Educational Administration: Theory and Practice
2024, 30(1), 3273 - 3280
ISSN: 2148-2403
https://kuey.net/

Research Article

Extended Reality And Cybersecurity: Protecting Children And Women From Online Exploitation And Abuse

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***Citation**:* Prof. (Dr.) Namita Vyas Joshi, et.al (2024) Extended Reality And Cybersecurity: Protecting Children And Women From Online Exploitation And Abuse *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30*(1)* 3273 - 3280
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i1.7116

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Extended Reality (XR), encompassing Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and Mixed Reality (MR), is transforming digital interaction by providing immersive and interactive experiences. However, the proliferation of XR technologies introduces significant cybersecurity concerns, particularly the heightened risk of online exploitation and abuse targeting vulnerable populations, including children and women. This research paper critically examines the unique cybersecurity threats posed by XR environments, focusing on the protection of these at-risk groups.

The study explores current trends in XR technology and analyzes the specific nature of cyber threats within these virtual spaces, such as cyberbullying, harassment, and exploitation. It assesses existing legal and technological frameworks designed to mitigate these threats and identifies significant gaps that need addressing. Furthermore, the paper highlights the psychological and social impacts of XR-related abuse, emphasizing the need for comprehensive protective measures.

By proposing a multifaceted approach that combines legal, technological, and educational strategies, this research aims to enhance online safety for children and women in XR environments. The findings underscore the necessity for proactive and interdisciplinary efforts to develop robust cybersecurity measures that keep pace with the evolving digital landscape. This study contributes to the broader discourse on cybersecurity, advocating for innovative solutions to protect vulnerable populations from the complex challenges presented by XR technologies.

Keywords: Extended Reality, Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, Mixed Reality.

Introduction

Extended Reality (XR) technologies have revolutionized the way individuals interact with digital content. While XR presents numerous benefits in education, entertainment, and professional training, it also introduces new cybersecurity challenges. Children and women, often targeted for online exploitation and abuse, face heightened risks in XR environments. This paper explores these risks, reviews existing literature on XR cybersecurity, and identifies gaps that need addressing to protect these vulnerable groups. Children and women are disproportionately targeted by online predators and abusers, a trend that is alarming as XR environments become more sophisticated and integrated into daily life. The immersive nature of XR can amplify the psychological impact of cyberbullying, harassment, and exploitation, making it imperative to develop comprehensive protective measures. This research paper aims to explore the unique cybersecurity threats posed by XR technologies and propose effective strategies to safeguard children and women from online exploitation and abuse.[1]

[1] Dall'Acqua, L., & Gironacci, I. (2019). Using extended reality to support cyber security. Political Decision-Making and Security Intelligence: Recent Techniques and Technological Developments, 146-166.

By examining current trends in XR technology, the nature of cyber threats in these environments, and existing legal and technological frameworks, this study seeks to identify gaps and propose solutions to enhance online safety. The paper will also delve into the psychological and social ramifications of XR-related abuse and the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in crafting effective policies and interventions. In a rapidly evolving digital world, ensuring the safety of vulnerable groups in XR environments is not only a technological challenge but a societal imperative. This research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on cybersecurity in the context of XR, advocating for proactive and holistic measures to protect children and women from the multifaceted threats they face online.
Extended Reality (XR) is an umbrella term that encompasses Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and Mixed Reality (MR). These technologies blend the physical and digital worlds, creating immersive experiences that transform how users interact with their environment and digital content.[2]

Virtual Reality (VR) is a fully immersive experience where users are placed in a computer-generated environment, separate from the real world. VR typically requires a headset that covers the eyes, with sensors to track head movements, allowing users to look around and interact with the virtual environment as if they were physically present. Examples of VR applications include gaming, virtual tours, and training simulations.

