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Regulated by Institution, Organized by Individual: India's Media Law Meets the Group Chat

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ABSTRACT

Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan resigned in July 2026, not because a newspaper investigation broke the story, but because the Cockroach Janta Party and student groups spent seven weeks protesting at Jantar Mantar, organising mostly through social media, after NEET-UG got cancelled over a paper leak. That timeline exposes a real gap in Indian media law. The regulatory system, from the Press Council to the NBDSA to IT Rules compliance, was built around publishers, broadcasters, and registered institutions. It has no real answer for a decentralised movement with no editorial board and no publisher registration. India's March 2026 draft IT Rules try to close that gap by pulling individual creators into publisher-style obligations, which critics call a step toward digital authoritarianism rather than accountability.

INTRODUCTION

When a minister resigns under public pressure, the reflex is to credit whichever newspaper investigation or television exposé forced his hand. In the case of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation on July 25, 2026, that reflex points to the wrong place entirely.¹

Pradhan stepped down after roughly seven weeks of protest at Jantar Mantar, led by the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP), a youth-led movement that had started online as satire before turning into a real organising force, alongside left-leaning student groups like AISF, AISA, and SFI.² The trigger was the NEET-UG 2026 paper leak: the exam held on May 3 was compromised, a re-exam followed on June 21, results came out July 16, and none of it stopped the protests.³ Social activist Sonam Wangchuk joined the sit-in and fasted for 26 days demanding Pradhan's resignation before ending his strike after government assurances.⁴ In his resignation letter, Pradhan said he was stepping down so students wouldn't stay "trapped in a

¹Careerindia, "Dharmendra Pradhan Resigns as Education Minister Over NEET 2026," July 2026, <https://www.careerindia.com/news/dharmendra-pradhan-resigns-as-education-minister-over-neet-2026-062895.html>

² Wikipedia, "2026 Delhi Jantar Mantar protests," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Delhi_Jantar_Mantar_protests

³ Outlook India, "Dharmendra Pradhan Resigns Over NEET-UG 2026 Paper Leak," <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/dharmendra-pradhan-resigns-over-neet-ug-2026-paper-leak-who-will-be-indias-next-education-minister>

⁴ Britannica, "Cockroach Janta Party and the 2026 Delhi Protest," <https://www.britannica.com/topic/What-Is-the-Cockroach-Janta-Party>

web of confusion," framing it as personal responsibility rather than any single story that broke him.⁵

No editor assigned that story. No broadcaster ran the exposé. What forced the resignation was a decentralised, self-filmed, self-livestreamed protest that deliberately kept some mainstream TV crews at arm's length, choosing instead to circulate its own footage.⁶ The pressure built somewhere the law doesn't quite know how to look.

That's the actual gap. Indian media law has no real vocabulary for where public accountability pressure originates when it isn't coming from the press at all.

WHAT THE CONSTITUTION ACTUALLY PROTECTS

Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution of India, 1950, guarantees freedom of speech and expression to every citizen. Freedom of the press was never written in as a separate right, but the Supreme Court closed that gap early, holding in *Romesh Thappar v. State of Madras*⁷, that the free circulation of a publication matters just as much as the act of publishing it in the first place.

That protection was never absolute. Article 19(2) of the Constitution lets the state impose reasonable restrictions on grounds of sovereignty, public order, decency, defamation, and contempt of court. Decades later, in *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India*⁸, the Supreme Court struck down Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, for vagueness, reasoning that a law chilling the backbone of free speech can't be allowed to stand.⁹ Nearly every dispute in this area still moves between these two poles: Article 19(1)(a) doing the expanding, Article 19(2) doing the restricting.

A SYSTEM BUILT FOR INSTITUTIONS, NOT PEOPLE

Indian press regulation has always organised itself around institutions rather than individuals. Print media largely runs on a self-regulatory code. The News Broadcasting and Digital Standards Authority governs television news. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting holds statutory power under the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, but that power was built to reach registered publishers and intermediaries, not somebody typing commentary into a personal account.

A journalist filing a story for a newspaper sits squarely inside this system. A citizen posting the same argument from their phone, oddly enough, does not.

The Jantar Mantar movement never touched any of these regulated channels. No publisher registration. No broadcast licence. No editorial board answerable to the Press Council. Commentators covering the protest made this point directly: what made it hard to shut down

⁵ ANI, "Dharmendra Pradhan steps down as education minister over NEET row," July 25, 2026, <https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/dharmendra-pradhan-steps-down-as-education-minister-over-neet-row20260725143335/>

⁶ Waging Nonviolence, "What India's Cockroach Party won — and what's next," <https://wagingnonviolence.org/2026/07/what-indias-cockroach-party-won-whats-next/>

⁷ *Romesh Thappar v. State of Madras*⁷, AIR 1950 SC 124.

⁸ *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India*⁸, (2015) 5 SCC 1

⁹ Law Zone, "IT Rules 2026: India's Digital Governance Revolution," <https://www.lawzone.in/2026/08/it-act.html>

was that there was no single leader to remove and no organisation to dismantle, since it ran on decentralised participation rather than institutional structure.¹⁰ When a movement like that becomes the actual engine of public accountability, the entire regulatory framework built around newsrooms and broadcasters has nothing left to hold onto. The law knows how to regulate a newsroom. It was never written for a protest that started in a group chat.

