

## Kapil Sibal's web monitoring plan: Netizens tweet foul as India targets 'objectionable' content

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NEW DELHI: In a move netizens fear is tantamount to censorship, the Indian government has directed social networking sites like [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) to filter out "objectionable" content from their websites. It warned of suo moto action if this was not done.

The decision was conveyed during a meeting Communications and IT Minister [Kapil Sibal](#) held here on Monday evening with the India representatives of sites like Facebook, Twitter, [Youtube](#) and [Microsoft](#).

"Religious sentiments of many communities and of any reasonable persons is being hurt because of content which is on the sites," Sibal told reporters here Tuesday, explaining what the government considered "objectionable" content.

"Nobody minds satirical images of any public personality but if you show a certain form of me, this is not acceptable. Even individuals should be protected," the minister said, adding he had first raised the issue with social networking sites on Sep 5. But confusion remained on what constitutes "objectionable" or, for that matter, who will decide what is tantamount to "hurting" religious sentiments or an individual's personal integrity and privacy. All that officials said was that they will come up with guidelines.

"They will have to give us data. Then, there will be action taken. We will ask them to give information. Allow us time to deal with it. One thing is sure: We will not allow this kind of objectionable content," Sibal said.

The representatives of these sites pointed out that there was both the issue of what is tantamount to "objectionable" and the sheer logistical nightmare in screening every bit of content that is posted on the sites. They, however, said they did have checks.

"We will remove any content that violates our terms, which are designed to keep material that is hateful, threatening, incites violence or contains nudity off the service," said Facebook in a statement issued Tuesday.

"We recognise the government's interest in minimising the amount of abusive content that is available online and will continue to engage with the Indian authorities," the firm, which has one of the largest number of users in India, added.

For these social networking sites, Indians form among the largest online communities. Facebook, for example, says that out of 800 million users globally, 34 million are in India -- the third largest such group country-wise, after the US and Indonesia.

[Google](#) said there was a need to differentiate between what was controversial and what was illegal, adding that anything that went against statute was removed by their team, including content that went against their strict terms and conditions.

"But it also means that when content is legal but controversial we don't remove it because people's differing views should be respected, so long as they are legal," a Google spokesperson said in a statement.

According officials, during the Sep 5 meeting, some pictures were shown off the record, which purportedly depicted Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and [Congress](#) President Sonia Gandhi in "bad light", while in some others, it "insulted" various religions.

Sibal did not elaborate on the steps the government intended to take. His meeting Sep 5 was followed by another called by Telecom Secretary R. Chandrashekhar, Oct 19, where it was decided that a framework would be prepared for a code of conduct for the intermediaries when such objectionable content surfaced on the web sites.

"They orally agreed. But not in writing," Sibal said referring to the responses of those who attended the meeting. "They neither provided a solution, nor removed such content. They said they will take any action only if the ministry comes out with court orders."

Even as Sibal sought to clarify the government position and was at pains to explain that the move was not intended at any form of censorship on the net, netizens were caustic about the move. "Sibal was wrong on the 2G scam with his 'zero loss' theory. He is very very wrong in trying to bring to India the Chinese model of controlling Internet," said Rajiv Chandrasekhar, an industrialist and member of the Rajya Sabha.

"Doomed to fail!"