

TEAM DNA | BLESSY CHETTIAR | RENUKA RAO | Wed, 7 Dec 2011-10:00am , Mumbai , dna

Sibal tried to explain throughout Tuesday that the government did not want to act like a big brother.

A storm of criticism in the online world greeted Union telecom minister Kapil Sibal on Tuesday after he said that the government would be forced to take necessary steps if Internet giants such as Facebook, Twitter and Google failed to screen derogatory material from their sites.

Many Internet users said Sibal was trying to muffle the freedom of expression in the world's largest democracy, India.





Some said if the government had its way, the country would soon become like China where the online world is heavily censored.

But Sibal said the government was not trying to censor the freedom of speech and expression or the press; it merely wants to stop offensive material from being uploaded on social networking sites.

The telecom minister said the Internet giants did not come up with a solution though he had lodged complaints with them three months ago over "unacceptable" images.

"My aim is to stop insulting material from getting uploaded," he told reporters. "We will evolve guidelines and mechanisms to deal with the issue. They will have to give us the data, where these images are being uploaded and who is doing it."

Sibal met executives from Facebook, Google, Yahoo and Microsoft on Monday, but the meeting was not fruitful, he said.

"Three months back we saw that Google, Yahoo!, Facebook had images that could be insulting to Indians, especially the religious," Sibal said. "We told them to see to it that such insulting images are not uploaded. We gave them some time... but there's been no response."

Sibal tried to explain throughout the day that the government did not want to act like a big brother and censor stuff but his statement does throw up certain questions: Does the government have a right to block content the way it proposes?

Even if it does, is it possible to regulate content on the Internet? And what about our constitutional right to freedom of speech and expression?

"You cannot censor the Internet in India," said Pavan Duggal, Supreme Court advocate and president, cyberlaws.net. "You can ask social media sites to ensure that they comply with the law, but you cannot look at censorship. Regulating content on the Internet is legally, practically and technologically impossible. At this rate, the chances of the government trying to enforce censorship cannot be ruled out."

Rohan Babu, social media strategist, said it would be silly of the government to even think of censoring or regulating content on grounds of morality.

"The government has no right to demand respect for a particular religion, politician or higher authority. If you are in politics, you are bound to be talked about and made fun of."

Sahil Khan, founder, thetossedsalad.com, a lifestyle portal, said Sibal's statement exposes the government's fear. It knows social media can reach out to millions, especially after the Arab revolutions in West Asia and the backlash in the country following Anna Hazare's arrest in August, he said.

Author and entrepreneur Rashmi Bansal said the government was trying to deflect people's attention from important matters. "Millions use the Internet to express their views," Bansal said. "Those who are advocating censorship are neither aware of Internet culture nor are they in touch with reality."

And is it possible to regulate the Internet? Rahul Roushan, who runs the satire website Faking News, said, "It is funny that they say the Lokpal cannot monitor the lower bureaucracy because of its size, but they think they can monitor each and every Facebook user. Ridiculous!"

Facebook, which has 25 million users in India, released a statement saying it "recognised the government's interest in minimising the amount of abusive content" online and would continue to communicate over the issue. It would remove content that "is hateful, threatening, incites violence or contains nudity".

Google confirmed Monday's meeting with Sibal and said it complies with the law of the land but will not remove any material just because it is controversial. "When content is illegal, we abide by local law and take it down. And even where content is legal but breaks or violates our own terms and conditions we take that down too, once we have been notified about it," a Google spokesperson said. "But when content is legal and does not violate our policies, we will not remove it just because it is controversial as we believe that people's differing views, so long as they are legal, should be respected and protected."

Yahoo! and Microsoft were not available for comment.

Congress spokesman Abhishek Manu Singhvi said the government was only acting "in respect of absolutely illegal, defamatory, pornographic or other similar kind of material". But will such a decision stand in court of law? Harish Salve, constitutional expert, said the government was just saying "listen, you are crossing all bounds of decency". "And if that is what Sibal has in mind, it is not a bad idea," he said.

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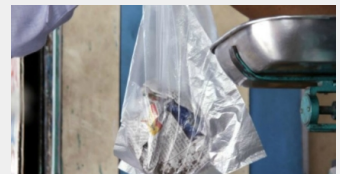
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(With inputs from Blessy Chettiar, Renuka Rao & Agencies)

