

Censoring a billion voices to save a nation

Manav Bhushan, an Indian member of the Free Speech Debate team, makes the case for blocking hate-filled websites in his country.



A socio-political storm is raging in India. Although the world's largest democracy has been through worse in its relatively short lifespan, the present storm has shaken up the political establishment, academics and commentators because it seemed to come out of nowhere and threatens the already strained secular and multicultural fabric of the country.

Citizens of the northeastern states of India (the "seven sisters") have long been regarded by some Indians in other parts of the country as social outcasts due to their distinct facial features and cultural practices. The fact that the northeastern states are geographically and hence economically isolated from the rest of the country hasn't helped matters. This isolation has also led to armed insurgencies in some parts of the region.

In spite of all this, the fear and panic amongst northeastern citizens we've seen spread across

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India is nearly unprecedented. The ripple effect started by ethnic violence between Muslims and members of the Bodo tribe in the northeastern state of Assam has reached far-flung corners of India where very few incidents have disturbed the peace between different communities in recent times.

One very important factor has changed since the time of earlier ethnic clashes and that is the reach and power of internet-based social media and mobile phones. In this [case](#), mass SMS campaigns and websites set up by people hell-bent on disrupting the country's communal harmony have acted like poisonous smoke machines and created a situation far more precarious and widespread than fires alone, which have already claimed 70 lives and left 170,000 homeless. News organizations have [worsened](#) the situation by erroneously or inadequately reporting the facts as have political groups trying to score points with inflammatory statements.

In order to control the situation, the Indian government temporarily [restricted](#) the number of daily SMSs a phone can send to five. The government also [blocked](#) nearly 300 websites including blogs, Facebook pages and the Twitter accounts of prominent journalists. The vast majority of these pages feature communal and inflammatory content. Many of these sites are managed by organizations that are closely associated with the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). To call the banning of these pages an attack on political opposition and free speech rather than a curb on hate speech and incitement to violence is problematic.

The hypocrisy exhibited by the US State Department in their public admonition of the Indian government is not just questionable but laughable. Let's not forget that the US government [blocked](#) access to Wikileaks on their own government computers. The [argument](#) that the US State Department spokesperson gave during her interaction with the Indian media applies equally well to the Indian government. Just as content uploaded to Wikileaks was in violation of US federal laws, the content uploaded to most of the banned web pages is in violation of Indian laws pertaining to hate speech and incitement to violence. That being said, the Indian government should not be exonerated just because it has tried to imitate the US.

The central question remains whether or not these sites should have been banned at all. No sane person could argue that all of these sites should be blocked. Clearly there are innocent players that have inadvertently or maliciously been targeted and will deserve judicial redress. However, if I face the choice between having all these sites banned for the time being and freedom of speech being curtailed for some of our nation that faces serious risk of communal riots as a result of this freedom being abused, I would definitely opt for the former in these extraordinary times and hope that the government does its best to ensure peace and harmony in the country. It should come as no surprise that the government is not doing its best. It is not only targeting some dissenting though harmless voices under the garb of stopping hate speech but is also allowing [far more dangerous elements](#) to openly spew venom.

I'm sure many enthusiastic defenders of the right to free speech would want to jump down my

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throat and tell me that if the 'good' guys silence the 'bad' guys today, the bad guys will silence the good guys tomorrow. Since we aren't really spoiled for choice between the communal on the one hand and corrupt on the other (or indeed communal *and* corrupt on both hands), the question of good and bad is not applicable. If the bad guys were able to silence the good guys tomorrow they would do it anyway, so we might as well do the best that we can today. Some gags will have to be burnt and some burners will have to be gagged, and we will just have to try and compel today's government to make the right choice in each individual case.

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