Augmented Reality (AR) overlays digital content onto the real world, enhancing the user's perception of their environment. Unlike VR, AR does not create a separate world but adds elements such as images, videos, or 3D models to the existing surroundings. AR is often experienced through smartphones, tablets, or AR glasses. Popular examples of AR include mobile games like Pokémon GO and applications that provide real-time navigation information or visual instructions.[3]

Mixed Reality (MR) combines elements of both VR and AR, creating interactive experiences where physical and digital objects coexist and interact in real-time. MR allows users to manipulate both real and virtual elements, often requiring advanced hardware such as specialized headsets (e.g., Microsoft HoloLens). MR is used in various fields, including design, education, and healthcare, to create complex simulations and interactive environments.

The Significance of XR- The significance of XR lies in its potential to revolutionize various industries by providing new ways to visualize data, interact with content, and train individuals. In education, XR can create immersive learning environments; in healthcare, it can assist in surgical simulations; and in entertainment, it can offer unprecedented interactive experiences.

However, the immersive and pervasive nature of XR also introduces new cybersecurity challenges, particularly regarding privacy, data protection, and the potential for online exploitation and abuse. As XR technologies become more integrated into everyday life, it is crucial to develop robust measures to safeguard users, especially vulnerable populations such as children and women, from these emerging threats.

Extended Reality (XR), encompassing Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and Mixed Reality (MR), represents a significant technological leap forward, offering immersive and interactive experiences that blend the physical and digital worlds. However, this advancement brings a new array of cybersecurity challenges and considerations. Understanding the relationship between XR and cybersecurity is crucial for developing robust protective measures and ensuring safe user experiences.

Immersive Vulnerabilities- XR environments create highly immersive experiences, which can make users more susceptible to cyber threats. The level of engagement and immersion can lead to a decreased awareness of the physical surroundings, making users vulnerable to both virtual and physical risks. Cyber attackers can exploit this by introducing malicious content, phishing schemes, or other deceptive practices within the XR environment.[4]

Data Privacy and Protection- XR technologies collect extensive data to create personalized and immersive experiences. This data includes not only personal information but also behavioral and biometric data, such as eye movements, gestures, and even physiological responses. The collection and processing of such sensitive data poses significant privacy concerns. Ensuring that this data is securely stored and transmitted is a critical aspect of XR cybersecurity.

[2] Dissanayake, V. D. (2019). A review of Cyber security risks in an Augmented reality world. University of Sri Lanka, Institute of Information Technology: Malabe, Sri Lanka.
[3] Morimoto, T., Kobayashi, T., Hirata, H., Otani, K., Sugimoto, M., Tsukamoto, M., ... & Mawatari, M. (2022). XR (extended reality: virtual reality, augmented reality, mixed reality) technology in spine medicine: status quo and quo vadis. Journal of Clinical Medicine, 11(2), 470.
[4] Quayle, E., & Koukopoulos, N. (2019). Deterrence of online child sexual abuse and exploitation. Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice, 13(3), 345-362.

Device Security- XR relies on specialized hardware, such as VR headsets, AR glasses, and sensors, which can be targets for cyber-attacks. These devices, if compromised, can provide attackers with access to a user's personal information and the XR environment. Securing these devices through firmware updates, secure communication protocols, and robust authentication methods is essential.
Virtual Harassment and Abuse.[5]

The immersive nature of XR can amplify the impact of cyberbullying, harassment, and exploitation, particularly for vulnerable groups such as children and women. In virtual environments, malicious actors can create realistic scenarios that can cause psychological harm. Addressing these issues requires not only technological solutions, such as content moderation and user reporting mechanisms, but also legal and policy frameworks that protect users' rights in XR spaces.

Legal and Regulatory Challenges- The rapid development of XR technologies has outpaced the creation of comprehensive legal and regulatory frameworks. This gap presents challenges in defining and enforcing cybersecurity standards and protocols. International cooperation and updated regulations are necessary to address the global nature of XR and its associated risks.[6]

Ethical Considerations- The development and deployment of XR technologies also raise ethical questions about user consent, data ownership, and the potential for manipulative or harmful content. Ensuring that XR experiences are ethical and respect user rights is an integral part of cybersecurity in this domain.[7]

Cybersecurity in XR

XR environments present unique cybersecurity challenges. Unlike traditional digital platforms, XR involves sensory data and physical movements, creating opportunities for novel attack vectors. Key cybersecurity issues in XR include:

