India to ban 'offensive' Internet material

December 6 2011, by Ammu Kannampilly

The Indian government has asked Facebook, Google, Yahoo! and other Internet networks to screen user content to cut out defamatory and offensive material, officials said Tuesday.

India on Tuesday vowed to ban offensive material from the Internet after Facebook, Google and other major firms told the government they were unable to screen content before it was posted.

Communications Minister Kapil Sibal said talks with the Internet giants had failed to come up with a solution following complaints that he had lodged three months ago over "unacceptable" images.

"My aim is that insulting material never gets uploaded," Sibal told reporters in New Delhi. "We will evolve guidelines and mechanisms to deal with the issue.

"They will have to give us the data, where these images are being uploaded and who is doing it."

Sibal said the government supported free speech and was against censorship but that some material on the Internet was so offensive that no one would find it acceptable.

He said he had shown some of the worst images to the Internet companies, who had said they could not control all distribution.

"Three months back we saw that Google, Yahoo!, Facebook had images which could be an insult to Indians, especially religious-minded people," Sibal said.

"We told them to find a way that such insulting images are not uploaded. We gave them some time... but there was no response."

Sibal said the firms had shown that their "intention was not to cooperate" and that they had explained they were only "platforms" on which people could display material.

"I feel that this in principle was not correct but it is very clear that we will not allow such insults to happen. We are thinking and will take the next step," he said. "We will not allow our cultural ethos to be hurt."

Facebook, which has 25 million users in India, released a statement saying it "recognised the government's interest in minimising the amount of abusive content" online and would continue to communicate over the issue.

Google confirmed Monday's meeting with Sibal but made no further comment, while Yahoo! and Microsoft were not immediately available.

Sibal showed some of the offending material to journalists, including fake images of naked politicians and religious figures.

He added that "sometimes when asked for data in respect to terrorists... there is hesitation (by Internet companies) to provide that data."

The Hindustan Times on Tuesday said the Internet companies had rejected Sibal's appeal for screening, saying a huge volume of information was uploaded on to the Internet and that they were not responsible for judging its content.

The paper added that Sibal had earlier complained about a site that targeted Sonia Gandhi, the influential president of the ruling Congress party.

Congress spokesman Abhishek Manu Singhvi said the government was only acting "in respect of absolutely illegal, defamatory, pornographic or other similar kind of material".

BlackBerry maker RIM has been embroiled in a similar wrangle with India over access to encrypted email and instant message services that the government says could be used by extremists to plot attacks.

India has more than 110 million Internet users out of a population of 1.2 billion, according to latest research, with the figure likely to jump to 600 million in the next five years.

Sibal's call for Internet screening quickly attracted a storm of criticism on Twitter, with many users expressing anger over any attempt to restrict usage.

Citation: India to ban 'offensive' Internet material (2011, December 6) retrieved 9 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2011-12-india-offensive-internet-material.html