

2017 witnessed a 38% rise in social media URL blocking

A total of 1,329 social media URLs were blocked or removed on the recommendation of a government committee to deal with “objectionable content” last year till November 2017.

This is an increase of nearly 38% from 964 social media URLs blocked or removed for the whole of 2016.

URLs that were blocked or removed on account of court orders during the same period came down from 100 in 2016 to 83 in January-November 2017, according to an internal note of the Ministry of Electronics and IT. The action covered Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

“While social media sites are a good medium to share and exchange information, some miscreants are also using this platform to spread rumours and posting objectionable content thereby causing disturbance in the society,” the note said.

Malicious purposes

Also, the widespread usage of social networking sites and lack of awareness among users about the methods of cybercriminals, it added, is leading to a rise in the spread of malware such as Trojans and bots, and the theft of sensitive personal information. “It has been observed that the misuse of social networking sites for malicious purposes is on the rise. These websites are being used by malicious people to harvest personal information of the targeted users or group of users,” it added.

This information may be used to impersonate persons and conduct identity theft and phishing attacks, the note adds.: “The mutual trust of the users is also used in enticing users to click on links to malicious URLs and opening files containing malware.”

A senior official of the Ministry said that social media sites are required to disable or remove any unlawful information as and when it is brought to their knowledge through a court order or by an appropriate government agency.

There are provisions in the Information Technology (IT) Act 2000 and Indian Penal Code to deal with “objectionable content” posted online.

Cyber law expert and advocate Pavan Duggal said, “Blocking is a sovereign power that is given to the government by virtue of Section 69A of the Information Technology Act. So under certain specified considerations, the power of blocking can be exercised... This power was inserted in the IT Act by virtue of the Information Technology (Amendment) Act, 2008, which came into effect from October 2009.”

‘Outdated paradigm’

He said this was increasingly being resorted to. “But my personal belief is that blocking as a phenomenon is an outdated paradigm. In today’s context of the Internet and its architecture, it is almost impossible to block any content.”

Various law enforcement agencies notify social media sites for removal of content or disabling of content under Section 79(3)(b) of the IT Act 2000.

The data shows that in the last four years, the number of social media URLs blocked on the

recommendation of the government committee under Section 69A of the IT Act were 10 in 2014, 587 in 2015, 964 in 2016 and 1,329 till November 2017.

Additionally, 432 URLs were blocked through court orders in 2014, 632 in 2015, 100 in 2016 and 83 till November 2017.

Till November 2017, a maximum of 588 URLs blocked were from Twitter, as compared to 196 in 2016 and 27 in 2015. A total of 530 URLs were blocked on Facebook till November 2017, as against 363 in 2016, and 352 in 2015.

For YouTube, it was 123 URLs blocked till November 2017, 3 in 2016 and 125 in 2015.

Mr. Duggal pointed out that a number of these blocking events happen for political reasons. Often, the process is very non-transparent about how a particular content violates the parameters.

“There is a lack of transparency in terms of having in place adequate parameters on what kind of instances the power of blocking can be exercised because parameters like sovereignty and integrity of India are vast. And a large number of things can be brought under it as per the subjective interpretation of the concerned authority,” he said.

“Merely saying that blocking of a website or URL is in the interest of the sovereignty and integrity of India, would not suffice. Clear illustration of how the same would impact the sovereignty and integrity will be far more helpful,” he added.

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