- Data Privacy: XR systems collect extensive personal data, including biometric information, which, if compromised, can lead to severe privacy breaches.
- Identity Theft and Impersonation: The immersive nature of XR makes it easier for malicious actors to impersonate others, leading to potential exploitation and abuse.
- Harassment and Abuse: XR environments can facilitate new forms of harassment and abuse, such as virtual groping and stalking, which are difficult to monitor and control.[8]

Vulnerabilities of Children and Women in XR

Children and women are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse in XR environments. Factors contributing to their vulnerability include:

- Lack of Awareness: Children and some women may lack awareness of the potential risks associated with XR technologies.[9]
- Targeted Exploitation: Predators can use the immersive and interactive nature of XR to groom and exploit victims.
- Inadequate Safeguards: Existing safety measures in XR environments may be insufficient to protect these vulnerable groups effectively.[10]

Protective Measures

Current protective measures focus on a combination of technological solutions, regulatory frameworks, and educational initiatives:

- Technological Solutions: Encryption, secure authentication methods, and real-time monitoring are critical in safeguarding XR environments.

[5] Wijakusumariasih, N. P. I. (2019). Legal Protection For Children Against Online Sexual Exploitation and abuse of Children. Jurnal Magister Hukum Udayana (Udayana Master Law Journal), 8(1), 1-12.

[6] Shamim, I. (2017). Child sexual abuse and exploitation online in Bangladesh: The challenges of the internet and law and legal developments. Crime, Criminal Justice, and the Evolving Science of Criminology in South Asia: India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, 145-171.

[7] Netkova, B., & Mustafa, A. Q. (2021). International legal standards in combating child online sexual abuse and exploitation. Journal of liberty and international affairs, 6(3), 111-122.

[8] Shreya Singhal vs. Union of India (2015), AIR 2015 SC 1523

[9] Ministry of Home Affairs. (2020). *National Crime Records Bureau Annual Report*. Government of India.

[10] Law Commission of India. (2018). *Report No. 276: Protection of Children from Sexual Offences*. Government of India

- Regulatory Frameworks: Governments and organizations are developing regulations to address privacy and security concerns in XR. Examples include the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in Europe and the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) in the United States.
- Educational Initiatives: Raising awareness about XR risks and promoting safe online practices among children and women are essential.

Research Gap

Despite the progress in addressing cybersecurity in XR, significant research gaps remain:

1. Comprehensive Risk Assessment: There is a need for comprehensive studies assessing the full spectrum of risks associated with XR technologies, particularly for children and women.
2. Effective Safeguards: Research on the effectiveness of current protective measures and the development of innovative solutions tailored to XR environments is lacking.
3. Regulatory Impact: The impact of existing regulations on XR cybersecurity needs thorough evaluation to identify areas for improvement.
4. User Education: Studies focusing on effective methods for educating vulnerable populations about XR risks and safe practices are limited.
5. Cross-Disciplinary Approaches: Integrating insights from cybersecurity, psychology, and social sciences to develop holistic protective strategies is an underexplored area.

Existing Laws in India on Extended Reality, Cybersecurity, and Protection Against Online Exploitation

India has a comprehensive legal framework to address cybersecurity and protect vulnerable populations, such as children and women, from online exploitation and abuse. Here, we explore relevant laws and regulations that intersect with the concerns related to Extended Reality (XR) technologies.

Information Technology Act, 2000 (IT Act) and Amendments

The IT Act is the primary legislation in India dealing with cybercrimes and electronic commerce. Key provisions relevant to XR and cybersecurity include:

1. **Section 43**: Deals with penalties for unauthorized access, damage to computer systems, and data theft.
2. **Section 66**: Addresses computer-related offenses, including identity theft and impersonation, which are critical in XR environments.
3. **Section 66A**: (Struck down by the Supreme Court in Shreya Singhal vs. Union of India, 2015) dealt with the punishment for sending offensive messages through communication service, etc.
4. **Section 66E**: Provides punishment for the violation of privacy, specifically dealing with capturing, publishing, or transmitting images of a private area of any person without consent.
5. **Section 67**: Covers punishment for publishing or transmitting obscene material in electronic form, relevant for preventing harassment and abuse in XR platforms.
6. **Section 67B**: Addresses the punishment for publishing or transmitting material depicting children in sexually explicit acts, which is crucial for protecting children from exploitation.[11]

Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012

The POCSO Act provides comprehensive protection to children against sexual offenses, including those committed through digital means:

1. **Section 11**: Defines sexual harassment of a child, including online exploitation.
2. **Section 13**: Covers the use of a child for pornographic purposes, which can extend to virtual environments in XR technologies.
3. **Section 14**: Deals with punishment for using children for pornographic purposes and explicitly covers electronic forms of media.[12]

Personal Data Protection Bill, 2019

Though not yet enacted, the Personal Data Protection Bill aims to provide a comprehensive framework for data protection in India. Key provisions include:

1. **Consent**: Requires explicit consent from individuals before collecting their data, which is crucial for XR technologies that collect extensive personal information.
2. **Data Security**: Mandates data fiduciaries to implement security safeguards to protect personal data from breaches.[13]
3. **Rights of Individuals**: Grants individuals rights over their data, including the right to access, correction, and erasure, important for maintaining privacy in XR environments.

[11] Gupta, A. (2020). Cybersecurity in India: A Legal Perspective. Oxford University Press.

[12] Mishra, G. (2021). Protection of Children from Cybercrimes in India. LexisNexis

[13] Sharma, V. (2018). Data Privacy and Cybersecurity: The Indian Legal Context. Eastern Book Company.

Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986

This Act prohibits the indecent representation of women through advertisements, publications, and other means, which can be extended to digital and XR platforms:

1. **Section 4**: Prohibits the indecent representation of women in any form, including digital media.
2. **Section 6**: Empowers authorities to enter and search premises if they suspect any violation, including virtual spaces.[14]

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015

This Act provides for the protection, treatment, and rehabilitation of children in the context of cybercrimes and abuse:

1. **Section 75**: Penalizes cruelty to children, which can include online exploitation.
2. **Section 77**: Addresses penalties for giving children intoxicating substances, including those facilitated through digital means.

The National Cyber Security Policy, 2013

This policy aims to protect information and information infrastructure in cyberspace, build capabilities to prevent and respond to cyber threats, reduce vulnerabilities and minimize damage from cyber incidents.

1. **Objectives**: Includes creating a secure cyber ecosystem, enhancing and creating mechanisms for monitoring and responding to cyber incidents, and securing e-governance services.[15]

Judicial Interpretations and Guidelines

Indian judiciary has provided significant interpretations and guidelines on cybersecurity and protection from online exploitation, which are relevant for XR:

1. **Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan (1997)**: Laid down guidelines for preventing sexual harassment in workplaces, which can be extended to virtual workplaces in XR.
2. **Supreme Court Guidelines on Data Privacy**: Following the Puttaswamy judgment, the court has emphasized the need for robust data protection frameworks, impacting how XR data should be handled.

India's legal framework provides robust protections against cybercrimes and online exploitation, with specific provisions to safeguard children and women. As XR technologies evolve, these laws and regulations will need continuous updates to address new challenges and ensure comprehensive protection in virtual environments. Future legislation, like the Personal Data Protection Bill, will further enhance these protections by addressing emerging data privacy concerns.

New Criminal Laws in India Relevant to Cybersecurity and Protection Against Online Exploitation in XR

India has been proactive in updating its legal framework to address the challenges posed by the digital age, particularly concerning cybersecurity and the protection of vulnerable populations. Here are some recent legislative efforts and amendments that are particularly relevant to Extended Reality (XR) and online exploitation:

Personal Data Protection Bill, 2019 (Expected to be Enacted Soon)

The Personal Data Protection Bill, 2019, aims to provide comprehensive data protection, impacting how personal data is handled in XR environments:

Data Fiduciaries: The Bill introduces the concept of 'data fiduciaries' responsible for processing personal data. They must ensure transparency, accountability, and user consent.

Rights of Data Principals: Individuals (data principals) have rights to access, correct, erase, and port their data, enhancing control over personal information used in XR.

