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Draft IT (Digital Code) Rules, 2026: Regulating Online Content in India

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In early 2026, the Government of India proposed a new set of rules called the **Draft Information Technology (Digital Code) Rules, 2026**. These rules aim to regulate online content more clearly than before, especially content that could be obscene, harmful, or inappropriate for certain age groups.

The idea is to make the internet a safer and more responsible space for users, particularly for children and young people. The proposal also reflects a broader effort to balance freedom of speech with public morality and safety.

Why Are These Rules Being Proposed?

The growth of digital platforms such as social media, online streaming services, and user-generated content sites like YouTube has been rapid. With that growth, there have been increasing concerns about harmful, offensive, or obscene content spreading online without clear boundaries.

Lawmakers and courts have noted that current laws and regulations do not always keep up with the pace of technology or provide clear guidelines for content moderation. The Supreme Court of India has previously directed the government to frame rules that protect freedom of speech while allowing “reasonable restrictions” for public decency and order.

The new draft rules are being considered under **Section 87(1) of the Information Technology Act, 2000**. This section gives the government the power to make rules that can help enforce the law in a changing digital environment. The draft is also influenced by existing regulations such as the Cable Television Networks Rules, which govern traditional broadcast content.

What Are the Key Features of the Draft Rules?

1. Age-Based Classification of Content

One of the most important proposals is a system of age-based classification for all online content. This is similar to how movies are classified for audiences. The draft suggests labels like:

- U for content suitable for all ages
- U/A 7+ for content suitable for ages 7 and above
- U/A 13+ for ages 13 and above
- U/A 16+ for ages 16 and above
- A for adult-only content

Every piece of digital content would need to carry this rating and a description of what kind of content it contains, such as violence, sex, language, horror, or drug references. This helps users make informed choices about what they view.

Platforms may also need to put **parental control options** in place. For example, content rated 13+ or higher would require a system that allows parents to restrict access for children. Adult content would require reliable age verification before it is shown to a user.

2. Defining Obscenity and Other Restricted Content

The draft rules borrow from older content standards to define what constitutes **obscene digital content**. Content would be considered obscene if it is lustful, appeals to prurient interest, or tends to corrupt or deprave viewers, especially minors. There are also detailed lists of what the government considers unacceptable. These include content that:

- Offends public decency or good taste
- Attacks or insults religions, communities, or nationalities
- Includes defamatory, false, or misleading information
- Encourages crime, violence, or disorder
- Denigrates women, children, or persons with disabilities

This part of the draft is meant to set clear boundaries so that digital platforms know what they need to prevent or remove from their services.

3. Parental Controls and Verification

The draft rules place emphasis on **protecting minors from harmful material**. For content meant for older audiences, platforms would need to implement systems that ensure only appropriate users can access it.

For example, a 16+ or adult rating might require age verification that checks a user's date of birth or uses other reliable methods. Platforms may also have to offer parental control tools that allow guardians to manage what children can see.

4. Applicability to All Digital Platforms

The rules would apply to a wide range of digital content providers. This includes social media platforms, streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime, online news publishers, and individual content creators.

Current rules like the **Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021** would continue to apply, but the new draft aims to expand and clarify obligations especially around age classification and prohibited content.

What Is the Goal of These Rules?

The main purpose of the Draft IT (Digital Code) Rules, 2026 is to create a safer online environment. The rules aim to protect children from harmful content while still upholding the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression under Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution.

At the same time, the rules rely on the "reasonable restrictions" permitted under Article 19(2) in the interest of decency, morality, and public order.

Concerns and Criticisms

While the intentions behind the draft rules are clear, there are concerns about how they might be implemented. Some experts worry that vague definitions of obscenity or offensive content could lead to excessive censorship or subjective decisions.

Others point out that age verification and parental control systems could raise privacy issues if not handled carefully. The balance between regulation and freedom of expression remains a key debate.

Conclusion

The Draft IT (Digital Code) Rules, 2026 represent a significant step in how India plans to regulate online content. By introducing age-based classification and clearer definitions of prohibited content, the government aims to protect users, especially minors, from harmful material.

At the same time, it is essential that these rules respect individual rights and do not undermine the free flow of information.