

IN TODAY'S PAPER

Front Page
Nation
Calcutta
Bengal
Foreign
Business
Sports
Horse Racing
t2
Opinion

Front Page > Nation > Story

Hiring: social media whiz-kids

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New Delhi, Aug. 5: The Centre is getting ready to hire a social media army to manage Net content, on the directive of the Narendra Modi PMO.

The first off the block is the women and child development ministry, which this week invited bids for the right to manage its Twitter and Facebook handles.

In the notice, it said a "Social Network Management Agency" would be hired to generate awareness on ministry-related issues and laid down the eligibility criteria:

Five years' experience in the field;

Experience in executing government projects;

Proven track record of managing a social networking platform with at least 2.5 lakh "followers" or people "liking" the content.

The notice, which could offer an early template for other government departments as well, says the potential applicant should have in-house facilities for production and editing of all content, including high-definition video, and research.

It also sets a target: the agency must ensure five lakh "likes" or "followers" for the ministry's site for a year.

The contract will initially be for two years and is extendable yearly. The notice says nothing about the fees.

Cyber law expert Pawan Duggal sounded a note of caution.

"Ideally parameters such as ensuring 5 lakh 'likes' should be kept out of government documents as it goes into a grey area. How do these agencies generate likes? They are mostly fake 'likes' bought and sold by them. This is done manually through dummy and multiple IP addresses, and proxy channels, which are mostly based outside the territories of India and sometimes even within it.... In fact, not so long ago, Congress leader Ashok Gehlot was accused of buying 'likes'," Duggal said.

The former Rajasthan chief minister was accused of buying Facebook 'likes' after they shot up to 2.15 lakh in July 2013 from 1.69 lakh in May 2013. The jump also made Istanbul the city with the highest number of his followers, replacing Jaipur.

An officer in the WCD ministry who asked not to be named said the "information officers now handling the digital interfaces are not equipped to handle interactions on social networking sites. Also, they are overburdened".

Prime Minister Modi, the most prolific politician online, has a team of cyber soldiers led by Hiren Joshi, an IT professional who is now an officer on special duty in the PMO.

The WCD ministry notice says the agency would have to set up a complete social networking management system and deploy qualified people to "gather, collate and post contents (sic) on the social media website under supervision of the ministry." It would also have to monitor the site on a real-time basis and report any significant posts by the public to a designated ministry official.

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