

DoT eyes ways to block Facebook, WhatsApp

Dept seeks inputs from telcos on options to block apps during emergencies

Navadha Pandey
navadha.p@livemint.com
NEW DELHI

The government has asked telecom operators and internet service providers to suggest ways to block social media apps such as Facebook and WhatsApp during emergencies, a move the industry says will be difficult to enforce and violate the fundamental right of speech and expression.

In an 18 July letter, the department of telecommunications (DoT) wrote to companies including Bharti Airtel Ltd, Reliance Jio Infocomm Ltd, Vodafone India Ltd, Idea Cellular Ltd, Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd, and industry associations, requesting them to "explore various possible options and confirm how Instagram/Facebook/WhatsApp/Telegram and such other mobile apps can be blocked on internet." *Mint* has seen a copy of the letter.

They were asked to submit inputs by 20 July.

MINT QUICK READS

SOCIAL MEDIA UNDER SCRUTINY

▶ DoT has written to telcos, internet service providers seeking possible options to **ban apps** such as WhatsApp and Facebook



▶ **Assocham** says blocking apps may **violate fundamental right** to speech and expression

▶ DoT has sought comments from telcos such as Airtel, Jio, BSNL and industry bodies by **20 July**

▶ Blocking apps during emergencies would be **difficult**, the IT and electronics ministry has told DoT

▶ The move is also likely to **hurt the digital economy**



▶ DoT can instruct **internet service licensees** to block websites in particular situations, based either on a court order or the IT ministry's directions

▶ In the past, mobile and internet services were suspended in **J&K and Rajasthan**

PARAS JAIN/MINT

"In our submission, we have said such an exercise would be extremely difficult to do. In this day and age, how can you shut down the internet especially as many travel bookings and financial transactions etc. are on the internet," a person aware of the development said, requesting anonymity.

DoT issues instructions to internet service providers to block websites based either on a court order or on the directions of the cyber law division of the ministry of electronics and information Technology

(Meity). In this case, DoT, has merely initiated a discussion based on a letter received from Meity, a DoT official said. "There is no move to block any apps. Meity has told DoT that blocking such apps during emergency situations is difficult, and hence there is a need for a reasonably good solution to protect national security," the official said, requesting anonymity.

While such suspensions are frequent in Kashmir, Rajasthan has also clamped down on internet services several times

this year, most recently to prevent cheating in police constable recruitment examinations.

"This proposal for blocking apps is a requirement of the ministry of home affairs in the context of national security," a person privy to the matter said, requesting anonymity.

The industry is not pleased with the proposal. "Overly broad, extended, or frequent blocks would also run directly counter to the government's stated objective of facilitating the emergence of a new Digital India," a 1 August letter by industry body **Assocham** to telecom secretary Aruna Sundararajan said.

The exercise can be counterproductive. "The government is trying to deal with a 21st century challenge with a 19th century mindset. Banning something arouses more curiosity. Such an exercise can only work within boundaries of the country and most such apps are not hosted here," lawyer Pavan Duggal said. An email query sent to Facebook that owns WhatsApp, Instagram remained unanswered.



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Govt seeks options to block FB, WhatsApp

KIRAN RATHEE

New Delhi,
6 August



In a bid to check the spread of fake news through social media and messaging platforms — leading to mob lynching in some cases — the government is exploring the possibility of blocking mobile applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Telegram. The government is also trying to curb child abuse and pornography spread through these platforms.

The Department of Telecommunications (DoT) had written to telecommunications service providers (TSPs) and internet service providers (ISPs) on July 18, seeking inputs about options for blocking mobile applications, especially when national security and public order are under threat.

Turn to Page 6 ▶

Block FB, WhatsApp

According to officials, the DoT had a meeting on July 4 with telcos and ISPs to discuss measures. "Issues have been raised by the Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY) and law enforcement agencies for blocking of certain mobile apps... Therefore, you are requested to explore various possible options and confirm how the Instagram/Facebook/WhatsApp/Telegram and such other mobile apps can be blocked on internet," said the July 18 letter.

The MeitY, too, had issued a second notice to WhatsApp on July 19, warning the messaging app could face legal action if it failed to curb abuse on the platform. The ministry's first notice was sent on July 2.

Telecom operators, however, said it would be difficult to block these applications. With the advent of technology, tools such as the virtual private network (VPN) are prevalent in the market, and they allow users to access content that has been blocked at the TSP or the ISP level. The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (Assocham), too, feels

that the proposed measure to evolve mechanisms to block applications at the service provider-level is excessive. It would also harm India's reputation as a growing hub of innovation in technology.

Under the present framework, instructions for blocking of websites or URLs are issued by the DoT to internet service licensees, based on the directions of MeitY and according to the directions from courts. The blocking was done under the Information Technology Act and the Telegraph Act.

