



The relationship between the right to freedom of expression (Legal and ethical dimensions) and the extent of digital media usage (Case study: media experts and professionals)

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Abstract

Introduction

A prominent issue within the domain of freedom of expression is the interplay between this right and the degree of digital media utilization by communication scholars and media professionals. The widespread adoption of digital media has elevated cybersecurity to a critical concern. Drawing upon the empirical insights of communication and media studies academics concerning the right to freedom of expression in Iranian media, this construct encompasses multiple dimensions: media diversity, content ownership, the right to access content, and the right to disseminate content (Zamani et al., 2021). Based on these four dimensions, the research hypotheses are articulated as follows:

- There exists a positive and statistically significant relationship between media diversity and the extent of digital media usage.
- There exists a positive and statistically significant relationship between content ownership within media and the extent of digital media usage.
- There exists a positive and statistically significant relationship between the right to access content and the extent of digital media usage.

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- There exists a positive and statistically significant relationship between the right to disseminate content and the extent of digital media usage

Methodology

The research methodology of this study is descriptive-survey, and the primary data collection tool was a questionnaire. The statistical population consisted of professors in the field of communication and media, as well as experts and practitioners in digital media. To access the professor population, faculty members from the Faculty of Communication Sciences at Allameh Tabataba'i University, communication and media professors from IRIB University, University of Tehran, Azad University, Soore University, and the University of Religions and Denominations (totaling 83 individuals) were identified. For experts and practitioners in digital media, 32 managers and active professionals from four main groups of digital media were selected, including social networks (Aparat, Facebook, Bale, Eitaa), IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting), applications (Cafe Ketab, Cafe Bazaar, Digikala, Okala, Fidibo, Filimo, HaftHashtad, Hamrah Man), and news agencies (Fars, Mehr, IRIB News Agency, Young Journalists Club). Among the 83 professors, 71 completed the questionnaire, and among the 32 managers and media practitioners, 20 completed it. These completed questionnaires formed the basis for statistical analyses. Thus, the data collection process was conducted as an incomplete census.

The freedom of expression questionnaire was designed based on four main components of freedom of expression, including media diversity (13 questions), content ownership (7 questions), the right to receive content (9 questions), and the right to disseminate content (10 questions). The questions were developed based on reputable articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals, and responses were provided on a Likert scale (Very Low = 1; Low = 2; Moderate = 3; High = 4; Very High = 5)

Result and discussion

In the domain of “media diversity,” social networks received the highest scores with an average of 3.52 (professors) and 3.68 (media managers), indicating respondents’ assessment of broader media diversity within this category. News agencies followed with averages of 3.42 (professors) and 3.65 (media managers), then IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting) with averages of 3.38 (professors) and 3.62 (media managers), and applications with averages of 3.35 (professors) and 3.61 (media managers) ranked subsequently.

In the "content ownership" dimension, social networks also achieved the highest scores with averages of 3.28 (professors) and 3.70 (media managers) compared to other media categories. News agencies (3.22 professors; 3.69 media managers), applications (3.18 professors; 3.68 media managers), and IRIB (3.15 professors; 3.66 media managers) followed closely, reflecting relatively minor differences in this evaluation. Regarding the "right to receive content," respondents reported high averages across most media categories, reflecting an overall positive perception of content accessibility in digital media. Social networks received the highest evaluation with averages of 3.52 (professors) and 3.63 (media managers). The “right to disseminate content” was rated relatively equally across all media categories. Social networks had the highest averages, 3.42 (professors) and 3.62 (media managers), which aligns with the open and interactive nature of these media and indicates greater ease in content dissemination on these platforms. Furthermore, social networks with an average usage rate of 3.65 (professors) and 3.60 (media managers) claimed the highest level of use among digital media types by respondents, underscoring their dominant position, widespread influence, and ease of access in everyday life.

Table 1. ANOVA Test Results Comparing Components of the Right to Freedom of Expression and the Level of Use in Digital Media

Component	F Statistic	Between- Groups df	Within- Groups df	p Value	Interpretation
Media diversity	1.12	3	87	0.354	No significant difference
Content ownership	0.89	3	87	0.456	No significant difference
Right to receive content	4.75	3	87	0.009	Significant difference
Right to publish content	3.68	3	87	0.021	Significant difference
Usage level of digital media	1.30	3	87	0.289	No significant difference

This indicates that respondents' views on the extent of these two components of the right to freedom of expression differ significantly depending on the type of media (social networks, broadcasting, applications, and news agencies). In contrast, for the other three components—"media diversity," "content ownership," and "level of media usage"—the p-values are greater than 0.05, indicating no statistically significant difference among the groups. Overall, considering the results presented in Table 1, the components of "right to receive content" and "right to publish content" show statistically significant differences across different media groups, while no significant differences were found for the other components.

Components of the Right to Freedom of Expression	Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r)	Significance Level (p)
Media diversity	0.42	0.000 (significant)
Content ownership	0.35	0.001 (significant)

T a b l e	Right to receive content	0.48	0.000 (significant)
	Right to publish content	0.44	0.000 (significant)

2. Pearson Correlation Test Between Components of the Right to Freedom of Expression and Level of Use of Digital Media

The beta coefficient (β) indicates the strength and direction of the impact of each independent variable on the dependent variable. In this model, only digital media usage shows a positive and statistically significant moderate effect on the components of the right to freedom of expression, with a beta coefficient of 0.39.

Table 3. Results of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

C o n c l u s i o n T h	Independent Variable	Beta Coefficient (β)	t Statistic	Significance Level (p)	Effect Description
	Digital media usage	0.39	4.30	0.000	Positive and moderate significant effect
	Age	0.05	0.70	0.485	Nearly non-significant effect
	Gender	-0.04	-0.56	0.580	Non-significant effect
	Education	0.03	0.42	0.675	Non-significant effect

is study aimed to examine the relationship between the right to freedom of expression and the level of digital media usage among experts and media professionals. The findings of this study show considerable conceptual and methodological alignment with previous research. In particular, Fouladi's (2025)

analysis on the necessity of balancing media freedom with public interest fully aligns with the policy recommendations for balanced governance proposed in this study. The significant differences observed in the "right to receive" and "right to publish content" across media types are consistent with Qaempanah's (2024) findings, which examined the impact of ownership structure and institutional differences between Iranian and American media, highlighting the importance of media ownership and policy frameworks in shaping free access and content dissemination. Zarei and Mazinianian's (2024) emphasis on developing international documents to clarify the boundaries of freedom of expression in media aligns with the importance of targeted and specialized policymaking raised in this study in response to media-specific differences. Overall, this research enriches the existing knowledge by focusing on the expert community in media, demonstrating a correlation between digital media—particularly social networks—and the four components of the right to freedom of expression.

Keywords: Digital Media; Freedom of Expression; Media Professionals; Media Users' Rights; Social Networks

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