THE AMENDMENT TRYING TO CLOSE THE GAP

The government had already moved once this year to bring synthetic and AI-generated content under the same regulatory umbrella. On February 10, 2026, MeitY notified the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Amendment Rules, 2026, formally defining "synthetically generated information" and requiring platforms to label AI-generated content and remove unlawful synthetic media within windows as short as two to three hours.¹¹

Then, on March 30, 2026, MeitY went further, publishing the draft Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Second Amendment Rules, 2026, and giving the public just fifteen days, until April 14, to respond.¹² This draft is the direct attempt to close the Jantar Mantar-shaped gap: it extends Rules 14, 15, and 16, the government's blocking and oversight machinery, from intermediaries alone to individual users and content creators who post "news and current affairs" material, effectively pulling ordinary social media users into publisher-style obligations for the first time.¹³

The reaction was immediate. The Internet Freedom Foundation called the draft a "continuing expansion of unchecked executive power that is opposed to the Constitution of India," writing that the government's actions "smack of digital authoritarianism" and demanding withdrawal.¹⁴ DigiPub News India Foundation, a consortium of digital news outlets, went further still, warning the amendments risked becoming "a convenient institutional mechanism to muzzle the press¹⁵" by handing the government arbitrary, unaccountable power to decide what counts as fake news. By April, six press bodies, including the Press Club of India, the Editors Guild

¹⁰ Waging Nonviolence, "What India's Cockroach Party won — and what's next,"

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/2026/07/what-indias-cockroach-party-won-whats-next/>

¹¹ Kan and Krishme, "India's 2026 IT Rules Amendment: Regulating AI-Generated Content and Accelerating Compliance," <https://kankrishme.com/indias-2026-it-rules-amendment-regulating-ai-generated-content-and-accelerating-compliance/>

¹² NewsClick, "MeitY Draft Rules an SOS for Digital Rights; IFF Calls For Urgent Rollback,"

<https://www.newsclick.in/meity-draft-rules-sos-digital-rights-iff-calls-urgent-rollback>

¹³ The Wire, "Govt Proposes IT Rules Amendment to Block News Content on Social Media by Users, Influencers, Content Creators," <https://m.thewire.in/article/government/govt-proposes-it-rules-amendment-to-block-news-content-on-social-media-by-users-influencers-content-creators/amp>

¹⁴ Internet Freedom Foundation, "Sound the Alarm: IFF's First Read on MeitY's Draft IT Rules Second Amendment, 2026," March 30, 2026, <https://internetfreedom.in/sound-the-alarm-iffs-first-read-on-meitys-draft-it-rules-second-amendment-2026/>

¹⁵ Deccan Herald, "Draft IT rules have potential to muzzle the press: Digital news consortium DigiPub," <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/draft-it-rules-have-potential-to-muzzle-the-press-digital-news-consortium-digipub-1182836.html>

of India, and DigiPub, had jointly passed a resolution demanding withdrawal of what one editor called the "infrastructure of censorship."¹⁶

This isn't the government's first run at this kind of expansion. In *Kunal Kamra v. Union of India*, 2024 SCC OnLine Bom 3086¹⁷, the Bombay High Court struck down the 2023 amendment that had created a government Fact-Check Unit, holding it violative of Articles 14, 19(1)(a), and 19(1)(g) of the Constitution and ultra vires the Information Technology Act, 2000. That ruling is nearly two years old now, and the reasoning behind it is squarely back in play.

TWO SIDES, SAME DEMOCRATIC LANGUAGE

Both camps here reach for the same vocabulary and mean opposite things by it. The government frames the amendments as necessary accountability, arguing that a single post can now reach millions of people before any fact-check even catches up. Critics argue the opposite: that the power to decide what counts as "news" or "misinformation" belongs with courts, not with executive rulemaking, and warn the changes could undermine user privacy and increase opacity in platform governance.¹⁸

Several provisions of the existing Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, are still pending before the Delhi High Court on nearly identical grounds, with pleadings still being completed as of this year.¹⁹ The March 2026 amendments are being pushed through before that earlier litigation has even resolved. India's media law, in other words, is being rewritten faster than its own courts can decide whether the last version of it was lawful to begin with.

THE QUESTION THAT'S ACTUALLY LEFT OPEN

India's free speech protection, on paper, is genuinely wide, built up over decades of interpretation running from *Romesh Thappar* through *Shreya Singhal*. What the Jantar Mantar movement makes visible is that this expansive constitutional protection doesn't answer the harder, more current question: who gets regulated when the person actually driving the public conversation and holding power accountable isn't a publisher, a broadcaster, or an institution of any kind, but just an individual with a phone, a following, and enough will to organise.

¹⁶ Newslandry, "PCI passes resolution that attacks 'infrastructure of censorship' built by Modi govt," April 11, 2026, <https://www.newslandry.com/2026/04/11/pci-passes-resolution-that-attacks-infrastructure-of-censorship-built-by-modi-govt>

¹⁷ *Kunal Kamra v. Union of India*, 2024 SCC OnLine Bom 3086

¹⁸ IFEX, "India: Initial statement on the draft Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Second Amendment Rules, 2026," <https://ifex.org/india-initial-statement-on-the-draft-information-technology-intermediary-guidelines-and-digital-media-ethics-code-second-amendment-rules-2026/>

¹⁹ Internet Freedom Foundation, "IT Rules, 2021" (tag page, noting Delhi High Court proceedings on pleadings), <https://internetfreedom.in/tag/it-rules-2021/>