



Ethical Digital Conduct in Public Service

For Prelims: [RTI Act, 2005](#), [Official Secrets Act, 1923](#), [Freedom of Expression](#)

For Mains: Key Pillars of Ethical Digital Conduct in Public Service, Arguments in Favour and Against Regulation of Civil Servants' Social Media Usage.

Source: [TOI](#),

Why in News?

The **Maharashtra government's recent directive on regulating [social media](#) use by government employees**, focusing on political neutrality and information confidentiality, has reignited the larger debate on **ethical digital conduct in public service**.

- In a parallel development, LBSNAA's April 2025 advisory to newly selected civil servants highlights the same concern, **urging officers to exercise caution and avoid impulsive online behaviour or accepting inducements**.
 - It further emphasizes the importance of maintaining integrity and exercising restraint in the digital realm.

What are the Key Pillars of Ethical Digital Conduct in Public Service?

- **Transparency:** Public servants must foster openness by ensuring all digital communications and decisions are **clear, accessible, and comprehensible to the public**.
 - This builds trust by making government actions visible and accountable to citizens.
- **Accountability:** Civil servants should be **responsible for their digital actions**, both professionally and personally, ensuring that their online behavior aligns with public expectations and institutional standards.
 - This includes answering for any online missteps and maintaining ethical integrity.
- **Impartiality:** Public servants must **avoid any appearance of bias in their digital interactions**.
 - This entails ensuring political neutrality on social media and refraining from posting content that could be seen as influencing public opinion unfairly or violating the duty of impartiality required in governance.
- **Integrity:** Public servants should act with honesty, consistency, and fairness in all their digital engagements.
 - They must **avoid engaging in deceptive behavior online**, which could undermine trust in public institutions.

Note: In recent times, there has been a **noticeable increase in the use of digital platforms, particularly social media**, by civil servants **for personal visibility and expression** that has raised concerns.

- While digital platforms enable outreach and transparency, their misuse can affect neutrality, integrity, and public trust in the service and thus necessitates regulation.

How far is Regulation of Civil Servants' Social Media Usage Justified?

▪ In Favor of Regulation:

- **Preserving Political Neutrality:** Expressing political opinions or endorsing ideologies compromises the apolitical character of the civil service.
 - The **regulation aligns with deontological ethics**, which emphasizes duty over personal opinion, and **Rawls' theory of justice**, advocating **fairness for all citizens, regardless of their political or personal beliefs**.
 - This ensures that **decisions are made impartially and without partisan bias**, focusing on universal principles of justice rather than individual preferences.
- **Protection of Sensitive Information:** Civil servants' social media activity could lead to **unintended leaks or misinformation**, compromising national security.
 - Regulation helps maintain confidentiality and protect public trust, grounded in **Kantian duty ethics**, where a breach of duty is wrong regardless of intent.
- **Maintaining Institutional Integrity:** Civil servants, especially in uniformed services, **represent the state's image**.
 - For instance, **Somnath Zende**, a police sub-inspector in Pune, **was suspended for violating the police conduct rules** after winning money through an online fantasy league.
 - Unprofessional behavior online can harm the institution's reputation, and regulation aligns with **virtue ethics**, which values dignity, propriety, and restraint in public life.
- **Public Interest First Principle:** As per the Gandhian principle of selfless service, civil servants must prioritize the public good over personal expression.
 - **Utilitarian ethics** supports regulation, arguing the greater public interest should outweigh individual freedom when necessary.

▪ Against Overregulation:

- **Violation of Freedom of Expression:** Over-regulation risks violating fundamental freedom under [Article 19\(1\)\(a\)](#) of Indian constitution.
 - **John Stuart Mill's liberty principle** suggests personal freedoms should only be restricted when harm is clearly demonstrated.
- **Erosion of Transparency:** Social media can serve as a tool for transparency, enabling civil servants **to share government insights and updates directly**.
 - Over-regulation could limit this, undermining public access to information.
 - Also, the **presence of civil servants on social media has led to increased public scrutiny of their backgrounds, assets, and recruitment-related documents (e.g., Pooja Khedkar Case)**, offering an open platform for citizens to engage with and assess the integrity of public officials.
 - However, over-regulating their online activities could curtail this transparent interaction, ultimately reducing the level of accountability.
- **Generational Disconnect:** Younger civil servants are more familiar with social media dynamics.
 - Over-regulation risks distancing the government from the tech-savvy, younger population, clashing with the ethical principles of **empathy** and **inclusivity**.
- **Morale and Trust:** Excessive restrictions can breed distrust and alienation among civil servants, affecting morale.
 - A balance is needed to avoid creating an atmosphere of suspicion, violating **organizational justice** and **trust**, both crucial for a healthy institutional culture.

What is the Existing Regulatory Mechanism for Civil Servants in India?

Framework/Rule	Key Provisions
Central Civil Services (Conduct) Rules, 1964	Prohibits criticism of government policy and requires political neutrality.
All India Services (Conduct) Rules, 1968	Mandates dignified conduct and prohibits disclosure of information.
RTI Act, 2005 & Official Secrets Act, 1923	Protect sensitive and classified information from being leaked.

What Measures can be Adopted to Promote Ethical Digital Conduct in Civil Servants with Regulatory Balance?

- **Frame Clear and Specific Guidelines:** Rules must **clearly define acceptable and unacceptable online behaviour**, distinguishing personal views from official responsibilities.
 - This prevents ambiguity while safeguarding the dignity of the service.
- **Promote Constructive Use of Social Media:** Encourage the use of platforms for public awareness, grievance redressal, and policy outreach.
 - Recognising ethical use can inspire a culture of responsible innovation within the bureaucracy.
 - For instance, during the **2018 Kerala floods**, **IAS officer Prasanth Nair ("Collector Bro")** effectively used social media to mobilize tech volunteers and coordinate rescue efforts.
- **Integrate Digital Ethics in Training:** Civil servants along with all government employees should undergo training in **digital conduct, data privacy, and ethical communication**.
 - This fosters self-awareness and aligns actions with constitutional and ethical responsibilities.
- **Department-Specific Protocols:** Each ministry or state department can create its own **social media policy** tailored to operational needs.
 - This decentralised approach ensures context-sensitive regulation.
- **Implement a Graded Accountability Mechanism:** Instead of harsh blanket punishment, a **proportionate response system** — from advisory warnings to formal action — maintains discipline without demoralising officers.
- **Reinforce Virtue-Based Self-Regulation:** Encourage officers to follow **virtue ethics** — restraint, humility, and integrity — as guiding principles. A **culture of self-discipline is more effective than overregulation**.

Conclusion:

As civil servants navigate the digital age, the **key lies in balancing freedom with responsibility, and expression with ethics**. Regulation should not stifle innovation or outreach but ensure that conduct remains anchored in **neutrality, integrity, and public trust**. As the **LBSNAA** motto wisely reminds us, **"Sheelam Param Bhushanam"** i.e, Character is the supreme ornament and **this character must shine through both offline and online**.

Drishti Mains Question:

In an increasingly digital world, the ethical conduct of public servants on social media and other digital platforms is under constant scrutiny. Discuss the importance of digital ethics in public service. Suggest measures to ensure a balance between freedom of expression and institutional responsibility.

UPSC Civil Services Previous Year Questions:

Mains

Q. "The 'Code of Conduct' and 'Code of Ethics' are the sources of guidance in public administration. There is a code of conduct already in operation, whereas a code of ethics is not yet put in place. Suggest a suitable model for code of ethics to maintain integrity, probity and transparency in governance. (2024)

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