

India bid to censor Internet draws flak

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Communications Minister Kapil Sibal pledged a crackdown on "unacceptable" online content, saying Internet giants such as [Google](#), Yahoo! and Facebook had ignored India's demands to screen images and data before they are uploaded.

"We will evolve guidelines and mechanisms to deal with the issue," Sibal told reporters this week, without detailing what steps might be taken.

His comments provoked anger and derision among Indian Internet users, while experts raised doubts about the practicalities of enforcing any

directive and others questioned the government's motives.

Sunil Abraham, executive director at the Centre for Internet and Society in Bangalore, said it would be "impractical on the level of scale and on the level of the objective test".

"What's offensive for someone might be completely banal to somebody else," he told AFP.

Any ham-fisted [government crackdown](#) would "have a high impact on our credibility as a democracy" and risk alienating India's growing online community, Abraham said.

"We should be doing almost everything to promote the take-up of the Internet. It's almost tragic that we're pushing in the opposite direction," he added.

India, the world's largest democracy, has more than 110 million Internet users out of a population of 1.2 billion, with predictions that 600 million people will be online in the next five years.

#KapilSibal has this week become one of the most trending topics among Indian users of the micro-blogging site [Twitter](#), with many resorting to humour to mock the minister.



A protester stands outside the residence of Communications and IT Minister Kapil Sibal in New Delhi on December 7, 2011. Sibal on December 6 asked internet companies such as Facebook and Google to screen content that is uploaded on various sites, triggering a major uproar against the move.

Some likened his comments to attempts by Pakistan's telecoms regulator last month to ban text messages containing nearly 1,700 words it deemed "obscene", which was shelved after outrage from users and campaigners.

The satirical Indian web site fakingnews.com compared Sibal's plans to the futuristic Hollywood film "Minority Report", in which criminals are arrested before committing their crimes.



Indian police detain activists in New Delhi protesting against moves by the government to censor content uploaded on various Internet sites.

It also carried a spoof news article headlined: "All Facebook posts to have 'Kapil Sibal likes this' by default".

The mainstream media has been generally critical of Sibal as well, warning the government that it could not be seen to over-step the boundaries protecting India's treasured democratic values.

"Pre-screening of content amounts to unacceptable censorship," the Business Standard said in an editorial.

There was even a mild expression of concern from Washington where US State Department spokesman Mark Toner was asked about the Indian government's stance.

"We are concerned about any effort to curtail freedom of expression on the Internet," Toner said, while carefully avoiding any direct criticism of Sibal's proposals.

Sibal rejected any suggestion of an assault on free speech, saying the government had pleaded for self-regulation by companies such as Google to filter out deeply "insulting" material.

He highlighted examples of faked pictures of naked politicians, including Congress Party head Sonia Gandhi, and other images and social network pages that he said could inflame religious tensions.

India has in the past moved to block the publication of books and other material seen as disrespectful to Gandhi, or other members of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty that has dominated India's political life since independence.

Vijay Mukhi, a Mumbai-based freelance consultant who writes on Internet security, said Sibal had shown a fundamental lack of understanding about technology and was badly-advised.

He also saw in the reaction to the proposals a sign of how the Internet is

undermining traditional unquestioning respect and deference towards elders and authority figures.

"Most of us in India are very sensitive about what people say. The problem also is that whilst the Internet is there, you have to have a thick hide," said Mukhi.

"Politicians have got to create a second, third or fourth skin to be immune to the criticism that they get."

New Delhi has been accused before of censorship after demanding that BlackBerry makers Research In Motion give Indian security services access to encrypted messaging and email services.

Analysts agreed that under certain circumstances, particularly national security, pre- or post-censorship was acceptable, as India was the frequent target of extremists.

Abraham, though, said any ban on data and images on decency grounds without a prior complaint was doomed to fail and likely to be contrary to the constitutional right of freedom of expression if challenged in court.

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