Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)
Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

BLOCKING 32 WEBSITES IN INDIA – RATIONALISING THE BIGGER PICTURE

Dilipraj. E
Research Associate, CAPS

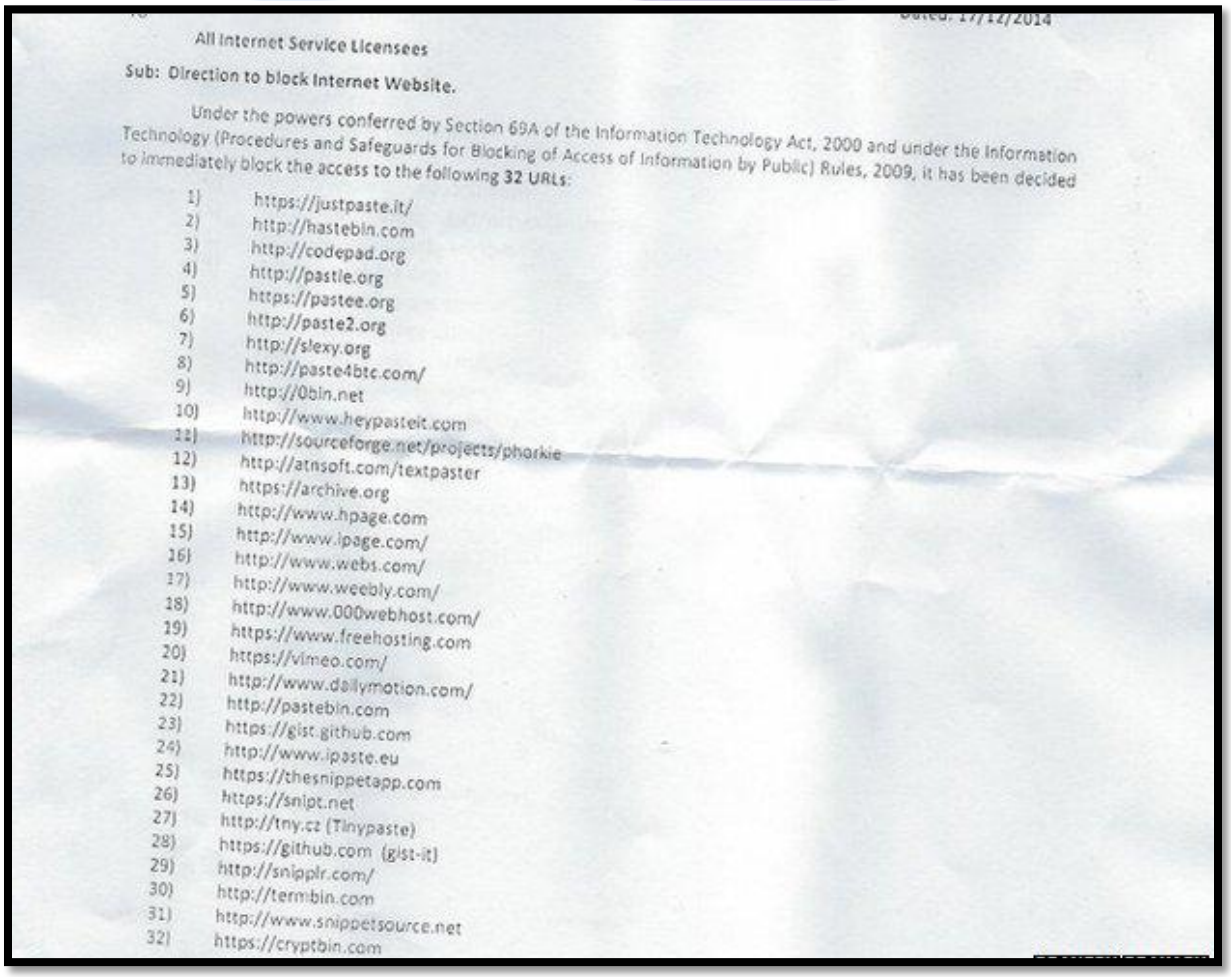
The Department of Telecommunications (DoT), under the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology recently ordered temporary take down of 32 websites in India. This action by DoT has infuriated the cyber community especially the advocates of internet freedom. This issue has been taken up seriously by netizens on various social networking sites generally condemning the move and thus reiterated the need for enhancing cyber laws of the country which at present status easily facilitates such blockades. However, sources from the Ministry stated that "*It was based on some national security issues, and we cannot compromise with our nation's security…*"[1]

Irrespective of the arguments and counter-arguments, this issue has once again raised the ongoing debate between internet freedom and national security. It is believed that this debate will continue even if internet becomes safe and impregnable from the threats of malwares, hackers, and activities by anti-social elements, etc in view of the fact of the existing misinterpretations and clash of interests. Ironically, the immediate future seems bleak for achieving a safe situation in the virtual domain due to the design of internet which was not pledged with the idea of assured safety. While the future of internet is still in a state of limbo as countries are still fighting over its governance, at certain periods of time and situations, few countries are compelled to take drastic measures such as blocking few websites temporarily or permanently in order to defend its national security and interest. Therefore, with this background, the paper aims to evaluate the rationale behind such restrictions by the government by examining the recent takedown of the 32 websites by

Indian government and also attempts to envisage as to what level of internet freedom is permissible when it clashes with national security.

