

India won't censor social media: minister

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This file photo shows Indian Muslims holding a protest in Mumbai, in 2010, after caricatures of Prophet Mohammed were published on Facebook. India does not intend to censor online social networks such as Facebook, a minister said on Tuesday, but he demanded that they obey the same rules governing the press and other media.

India does not intend to censor online social networks such as Facebook, a minister said Tuesday, but he demanded that they obey the same rules governing the press and other media.

"I want to say once and for all, without any obfuscation, no government in India will ever censor social media," Telecoms Minister Kapil Sibal told an IT summit in Mumbai.

"I never wanted to censor social media and no government wants to do so. But like the print and electronic media, they have to obey the laws of the country."

He held a number of meetings with leading Internet companies late last year in which he asked about the possibility of checking content before it is posted online by users.

The minister was said to have shown Internet executives examples of obscene images found on the Internet that risked offending Muslims or defaming politicians, including the boss of the ruling Congress party, Sonia Gandhi.

"The media reported I had said I wanted to pre-screen the content on social media. I have never even heard the word pre-screen," he told the summit.

Since these meetings, 19 Internet firms including Google, Yahoo! and Facebook have been targeted in criminal and civil cases lodged in lower courts, holding them responsible for content posted by users of their platforms.

The government has given its sanction for the firms to be tried for serious crimes such as fomenting religious hatred and spreading social discord -- offences that could land company directors in prison.

"All I want is that they (social media) should follow the laws of the land. Social media must not consider itself to be above that," Sibal said.

But Internet privacy groups say social media sites may not have the resources to screen obscene material that violates local laws posted on the Internet.

Local laws prohibit the sale or distribution of obscene material as well as those that can hurt religious sentiments in overwhelmingly-Hindu India.

"It is just not humanly possible to pre-censor content and Sibal knows

that very well," said Rajan Gandhi, founder of a New Delhi-based advocacy group Society in Action.

Pranesh Prakash of the Bangalore-based Centre for Internet and Society said he was "glad Sibal does not believe in censorship and that companies operating in India should follow local laws."

"But on the other hand he has asked them to evolve new guidelines and actively monitor user content which is not legally sanctioned. This makes him look two-faced," Prakash added.

Google and Facebook said earlier this month they had removed the allegedly offensive content used as evidence in the court cases.

The groups have appealed to the Delhi High Court asking for the cases against them to be quashed on the basis they cannot be held responsible for their clients' actions.

The comments of a judge hearing the case raised further fears that freedom of expression online could be restricted.

"You must have a stringent check. Otherwise, like in China, we may pass orders banning all such websites," the judge said at the January hearing.

Facebook is banned in China and Google moved its operations out of the country in 2010 in protest at censorship laws there.

The debate about social networks mirrors a larger national dialogue about freedom of speech in the world's biggest democracy following recent protests by religious groups.

Indian-origin writer Salman Rushdie was prevented from speaking at a literature festival in Jaipur last month after Muslim groups protested

against his presence over his allegedly blasphemous 1988 novel "The Satanic Verses."

A group led by author and journalist Nilanjana Roy organised public readings of banned literary works on Monday to protest against what it said were recent curbs on intellectual freedom.

The initiative, called "Flashreads for free speech", was widely advertised on social networks including Twitter and Facebook.

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