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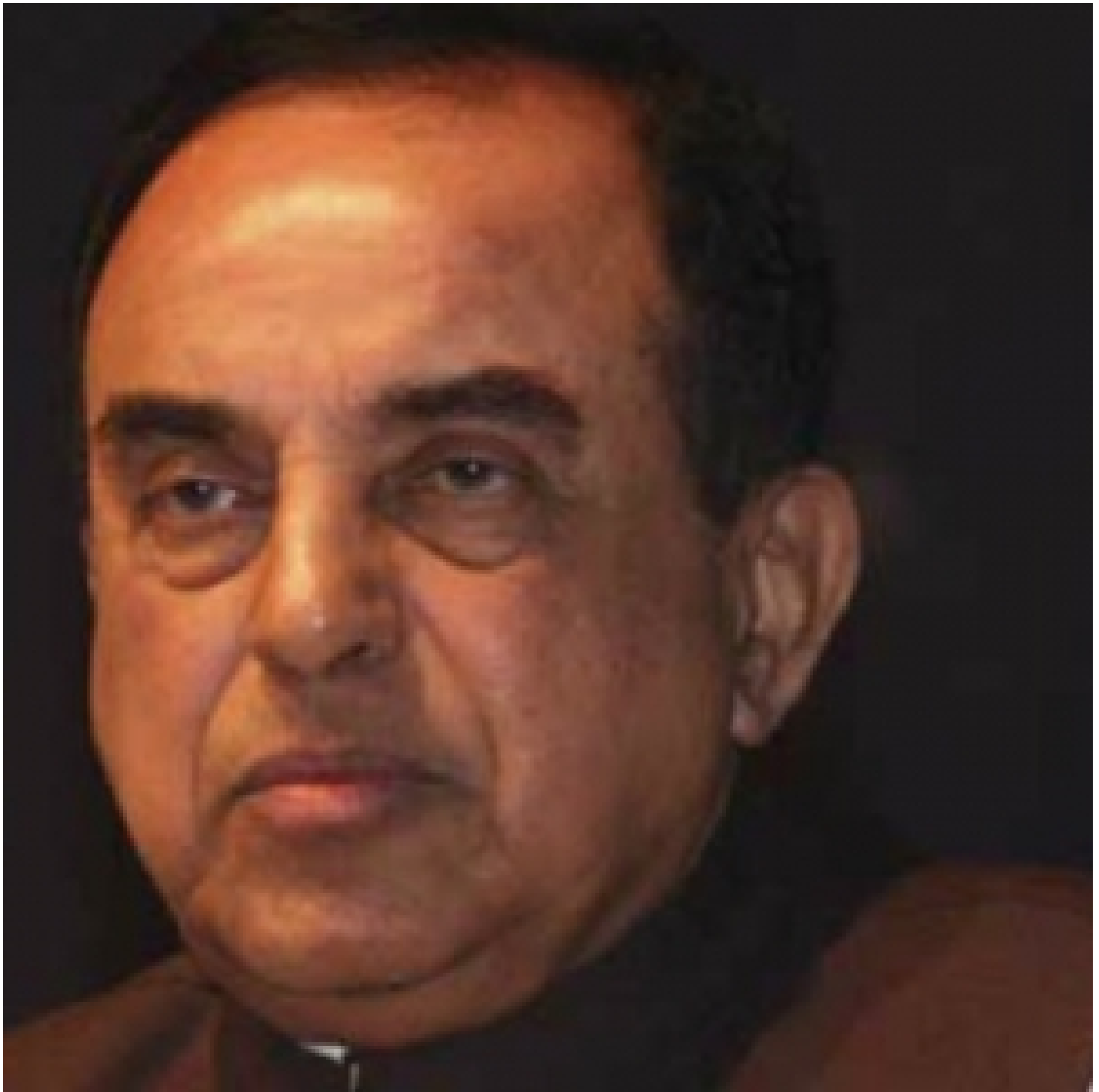
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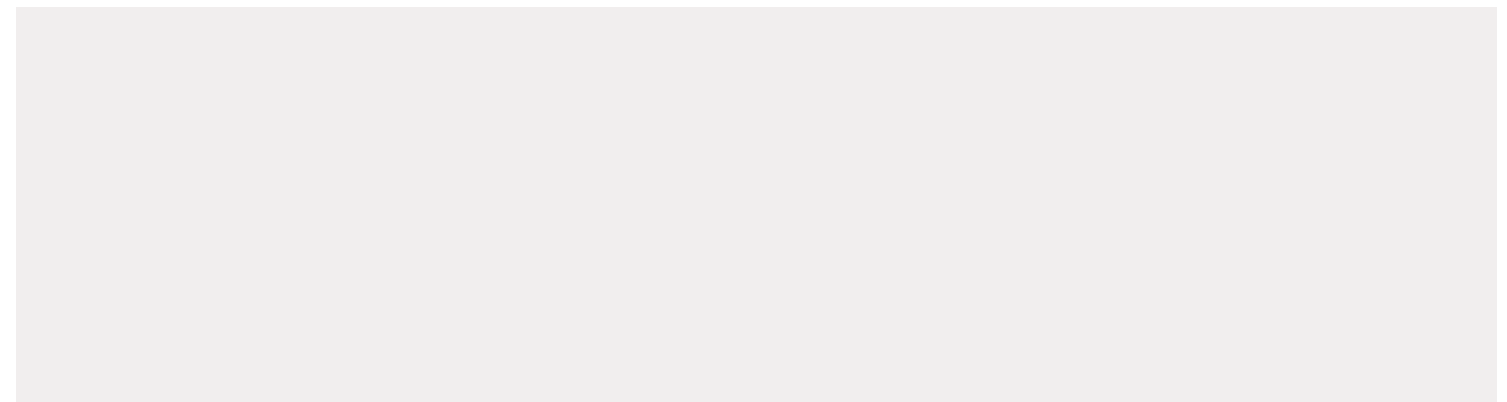
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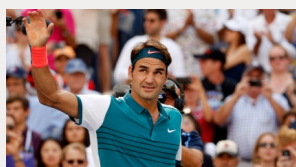
