

[News](#) » [National](#)

Published: September 4, 2012 04:09 IST | Updated: September 4, 2012 04:11 IST

Government to hold talks with stakeholders on Internet censorship

Shalini Singh

In an unprecedented move, the government, through the Department of Telecommunications and the Department of Electronics and Information Technology, has agreed to initiate dialogue on Internet censorship with mega Internet companies, social media giants such as Google and Facebook, members of civil society, technical community, media, ISPs and legal experts.

The triggers for the discussion, which will be held on Wednesday, are the riots in Assam, Mumbai and Uttar Pradesh, as well as the mass exodus of north-east Indians from Bangalore, which resulted in bringing the government, civil society organisations and the media to a flashpoint.

Two of India’s seniormost officers in the area of Internet censorship, DoT Secretary R. Chandrashekhar and Director General, CERT-IN, Gulshan Rai will engage with a range of stakeholders in a two-hour meeting titled ‘Legitimate Restrictions on Freedom of Online Speech: The need for balance – from Deadlock to Dialogue.’

Other panellists include representatives from Google and Facebook; Pranesh Prakash from the Centre for Internet and Society (a civil society group); Prabir Purkayasta, Delhi Science Forum (technical community); Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, president, Foundation for Media Professionals; Rajesh Chharia, president, Internet Service Providers Association of India; and Apar Gupta, an advocate dealing with cyber issues.

One analysis by the CIS has shown that 309 specific items, including URLs, Twitter accounts, IMG tags, blog posts and blogs were blocked. Complaints arose when blocking a page resulted in the blocking of an entire website – which has scores or hundreds of web pages. The government maintained that this was necessary as there was a sense of crisis. Home Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde insisted that the government was “taking strict action only against those accounts or people which are causing damage or spreading rumours.” However, the collateral damage of the move was the Twitter accounts of several people, including journalists like Kanchan Gupta, being blocked.

“Mass censorship is like killing a fly with a sledgehammer. Rather than blocking the sites, the government should have used the same media, Facebook, Twitter and Google to counter terrorism and hate speech. I am glad that they are now open to dialogue,” says Mr. Thakurta.

“It is an extremely productive move as it will generate awareness among content providers, government and users. In the absence of any dialogue, everyone was just sticking to their own positions without listening to the other stakeholders’ point of view,” says Mr. Chharia.

The meeting is to bring several stakeholders in dialogue on a single platform.

Nearly 50 other experts from industry, mobile service providers, Internet companies, intermediaries, academia and some international organisations as well as multilaterals are expected to join the conference, which will be held at 2.30 p.m. on September 4 at FICCI.

While this is seen as a brave attempt by some, there are an equal number of sceptics who believe that the discussion may not yield the desired result given the national security objectives governing law enforcement agencies on the one hand and the desire of users, media and civil society to preserve free speech on the other. Clearly, ISPs, Internet companies and social media are in a tough spot since they face legal obligations on legitimate orders for blocking on one hand while needing to protect their user privacy and rights to unhindered access to information.

If successful, it is possible that this dialogue will ensure that legitimate restrictions do not slide into illegitimate censorship.

Keywords: [Department of Telecommunications](#), [Department of Electronics and IT](#), [Internet censorship](#), [Google](#), [Facebook](#)

RELATED NEWS

[“Government should use Internet, social media to counter hate speech” Of parodies, misinformation and free speech](#)

[Regulating the Internet by fiat](#) [Freedom debate takes a new course](#) [Occupy internet](#) [Raised voices against Internet censorship](#) [Hacktivists want Internet curbs to go](#)

More In: [National](#) | [News](#)

Printable version | Sep 11, 2012 5:14:34 PM | <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/article3856121.ece>

© The Hindu