Data Localization: Certain sensitive personal data must be stored within India, aiming to protect national security and individual privacy.

Penalties and Compensation: Stringent penalties for data breaches and provisions for compensation to individuals affected by such breaches are included.

The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021

These rules strengthen the regulation of digital platforms and intermediaries, impacting XR applications and environments:

1. **Due Diligence by Intermediaries**: Intermediaries, including XR platform providers, must observe due diligence, including removing unlawful content within specified timelines.

[14] Banerjee, A. (2020). Women and Law in India: Cyber Violence and the Legal Response. Sage Publications.

[15] Kumar, S., & Singh, R. (2019). Cyber Law and Cyber Security in Developing and Emerging Economies. Springer.

2. **Grievance Redressal Mechanism**: Platforms must establish a robust grievance redressal mechanism to handle user complaints, essential for addressing online harassment and abuse in XR.

Traceability of Messages: Certain significant social media intermediaries must enable the identification of the first originator of information, which helps in tracing the source of harmful content

The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 (Proposed)

This proposed legislation builds on the Personal Data Protection Bill and aims to further refine data protection laws in India:

1. **Simplified Compliance**: Aims to simplify compliance requirements for data fiduciaries while ensuring robust protection for data principals.
2. **Cross-Border Data Transfers**: Provides clear guidelines on cross-border data transfers, ensuring data protection even when data is processed outside India.
3. **Personal Data Breach Notifications**: Mandates prompt notification of data breaches to the Data Protection Authority and affected individuals.

New Guidelines and Regulatory Measures

1. **National Cyber Security Strategy 2020 (Proposed)**

○ **Cyber Hygiene and Cybersecurity Awareness**: Emphasizes the importance of cyber hygiene and proposes large-scale awareness campaigns, which are crucial for users of XR technologies.[16]

2. **Incident Response and Crisis Management**: Strengthens incident response mechanisms and crisis management frameworks to handle cybersecurity threats in XR environments.

The Ministry of Women and Child Development Initiatives

Cyber Safety and Anti-Trafficking Measures: Focuses on online safety for women and children, including anti-trafficking measures that can be extended to XR environments.

Awareness Programs: Launches programs to educate children and women about online safety, including the risks associated with XR technologies.[17]

Judicial Developments

Recent judicial decisions have also shaped the legal landscape regarding cybersecurity and online exploitation:

1. **Re: Prajwala Letter Dated 18.2.2015 Videos of Sexual Violence and Recommendations (2018)** [18]

Summary: The Supreme Court directed the establishment of a committee to curb the circulation of sexually explicit videos involving children and women on social media and other digital platforms, impacting XR environments.

2. XYZ v. State of Maharashtra and Others (2019)[19]

Summary: This case reinforced the need for stringent action against digital harassment and abuse, setting a precedent for protecting users in XR spaces.

India is continuously evolving its legal framework to address the complexities of cybersecurity and protect vulnerable populations from online exploitation. The introduction of new laws, amendments to existing laws, and proactive judicial decisions are crucial steps toward ensuring safety in XR environments. As XR technologies become more pervasive, ongoing updates and enforcement of these laws will be essential to mitigate emerging risks and safeguard user privacy and security.

Judicial Trends and Indian Case Laws in Extended Reality and Cybersecurity

Introduction

The rapid advancement of Extended Reality (XR) technologies has posed new legal and regulatory challenges. Indian courts and legislative bodies are beginning to address these challenges, particularly concerning the protection of vulnerable populations such as children and women from online exploitation and abuse. This section explores judicial trends, notable case laws, and relevant law reports that highlight how the Indian legal system is responding to the cybersecurity implications of XR technologies.[20]

[16] Choudhary, S., & Arora, N. (2018). Cybersecurity laws in India: An overview. Journal of Cyber Law and Policy, 5(2), 45-67.

[17] Bhatia, G. (2017). The right to privacy in India: Conceptual foundations and practical issues. Indian Journal of Law and Technology, 13(1), 1-29.

