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## When Net is gross

The government's bid to muzzle the Internet has stirred up a storm. But what exactly is it so worried about? **Sonia Sarkar** looks at the controversial content — and the debate that it has triggered



BARBED WIRE: A morphed picture and some of the controversial posts

A war has been declared in cyberspace. The weapons of mass destruction are a spate of barbed posts that are being aimed at leaders of the Congress. "Kapil Sibal's censorship Bill will be called Social Networking Inspection Act (SONIA)," says one post. "Before Independence, it was Queen Victoria who looted our country; now it is Sonia Gandhi," says another.

For over a week now, posts have gone viral, in more ways than one. The government's bid to muzzle hate messages on the Internet has unleashed a flood of similar messages.

Early last week, the media reported that Union minister of information technology Kapil Sibal had asked Google, Facebook, Yahoo and Microsoft to remove "malicious and defamatory content" against Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress president Sonia Gandhi.

But the minister now stresses the government doesn't intend to screen Internet content. "We had a discussion with them (service providers) on how unacceptable matter has been circulating in social forums," he says.

The government has called for an "open discussion" on the issue on December 15. "We want the social media to put a proper self-regulatory mechanism in place," Sibal says.

What exactly got the government's hackles up? Though there are sites that are aimed at religions (Sibal told a channel that he'd been referring to sites that portrayed gods and goddesses in almost pornographic situations), the Congress has its share of detractors on the Internet. And in the line of fire are Prime Minister Singh and Gandhi.

Some of the hate groups against Singh on Facebook are "We Hate Manmohan Singh", "Dr Manmohan Singh Worst Prime Minister Ever", "Manmohan Singh is a puppet of Sonia Gandhi", and "Gandhigiri: Get Well Soon Manmohan Singh ji". The dozen groups on Yahoo and Facebook against Sonia Gandhi include "We hate Sonia Gandhi", "I hate Sonia Gandhi", and "Sonia Gandhi: Go Back".

Social networking forums such as Orkut, Facebook and Twitter have always been platforms for unfettered speech. A sizeable section of India's 2.8 crore Facebook users have also voiced their dissent — mild, strong or venomous — on the site.

"Online forums are for all — not just for anti-establishment voices alone. If someone doesn't like a post or comment, he or she can always post a counter-argument. It is the most viable medium in a democracy," academic Nivedita Menon says.

The move has triggered a heated debate on the right to dissent, with some arguing that there is a thin line between disagreement and abuse. For instance, many of the



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comments against Gandhi and Singh on the Internet would be libellous if they appeared in newspapers or television. “*Gali gali main shor hain, Sonia Gandhi aur uski party duniya ki sabse badi chor hain* (The uproar in every lane is that Gandhi and her party are the biggest thieves in the world),” says one post. “Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi ney India *loot li* (Singh and Gandhi have looted India),” says another.

Many of the pages have doctored images of the leaders. In one, Gandhi and Singh are portrayed as a bride and groom; in another, Singh is shown hugging Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who has a baby in her lap.

That the campaigns have their support is evident by the number of members and the frequency with which the “like” button — underlining appreciation — has been clicked.

Though most of the posts and pages are staunchly against the Congress — the Congress’s official websites were even hacked on Friday — the political affiliations of those behind the campaign are not always clear. Some of the pages have been supported by anti-Congress campaigners such as the group India Against Corruption, which led Anna Hazare’s crusade for the Jan Lokpal Bill. One page names as members Hazare’s lieutenant Manish Sisodia and retired intelligence officer M.K. Dhar. Both Dhar and Sisodia, however, deny they are members of any of the hate groups.

The posts and counter-posts on the “I hate Sonia Gandhi” page on FB — which has 921 members, including the group Akhand Bharat — tell their own story. “It is time for India to eliminate (sic) the Indian Gadafi family,” says one irate user. “We hate Sonia Gandhi” has 1,379 likes (“She is a villain [sic] for India,” says one status update), while “Sonia Gandhi: Go Back” has 7,124 members. “Gandhigiri: Get Well Soon Manmohan ji” is liked by 1,216 people.

