

India clamps down on bloggers, cell users

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In a knee-jerk reaction to the recent terror-related blasts in India, the government is stepping up control on the online community that according to the country's telecom regulator, the Department of Telecom (DoT), was running content that was "anti-national" and "against public interest." In a sudden move the DoT issued orders on Friday to all Internet service providers to block 18 Web sites that were blogging reactions following the recent terrorist-activated bomb blasts in Bombay and Srinagar in Kashmir.

The Web sites ordered to be blocked include hinduunity.org, hinduhumanrights.org, princesskimberley.com, bloodspot.com, dalitstan.org, clickatell.com, geocities.com, typepad.com and even Blogspot, a Google-owned site.

"The DoT did not give us reasons; the order just gave us a list of the Web sites to be blocked," said Deepak Maheshwari, secretary of the Internet Service Providers Association of India, adding that some internet service providers that are not equipped to filter specific pages may however block all blogs that carry the same Internet Protocol address even if they were running content not related to the recent blasts.

"I do not think this order impacts the business of ISPs adversely," added Maheshwari.

But even as the ISPs are largely stoic, some have taken exceptions to the crack-down. "It is curbing the fundamental right of freedom of speech," said Desi Valli, technical director, Net4India Ltd, a local ISP. "I do not

know how the DoT can block blogging sites technically. Moreover it is not the right mechanism to stop undesirable propaganda."

"(The) Internet after all is an international media, which is an open forum. Even the U.S. with all cutting-edge monitoring equipment has been unable to block all undesirable internet sites," added Vali.

Admittedly, it is difficult to curb blogging by blocking blog Web sites. Media organization like CNN and The Guardian run their own blog sites where these bloggers can move to or, bloggers can continue shifting their server sites and IP addresses.

Moreover Web sites such as www.pkblogs.com, a Pakistan-based Web site that enables bloggers to get around blog bans, could still be used to access the blocked sites.

Still DoT is insistent and says that blogging is getting misused in the country. According to the regulator, blogging on fanatic and religious websites had surged soon after the Mumbai bomb blasts on July 11, which saw serial bombing in Mumbai killing over 200 people and injuring many more.

Blogging is catching on rapidly in India, though numbers are still modest compared to many other countries. Estimates reckon that around a fourth of India's 38 million internet users are active bloggers compared to 38 million in China. Globally, there are over 120 million bloggers and multiplying at about 10 million per month. The number is expected to cross 160 million by the end of this year.

According to ISPAI, this is not the first time DoT has issued orders to block Web sites. Over the past six years, the regulator has blocked dozens of others, "however, this is the first time that DoT has blocked Web sites on terrorism as the sole cause" said an ISPAI member

requesting anonymity. "Moreover, this is also the first time that the DoT has issued orders without consulting the ISPs.

Usually, the Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) -- a division of DoT -- reports on the presence of Web sites running contents against public interest to DoT, which in turn discusses such websites with the ISPs before issuing blocking orders.

However, the country's bloggers were not the sole target of DoT in its pursuit to initiative additional security in the wake of renewed terror strikes in the country. In yet another similar crack-down, the regulator has also directed mobile operators in India to discontinue all mobile connections that have been issued without proper verification prescribed by the DoT.

This order, say operators could "pluck-out" about 15 million mobile phone users from their connections.

But that's not all. In another example of what the critics have called "excessive security consciousness", the government is reportedly trying to re-introduce a licensing regime in the telecom sector that would require foreign telecom network managers and equipment suppliers to obtain licenses before starting operations in the country.

This idea mooted by the country's security advisor argues that unlike Indian telecom companies, foreign companies are not obligated to provide intelligence agency access to their operations or network, which is to be made a condition for a license. Reports also suggest that the DoT is mulling on a law that prevents local telecom companies from allowing the networks accessed from across borders.

Small wonder then that many are unhappy; "Heightened security consciousness is understandable," said a member of the ISPAI. "But in

the process the government is trying to impose rules that may end up being retrograde."

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