The Take Down

According to the reports, it is said that the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) had approached a Mumbai court to block some websites which carried anti- India content. Based on the plea by ATS, the Mumbai court issued a directive to DoT to block the sites. Acting on this directive, the DoT later issued an order on December 17, 2014 to all the Internet Service Licensees of the country to block access to 32 websites mentioned in the order. The list includes websites like Vimeo and Dailymotion which are popularly used for video hosting; Pastebin, GitHub are content sharing sites and archive.org is an archive repository of old websites.



All Internet Service Licensees

Sub: Direction to block Internet Website.

Under the powers conferred by Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000 and under the Information Technology (Procedures and Safeguards for Blocking of Access of Information by Public) Rules, 2009, it has been decided to immediately block the access to the following 32 URLs:

1) https://justpaste.it/
2) http://hastebin.com
3) http://codepad.org
4) http://pastie.org
5) https://pastee.org
6) http://paste2.org
7) http://slexy.org
8) http://paste4btc.com/
9) http://0bin.net
10) http://www.heypasteit.com
11) http://sourceforge.net/projects/phorkie
12) http://atnsoft.com/textpaster
13) https://archive.org
14) http://www.hpage.com
15) http://www.ipage.com/
16) http://www.webs.com/
17) http://www.weebly.com/
18) http://www.000webhost.com/
19) https://www.freehosting.com
20) https://vimeo.com/
21) http://www.dailymotion.com/
22) http://pastebin.com
23) https://gist.github.com
24) http://www.ipaste.eu
25) https://thesnippetapp.com
26) https://snipt.net
27) http://tny.cz (Tinypaste)
28) https://github.com (gist-it)
29) http://snipplr.com/
30) http://termbin.com
31) http://www.snippetsource.net
32) https://cryptbin.com

Source: "India 'jihadi' web blocking causes anger, *BBC*, 02 January 2015, in http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-30656298, accessed on 06 January 2015.

Although the order dates back to 17 December 2014,[2] this issue was picked up by the media only after the DoT's order became public in the social networking sites towards the end of December 2014. The websites like Vimeo, Dailymotion, archive.org which have big business as well as user base, operate on set policies like discouraging anti-social content and to act on genuine grievances from governments. Therefore, these websites have to lead the way for the other smaller sites to follow in adhering to the government's grievances. However, the fact is that these 32 websites are blocked only by government owned service providers like BSNL and MTNL and few other private service providers like Vodafone, but most of these websites are still accessible from another private service provider - Airtel Broadband networks.

Though the government's claim regarding the existence of anti- India content in these websites as the reason for the blocking seems logical, a closer look into the list of websites that were blocked invokes another reason behind the event. More than 25 websites out of 32 are text sharing websites which operate on the mechanism of 'type-save-share the link' basis. Therefore, anybody who wants to communicate information can just type the content in the provided space in one of the websites, save the information and copy the generated link after saving and share the link with the intended recipient of the information. This way, both sender and receiver can avoid being detected by any preying eyes from the government even if their message gets intercepted. This is one of the many ways followed by anti- social elements, mainly terrorists, to communicate amongst themselves. Based on the above mentioned argument, the usage of these websites, when correlated with the agency which requested for the blockade i.e. ATS has raised speculation of an ongoing study within the agency to understand the pattern of communication or surveillance on particular anti-social activities.

It is widely known that on 13 December 2014, a Bangalore based engineer named Mehdi Biswas was arrested for allegedly being the handler of a twitter account named @ShamiWitness in which he promoted the views of Islamic State (IS) - the militant organisation in Iraq.[3] The police had stated that his twitter account was under surveillance for some time, alongside other surveillance operations was being conducted in the internet by all security agencies across the country in order to deduce prospective operatives and

hardcore supporters of IS militant organization. Hence, the restrictions and blocking of sites might be one such project taken up by ATS to chart out the options that a few targeted anti- social elements resort to when their choice for communications is reduced.

While many such speculations can be made, the issue will only get resolved when the government comes out with an official statement revealing the real purpose of the block, which in other words means, that the government has to be more transparent with its cyber policies and operations. Also, such initiative by the government can avoid an outrage from its netizens and, instead of completely blocking sites, the government could engage more with private partners as it is the private sector which holds more infrastructure and information related to cyber. And of course it is time for the government to enhance cyber laws of the country to make them more specific in order to face all aspects of the rapidly advancing virtual world.

As for the netizens, there is need for more patience and tolerance towards government actions when it comes to national security. The claim by netizens for an absolute internet freedom can never be a reality as it is likely to endanger the society and this harsh reality has to be accepted. At the same time, giving national security as the narrative, the government should not keep blocking services in the internet, but instead should resort to smarter 'arm twisting approaches' in order to secure the virtual world which in turn might act as a form of cyber deterrence in the internet domain for the nation.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

End Notes

[1] Singh, S Ronendra, "Centre blocks 32 websites for security reasons, restores some later", The Hindu – Business Line, 31 December 2014 in http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/features/smartbuy/tech-news/centre-blocks-32-websites-for-security-reasons-restores-some-later/article6742568.ece, accessed on 05 January 2015.

[2] "India 'jihadi' web blocking causes anger, BBC, 02 January 2015, in http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-30656298, accessed on 06 January 2015.

[3] "Islamic State Tweeter account handler arrested", The Hindu, 13 December 2014, in http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/proisis-twitter-account-handler-detained-in-bengaluru/article6688708.ece, accessed on 06 December 2015.