"These existing mechanisms require to be reviewed, strengthened and reformed, so as to make them more responsive and accountable," Assocham said.

Assocham said while considering blocking entire applications, its impact on the economy as a whole needed to be considered. The industry body said internet shutdowns cost the Indian economy approximately \$3.04 billion between 2012 and 2017.

"Besides, it is vital to consider the interests of the consumers whose lives might be disrupted despite having no role in the publication or circulation of unlawful content," Assocham added.

Several cases of mob lynching in recent months took place after false messages were spread on WhatsApp.

DoT eyes ways to block Facebook, WhatsApp

UNDER REVIEW Dept asks telcos for options to block apps during emergencies

Navadha Pandey

• navadha.p@hvmint.com

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They were asked to submit inputs by 20 July.

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Social media under scrutiny

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- DoT has sought comments from telcos such as Airtel, Jio, BSNL and industry bodies by **20 July**
- Blocking apps during emergencies would be **difficult**, the IT and electronics ministry has told DoT
- DoT can instruct **internet service licensees** to block websites in particular situations, based either on a court order or the IT ministry's directions
- Assocham says blocking apps may **violate fundamental right** to speech and expression
- The move is also likely to **hurt the digital economy**
- In the past, mobile and internet services were suspended in **J&K and Rajasthan**



down the internet especially as many travel bookings and financial transactions, etc., are on the internet," a person aware of the development said, requesting anonymity.

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discussion based on a letter received from Meity, a DoT official said. "There is no move to block any apps. Meity has told DoT that blocking such apps during emergency... situations is difficult, and hence there is a need for a reasonably good solution to protect national security," the official said, requesting anonymity.

While such suspensions are frequent in Kashmir, Rajasthan has also clamped down on inter-

net services several times this year, most recently to prevent cheating in police constable recruitment examinations.

"This proposal for blocking apps is a requirement of the ministry of home affairs in the context of national security," a person privy to the matter said, requesting anonymity.

The industry is not pleased with the proposal. "Overly broad, extended, or frequent blocks would also run directly counter to the government's stated objective of facilitating the emergence of a new Digital India," a 1 August letter by industry body Assocham to telecom secretary Aruna Sundararajan said.

The exercise can be counter-productive. "The government is trying to deal with a 21st century challenge with a 19th century mindset. Banning something arouses more curiosity. Such an exercise can only work within boundaries of the country and most such apps are not hosted here," lawyer Pavan Duggal said. An email query sent to Facebook that owns WhatsApp, Instagram remained unanswered.

DoT seeks views on blocking apps

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, AUG. 6

In a controversial move, the department of telecom (DoT) has reportedly sought views from industry on technical measures that can be adopted for blocking mobile apps such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram among others in situations where national security and public order are under threat.

The letter was written on July 18 to various associations including Cellular Operators Association of India (COAI) and Assocham and asked for their inputs to block the applications under Section 69A of the IT Act.

The letter comes at a time when the IT ministry has been writing to WhatsApp to take measures to stop spread of rumours which has resulted in lynching of innocents in the country by mobs.

The IT ministry has said that WhatsApp has not committed itself on "traceability" and attribution of messages, which had been one of the key

MASSIVE POWERS

■ The Centre has sought opinion of telecom operators, internet firms among others on the blocking of mobile applications under the IT Act

■ Section 69A of the IT Act empowers the Centre to block public access to any mobile app.

■ The move is attributed to the recent incidents of mob lynching in the country due to rumours spread on social media.

■ WhatsApp's reluctance to provide traceability of its messages also appear to be a reason for this step.

demands of the government. Therefore, ministry's concerns have not been addressed and the potential for misuse still remains, the source said.

The telecom department in the letter had said that the ministry of electronics and IT and law enforcement agencies have raised issue around blocking of certain mobile apps like Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, among others to meet requirement under

Section 69A of IT Act.

The Section, 69A of IT Act talks about power to issue directions for blocking for public access to any information through any computer resource "in the interest of sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states or public order or for preventing incitement to the commission of any cognisable offence relating to them."

However, Assocham in its response to telecom department has warned that "the proposed measure to evolve mechanism to block applications as a whole at the telecom service operator level is excessive, unnecessary and would greatly harm India's reputation as a growing hub of innovation in technology."

"The disproportionality and lack of necessity of application level blocking is accentuated by improvements to internal mechanisms that have been developed by various platforms to respond to complaints; block or remove content and disable access to content that is unlawful, illegal or falls afoul of community standards," wrote Assocham.

It pointed out that companies have appointed grievance officers and regularly taken steps to expeditiously remove content or block access when in receipt of a valid request and publish high level information to demonstrate compliance with legal requests.

