'Unclear whether bill will be rewritten or revised': Information & Broadcasting ministry withdraws controversial draft of Broadcast bill, claims report

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The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting on Monday has withdrawn the latest draft of the controversial Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill, 2024. As per reports, the ministry has instructed all stakeholders to return the physical copies they received between July 24 and 25.

As reported by the *Hindustan Times*, the stakeholders were informed that their feedback was no longer required.

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This draft had been circulated as part of an ongoing consultation process that began in November 2023, when the ministry first uploaded a draft version for public input.

An official, speaking anonymously, told *HT* that it remains unclear whether the bill will be completely rewritten or if only specific sections will be revised from the latest draft. This draft, which was not made public, was shared with select stakeholders in watermarked copies.

The proposed Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill, first introduced last year, has been at the centre of controversy and had faced strong opposition. The issue has gained considerable attention on social media, particularly due to concerns that Instagram influencers and YouTubers might fall under the new regulatory framework. The matter has also been raised in Parliament.

Trinamool Congress Rajya Sabha MP Jawhar Sircar was the first to bring this issue to the forefront, alleging that the government had discreetly circulated a revised version of the bill among business houses and key stakeholders. "The government has revised the Broadcasting Bill and circulated it secretly—yet it refuses to acknowledge this. It avoids the rest of the questions, as no democratic country would enact such a draconian law," Sircar stated.

Sircar's remarks followed a written response from the Minister of Information and Broadcasting, Ashwini Vaishnaw, in which he informed the Rajya Sabha that the bill was still in the drafting stage.

According to *HT*, the draft bill could classify Instagram influencers and YouTubers as "digital news broadcasters," based on criteria that would be determined by the government. Even TikTok creators, despite the app being banned in India, could be included under this classification.

The draft suggested that these digital news broadcasters would be distinct from OTT broadcasting services and registered digital media entities. The initial draft of the bill had already proposed that OTT platforms, which currently enjoy creative freedom, would be required to adhere to a program code.

Content creators identified under this new classification would be mandated to notify the government of their operations within a month of the bill's enactment. This requirement could extend to any account that shares news content, regardless of its follower count.

Reports indicate that these creators may also be compelled to register under a three-tier regulatory framework, similar to that imposed on OTT platforms like Amazon Prime Video and Netflix. Additionally, they would be required to establish a "content evaluation committee" at their own expense to screen content before it is published. Failure to comply could result in criminal penalties.

Another significant provision in the draft bill is the establishment of a Broadcast Advisory Council, composed of five government-nominated officers and industry professionals, tasked with imposing monetary penalties for violations.