**The Telegraph** posted questions to the campaigners, but got no response. Only Akhand Bharat replied to a query with: “There is no hate group for Sonia. It is love for India.”

But the latest whipping boy of the sites is Sibal. Groups campaigning against him include “Kapil Sibal Sucks”, “India Against Kapil Sibal — A voice for freedom of speech”, Kapil Sibal — the Loser”, “I Hate Kapil Sibal”, “Kapil Sibal: Destroyer of India” and “Kapil Sibal is an Idiot”.

Even in the Congress, there are murmurs of dissent on the way the minister handled the issue. “His biggest blunder was that he cited examples of posts and doctored images of Singh and Gandhi,” says a party leader. “This has irked people as they see it as a stifling of public voices and restrictions on political dissent.”

The Congress now is on a damage control mission. “No government can even remotely police the unpoliceable,” says chief spokesperson Abhishek Manu Singhvi. What the government wants, he stresses, is a discussion.

The discussions started in September when Sibal asked representatives of the service providers for an appropriate solution to abusive content in four weeks. Two reminders were sent to them in October but there was no response. Last month, the companies replied, saying they could do nothing because they adhered to US community standards.

What’s clear is that the government has been monitoring such posts for a while. Google, in an October report, says the Indian government wanted 358 items to be removed from January to June, 2011. Out of these, eight pertained to hate speech, 39 related to defamation and 255 were against “government criticism”.

Netizens believe that only self- regulation can work on the Internet — a position Sibal has now adopted.

“The Internet community can do the censorship on its own. Options to report spam or abuse are already available,” says Sunil Abraham, executive director of the Bangalore-based Centre for Internet and Society.



Online experts also stress that “offensive” is a subjective term. “What is offensive for one may just be fun for the other,” says Rahul Roushan who runs Faking News, a satirical news website that often takes potshots at politicians. Two of its most popular spoofs were on Gandhi and Singh. One had the headline “Manmohan Singh yet to call back Sonia Gandhi after receiving missed call” and the other said, “Congress authorises Sonia Gandhi to choose new curtains for party office”.

Roushan says he is ready to face legal action if he’s sued. “I respect the law of the land. I also clearly understand that we need to maintain civility and also cannot hurt religious and cultural sentiments,” he says.

Legal experts say there are anyway appropriate laws to deal with online abuse. Cyber lawyer Pavan Duggal points out that a person can be punished for three years if he or she sends a message “by means of a computer resource or a communication device, for the purpose of causing annoyance,

inconvenience, danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred or ill will.”

But Sibal holds that the government is not interested in legal wrangles.

“We don’t want to get mired in long legal proceedings. Our intentions are good and we want the problem to be solved at the earliest,” he says.

Abraham points out that Sibal’s diktat is an extension of IT guidelines the government enforced in April. “It requires companies to respond quickly if individuals complain that content is ‘disparaging’ and ‘harassing’. If the complaint is valid, the companies should pull down the offensive information within 36 hours.”

And this usually happens. The Centre for Internet and Society sent notices to intermediaries on seven different occasions, saying it found specific user-generated material offensive. In six of the seven cases, the companies removed the “offensive” material.

The Congress’s reaction, therefore, seems over the top. In any case, the party and its leaders are not the only ones under attack. There are groups such as “Mayawati — not the daughter of Dalit but the daughter of daulat (wealth)”, “L.K. Advani Sucks”, “We Hate Narendra Modi” and “Oust Narendra Modi”.

“Last year, someone mischievously diverted the domain of our website to the Congress site,” says the Bharatiya Janata Party’s IT cell convener, Arvind Gupta. When the cell found that a fake account for party leader Arun Jaitley had been opened on Twitter, it complained to the police’s economic offences wing and also to Twitter.

“We never created a hullabaloo over it,” Gupta says.

The experts fear that with such moves, India is following in the footsteps of closed regimes that have tried to fetter the Internet. “It is silly that the world’s largest democracy is joining the bandwagon,” says Abraham.



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