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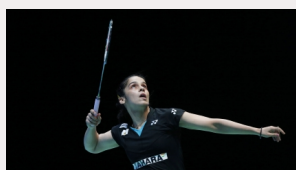
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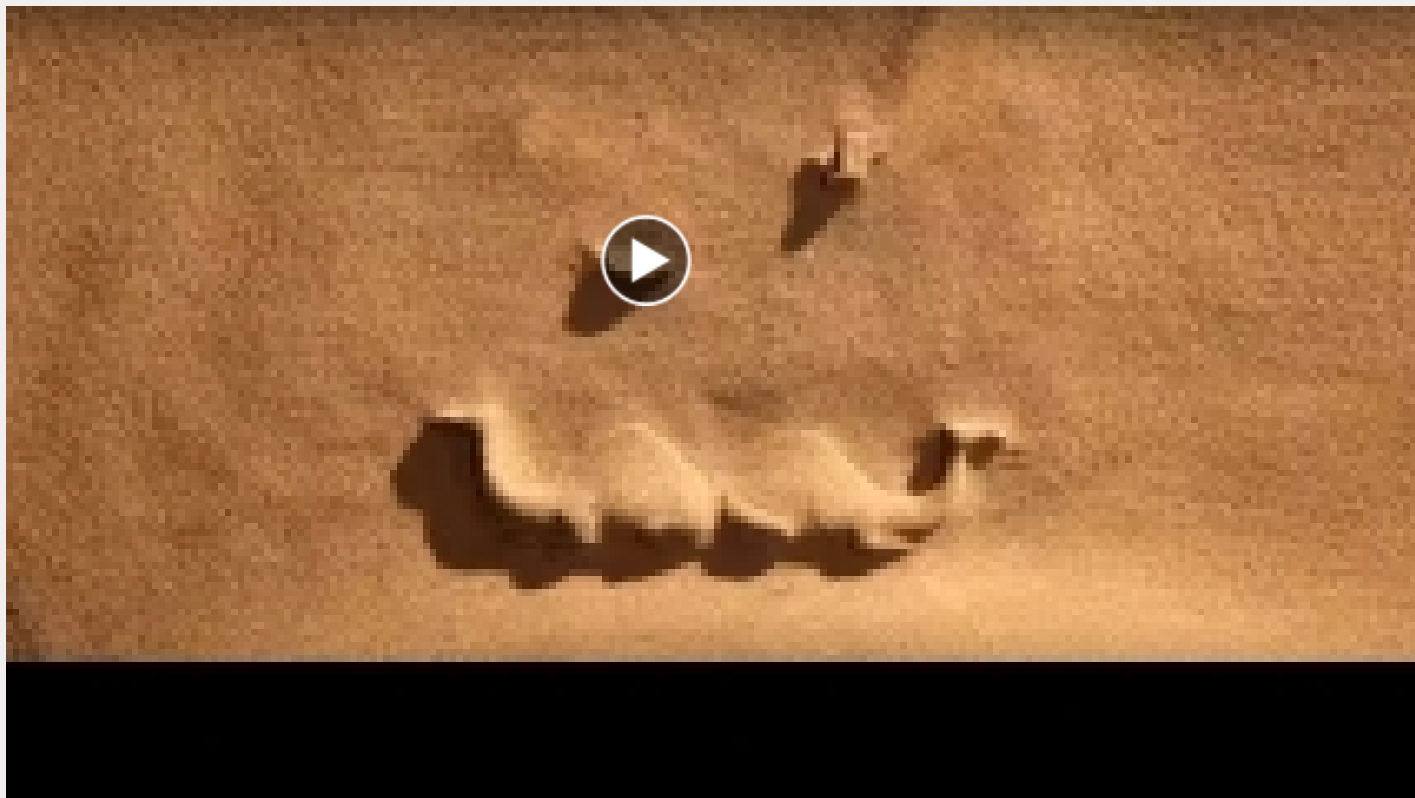


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