[18] (2018) 15 SCC 721

[19] (2019) 4 MLJ (Crl) 282

[20] Kaur, P. (2020). The role of judiciary in shaping cyber laws in India. National Law Journal, 15(2), 57-74

Relevant Law Reports

1. Report of the Committee on Data Protection Framework for India (2018)

This report, chaired by Justice B.N. Srikrishna, laid the groundwork for the Personal Data Protection Bill. The recommendations include stringent data protection measures, consent requirements, and penalties for data breaches, all of which are crucial for XR technologies.

2. National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) Annual Report

The NCRB report provides comprehensive data on cybercrimes in India, including those targeting children and women. The report highlights trends and patterns in online exploitation, which can inform protective measures in XR environments.

3. Law Commission of India Report No. 276 (2018)

The Law Commission's report on "Protection of Children from Sexual Offences" includes recommendations for strengthening the POCSO Act. The report emphasizes the need for special provisions to address new forms of digital exploitation, which are pertinent to XR technologies.

Notable Indian Case Laws

1. Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) vs. Union of India (2017)[21]

Significance: This landmark judgment recognized the right to privacy as a fundamental right under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. The verdict has significant implications for data protection in XR technologies, as it mandates stringent measures to safeguard personal data collected in XR environments.

2. Shreya Singhal vs. Union of India (2015)[22]

Significance: This case struck down Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, which was deemed to be vague and an infringement on free speech. However, the judgment emphasized the need for clear and precise laws to regulate online content and protect users from abuse, which is relevant for XR platforms.

Judicial Trends

1. Emphasis on Data Privacy and Protection

Indian judiciary has increasingly emphasized the importance of data privacy, especially in the digital realm. The landmark case of **Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) vs. Union of India (2017)** established the right to privacy as a fundamental right under the Indian Constitution. This case has significant implications for XR technologies, as they involve extensive data collection, including biometric and sensory data.[23]

2. Child Protection in the Digital Space

The Indian legal system has shown a strong commitment to protecting children from online exploitation. The **Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012** and its amendments have been pivotal in safeguarding children from online abuse. Courts have been proactive in interpreting the Act to cover new forms of digital exploitation, which can extend to XR environments.[24]

3. Women's Safety Online

Indian courts have also been focusing on women's safety in the digital space. The **Information Technology Act, 2000**, particularly Section 67, deals with the punishment for publishing or transmitting obscene material in electronic form. The judiciary has interpreted this provision to address various forms of online harassment and abuse, which are relevant in the context of XR.[25]

Conclusion

As XR technologies continue to evolve, ensuring the cybersecurity of these immersive environments is crucial, particularly for protecting vulnerable populations like children and women from exploitation and abuse. This paper highlights the pressing need for comprehensive research and innovative solutions to address the unique challenges posed by XR. Bridging the identified research gaps will require collaborative efforts across disciplines, regulatory bodies, and technology developers to create safer and more secure XR experiences.

[21] AIR 2017 SC 4161

[22] AIR 2015 SC 1523

[23] Rao, P. (2019). Legal aspects of data protection in India: The emerging framework. Indian Journal of Law and Public Policy, 2(1), 34-52

[24] Patel, D., & Sen, S. (2020). Protecting children in the digital age: Legislative and judicial responses in India. Child Rights Law Review, 6(1), 22-39

[25] Jain, R. (2019). Addressing cyber harassment of women in India: Legal and policy challenges. Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 26(3), 348-368

The Indian judiciary and legislative bodies are gradually addressing the cybersecurity challenges posed by XR technologies. Through landmark judgments and comprehensive reports, the legal framework is evolving to protect vulnerable populations from online exploitation and abuse. However, continuous efforts are required to adapt existing laws and develop new regulations to keep pace with the rapid advancements in XR technologies.

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4. Mishra, G. (2021). Protection of Children from Cybercrimes in India. LexisNexis.
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2. National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) Annual Report (2020)
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4. Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology. (2018). Report of the Committee on Data Protection Framework for India. Government of India.
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2. Shreya Singhal vs. Union of India (2015), AIR 2015 SC 1523.
3. Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) vs. Union of India (2017).
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