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Time to censor or certify digital content?

In light of recent controversies, experts believe creativity should be set free, but digital content creators need to act responsibly

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JOHN OLIVER IN his satirical news show *Last Week Tonight* compared Chinese President Xi Jinping's resemblance to Winnie the Pooh, and got himself banned in China. The country, known for controlling what people post and talk about online, took offence on Oliver's joke and popular Chinese social media and microblogging platforms like Weibo banned the usage of the words 'John Oliver'. Whenever someone tried to type the name, an alert popped up that it could mean violations of rules and regulations.

If this episode of censorship mid-June was just an exhibition of the administration dictating terms, consider how New Zealand in April, 2018 was compelled to take extreme precautionary measures. The Kiwis suffer the worst teenage suicide rate among the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, with two youngsters committing suicide every week. In such circumstances, the government believed that Netflix's suicide drama, *13 Reasons Why*, could worsen things and the Office of Film and Literature passed a new censorship category, RP18, banning the under-18s from watching the show.

More recently, Netflix's first India original *Sacred Games* created a stir too. It featured nudity, expletives and not-so-subtle mentions of political figures like former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee member Rajeev Sinha, supported by other organisations and associations, lodged an FIR against actor Nawazuddin Siddiqui and makers of the series for 'abusing and insulting' Rajiv Gandhi. Several other petitions were filed, and while hearing advocate Nikhil Bhalla, the Delhi High Court said actors cannot be blamed for dialogues. Eventually, the streaming app decided to change a few sentences in the subtitles to bury the hatchet. This begets the question: is censorship likely to be the new norm for digital?

Who draws the line?

Currently, there is no regulatory body for censorship or certification for online content in India. Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) certifies feature films before they hit theatres. Self regulatory body Broadcast Content Complaints Council (BCCC) accepts complaints related to non-news television content. Is it time to rewrite the rules? Given the individualistic viewing behaviour, parental locks and

paywall technologies that all OTT platforms offer, I don't think censorship is required," opines Sameer Nair, CEO Applause. "That said, content creators and platforms must employ responsible and conscious self-regulation; unnecessary nudity, violence and abuse just for shock value takes one away from the art form that is storytelling."

Arun Prakash, president and COO, Vuclip Inc believes that the 'original meaning' perception needs a change right away. "From the consumer point of view, the maker's creativity which is not filtered through trend, censorship and all other influencers is the way ahead. This is why we do not influence the creator creating originals for us," he says. "There is immaturity amongst OTT players. Many think that originals on OTT mean edgy content which in itself is a shame, and can cause frictions and hurdles."

If those players act irresponsibly and do not respect social ethos and cultural values in India, the industry will have to pay for it and creativity would get diluted, Prakash feels.

While free speech is promoted aggressively in India and is a fundamental right, one must draw the line somewhere when creating content, but the real question is, whether self regulation or censorship is the way — an answer that only time will tell.