights. There is little "modernisation"; the anxieties of the 1990s have been elevated by an authoritarian state that tries to use digital technologies to make us celebrate and outrage at its command.

The Cable Act was the product of a legislative vacuum prompted by a High Court ruling, security concerns from Pakistani channels, and a "cultural invasion" in which channels such as Fashion TV broadcast female nudity. It manifested in a regulatory system not only requiring registrations and licensing for standardisation, service quality, or demarcation of shared resources, but content regulation to protect "Indian values". It is always difficult to define "Indian values", but the government censors tried their best through a "programme code". The code says no programme should be carried which "offends good taste or decency", "contains suggestive innuendos", and "ironical and snobbish attitudes", etc. The job of enforcing these was retained by the Central government through, finally, the Inter-Ministerial Committee. There was much to fear as a channel's license could be revoked after three violations or the

'three strike rule'. The Inter-Ministerial Committee lacked diversity as it was packed with government bureaucrats. Its decision-making lacked transparency and it was clearly partisan.

The private sector had a solution for this and it was called self-regulation. Here, each broadcaster would first establish internal self-censorship checks through codes of practice that define what is "good taste" and promote offended viewers to complain to it first. If viewers were still dissatisfied, it could be escalated to the self-regulatory body, and eventually the Inter-Ministerial Committee.

This tiered system over time met with informal approval. Then, it became codified as rules under the Cable Television Networks (Amendment) Rules in 2021. Based on an empirical and qualitative assessment of self-regulatory actions in 2013, in an article titled 'Table of Discontents' in the Caravan magazine, I had cast "serious doubt about the presumption that self-regulation is a sort of benevolent liberal alternative to state sanction." While such a censorship system restricts "safe" and "family" themed broadcast (a soap or serial drama), it offers little to no check on prime-time anchors in attacking minorities or in their partisan defence of the Union government. This has made television content in India arid and putrid at the same time.

No wonder, viewers and creative professionals switched to digital platforms for news and entertainment. Since it disturbs the authoritarian apparatus, the Union government first tried regulation through the Information Technology Rules, 2021, which was stayed by the High Courts of Madras and Bombay. It then made further amendments to the Information Technology Rules for creating a censorship for "fact checking". This has not come into force due to a challenge in the Bombay High Court, which will soon give its verdict.

### More powers

The Broadcasting Bill retains all of these powers and makes them worse. It requires registrations from, and adherence to the programme code, by not only online broadcasters, but even individual journalists and creators who systematically comment on "news and current affairs". It establishes a system of self-certification where the names of the members of committees for each broadcaster will be made public. This will make them open to online and real world threats. Worse, there are vast and unguided powers without any anchoring criteria for the Union government to make rules. Even the Broadcasting Advisory Council is packed with government bureaucrats. The Broadcasting Advisory Council is a mere change in title for the Inter-Ministerial Committee. The Council does not have power to make decisions but only advise the Union government. The engine of censorship has been overhauled for the digital age and is driven by the "the Prime Minister's vision".



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## Fleet electrification to tackle urban pollution

The air quality index (AQI) in many Indian cities has entered the red zone several days this year. Millions of people have to face serious health hazards due to recurring increases in air pollution. It is clear that mitigation strategies have to be prioritised. As per two seminal studies pertaining to Delhi, the Urban Emission (2015) and the TERI study (2018), a significant contributor to urban smog is PM2.5 and PM10 pollution, which is caused by the transport and construction sector.

### Increase in truck fleet

About 9 lakh new trucks are added to Indian roads every year to an already running fleet of 70 lakh trucks. India carries over 2 trillion tonne kilometres freight on trucks, annually. These trucks consume over one-fourth of Indian oil imports and contribute to over 90% of road transport CO2 emissions. The rate of increase of truck fleet is expected to keep increasing in a growing network of roads in an emerging economy. If all these new trucks are powered by diesel-fired internal combustion engines vehicles, as is the case today, our cities will face a greater onslaught of PM2.5 pollution.

Thankfully, India has already electrified rail freight transportation, but that caters to only about 20% of the freight carried in the country.

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The focus must extend to diesel trucks and dust mitigation

On roads, India's electric vehicle penetration rate has crossed the 6% mark, but electric trucks remain a challenge due to upfront costs and charging infrastructure constraints. It is commendable that the government is aggressively electrifying the bus fleet, and sets electrification targets for bus aggregators. However, the focus must extend to diesel trucks and dust mitigation – significant PM sources requiring immediate attention. This is important both from an energy security perspective and sustainability perspective.

### Need of the hour

In this era of urgency, where every breath counts, deploying solutions swiftly is paramount. The recent demand for 7,750 e-trucks in India by 2030, if it materialises, will result in the country saving over 800 billion litres of diesel till 2050. However, the Indian truck fleet is likely to reach a figure of 1.7 crore in 2050. Hence, there is a need to push top gear on the pace of transition to e-trucks. Public funding alone cannot meet the transformational scale required. A pipeline of bankable projects, effectively structured, which can attract private and institutional capital at a ratio of at least six rupees for every rupee of public money is the need of the hour.

Though the victory achieved (more than 50%

electric vehicle penetration) in three-wheelers' electrification in India is an important milestone for the 2070 net zero agenda, transport sector decarbonisation pathways have to be led by truck electrification. However, the upfront cost of a mid-range electric truck in India is around ₹1.5 crore compared to about ₹40 lakh for a diesel truck. This and the cost of charging logistics remain major hurdles in the transition to e-trucks in the country.

### Green freight corridors

Declaring some of the expressways and national highways as green freight corridors will have a demonstration effect in the country. Accelerating feasibility studies, demand aggregation, supplier readiness, and a prudent risk allocation strategy are required to create green freight corridors in India. Such corridors can first evolve in small stretches of 500 kilometres on routes with heavy truck movement. Innovative financial instruments, incentivisation of charging infrastructure, facilitation of entrepreneurial efforts, and a conducive regulatory environment in the country can bring forth the much-needed breakthrough for truck electrification in India. We must realise the urgency of the need to take such concerted efforts if we want a fresh breath of life in our cities.

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