

# India's crackdown on COVID-19 posts shows the minefield beneath Big Tech's biggest emerging market

Article

The Indian government has ordered Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to take down dozens of posts critical of its handling of the pandemic, **per** The New York Times. The takedown order targeted around 100 social media posts—including posts by politicians and journalists—the government claims were attempting to spread misinformation and incite panic, though defenders claim the posts constitute protected speech. For context, at least one of the **blocked** posts was a tweet featuring Reuters photographs that **appear** to depict a mass crematorium and hospitals overflowing with patients. The order comes as India is ravaged by a resurgence of COVID-19, leading the world in daily new infections for five consecutive days, **per** the NYT.

**The recent social media takedowns are just the **latest** instance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's nationalist government **clamping** down on unfavorable free speech.**

- Last year, India **banned** TikTok and dozens of other Chinese apps citing the same legal justification as the recent COVID-19 posts, **per** The Wall Street Journal.
- Tensions reached new heights in February following the **passage** of guidelines requiring tech companies to remove content deemed a national security threat and to share the names and contact information of individual posters.
- In March, Indian officials went so far as to **threaten** Twitter and WhatsApp employees with jail time for failure to comply with data and takedown requests.

**The pandemic has left multinational social media companies in a thorny situation, with certain countries calling for increased moderation efforts to curb misinformation.** US legislators have spent years **pushing** tech companies to **increase** moderation efforts, with many—including President Joe Biden—open to amending Section 230 in the wake of the January 6 attack on the Capitol. Since then, Facebook has deviated from its past stance by **announcing** it would remove posts claiming vaccines cause autism or disease.

**Meanwhile, advocates point to a worrying trend of governments using the pandemic as a pretext for restricting political dissent.** Digital rights activists and human rights groups have cited dozens of countries—including **Russia, China, Turkey**, and others—whose governments are allegedly using the pandemic to overtly target expressions of dissent. Specifically, 28 of the 65 countries **assessed** in a 2020 Freedom House report were found to have either blocked websites or forced social media users or platforms to delete pandemic-related posts. As for India, the recent surge in cases may inspire more severe efforts by the government to block content. All of this could spell trouble for **Facebook, Twitter**, and other tech giants for

which India represents one of the greatest growth markets—particularly as **tensions** with China show no sign of abating.

# India Leads the World in Internet Shutdowns

*Number of internet shutdowns by country worldwide, 2020*

India

109

Yemen

6

Ethiopia

4

Jordan

3

Chad

2

Venezuela

2

Sudan

2

Togo

2

Other

25

*Source: Access Now, 2021*

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