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Last Updated: Monday, 29 September, 2003, 11:49 GMT 12:49 UK

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Outrage over India Yahoo ban

Thousands of internet users in India have flooded a government website calling for a ban to be lifted on a Yahoo discussion group.

The ban has resulted in the blocking of all discussion groups hosted by the internet giant in India, inconveniencing internet users across the country.

The Indian Government ordered the move because of fears the discussion group, the Kynhun forum, had links with banned separatists.

It used new information technology laws to force Indian internet service providers (ISPs) to block the forum after Yahoo refused to comply.

The government says the Kynhun forum is linked to the outlawed Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council, a minor separatist group in the north-eastern state of Meghalaya.

It said the discussion group "contained material against the Government of India and the State Government of Meghalaya".

Censorship

The order was issued by the Indian Government's Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-IN) which holds the power to block internet sites deemed to be obscene or a national security threat.

Under the IT Act, Indian ISPs are liable for all third party data and content.

Since Indian ISPs lack the technical expertise to block a sub-group, they have responded by blocking Kynhun's IP address, which makes no distinction between it and other Yahoo discussion groups.

Thousands of Indians have now flooded the CERT-IN's discussion board asking for the ban to be lifted.

Global media watchdog Reporters Without Borders says the case highlights the danger of internet censorship.



Yahoo is in a legal grey area, say experts

“ I publish a monthly newsletter which is distributed free of cost to more than 1,000 subscribers worldwide. Suddenly I learn that I can no longer have access to my data ”

Yahoo user Vivek Soley

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"Blocking a few web pages can result in the blocking of hundreds of other web pages that have nothing to do with the banned content - this is a recurring problem on which we must remain very vigilant," secretary-general Robert Ménard said.

Indian cyberlaw expert, Pawan Duggal, says the government is on very thin legal ground.

"The inherent sovereign power of the government to block can never be denied," he told BBC News Online.

"But the route they have taken is completely illegal and will be struck down if challenged in court."

Cyber chaos

Despite the legal grey area, the ban has in effect blocked out many Indians from the Yahoo discussion groups.

Vivek Soley lives in the central Indian town of Indore and maintains a subscribers list on yahoo.groups.com.

“ The government should lift this ban before it ruins India's image as a free country ”

Yahoo user Naveen Rolands

"I publish a monthly newsletter which is distributed free of cost to more than 1,000 subscribers worldwide.

"Suddenly I learn that I can no longer have access to my data.

"Several other educational and information groups have also been blocked all because of one group," he says.

Naveen Rolands' eight-year-old daughter has a Yahoo group through which she shares photos and accounts of her travels with family and friends who are abroad.

That site is now blocked.

"I wonder who the real terrorists are," he said. "My daughter who uses Yahoo groups to share some photos? Or the bunch of clowns who call themselves politicians and [bureaucrats] who have given free publicity to an insurgent group?"

"The government should lift this ban before it ruins India's image as a free country."

Others point out that Kynhun had no more than about 20 subscribers.

"There are over 200 Kashmiri discussion groups with far more volatile views," says Pawan Duggal.

"With this action the government has opened a huge Pandora's box."

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