

'Data is important for a study or information, but it should be anonymous'

Over recent weeks, there has been a controversy related to misuse of Facebook data to influence elections by London-based Cambridge Analytica. **RAVI SHANKAR PRASAD**, Union minister for electronics and information technology, talks to Kiran Rathee, on the government's views regarding data misuse. Edited excerpts:

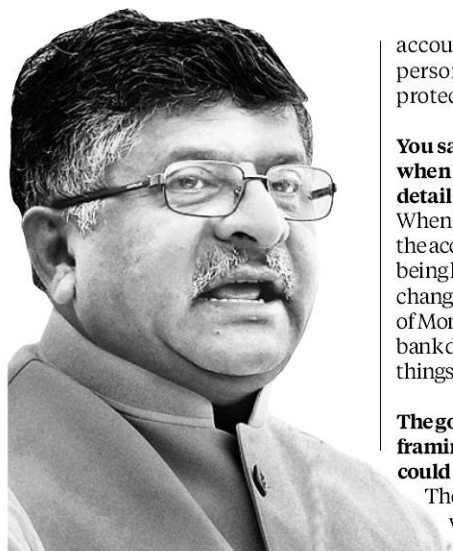
Data can be misused and we've recently seen how. With growing digitalisation, this fear of misuse is also increasing.

We are very proud of the Digital India initiative. Of our 1.3 billion people, 1.21 billion have mobile phones, 1.2 billion have Aadhaar cards, 500 million are internet users and India is emerging as a big digital market, with growth in e-commerce and digital payments. Growth of home-grown technologies is the marvel of Digital India. The government has saved ₹830 billion by using digital means. In any digital platform, data is important.



RAVI SHANKAR PRASAD

Union minister for electronics and IT



Facebook has its biggest footprint in India; then, we have Twitter, LinkedIn and WhatsApp. Our government is committed on data safety and security.

Data is growing but it should be protected. What are the safeguards for ensuring this?

When you talk of data protection, one concept should be clear. It's about data availability, data utility, data innovation, data anonymity and data privacy. The core data of an Indian or any individual must be respected and protected. Medical records, income, personal or family record, bank

account and sexual preferences are personal things and should be protected.

You say a bank account is private but when linked with Aadhaar, the details can be made public.

When I talk of a bank account, I talk of the account details. Bank accounts are being linked with Aadhaar because of changes in rules under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act. However, bank details like amount and other things cannot be made known to others.

The government is working on framing a data protection law. When could we expect this?

The BN Srikrishna committee is working on the report and it will be a comprehensive law. We have

made the Aadhaar Act. UPA's (the earlier government's) Aadhaar was without a law. Modi's Aadhaar is with a law, with due provision for safety and security. Data is important and any digital connect creates some sort of data. We have to accept this truth. Data is important for a study or information but it should be anonymous. We wish India becomes a centre for data analysis and our young human resources will do it. However, data should not be misused and those who misuse, tough action should be taken against them.

What has the government done to safeguard data, particularly on social media?

The IT ministry has conveyed to all social media platforms that they should not become platforms for abuse, hatred, crime and terrorism. A senior Twitter official met me recently and I told him Twitter should not be used to troll or shower abuse during election campaigns. All social media companies are welcome to do business in this vast country of 1.3 billion people but must keep in mind the sensitivity, amity and understanding of the people. My government fully respects freedom of press, freedom of speech and also freedom of social discourse on social media. But, under the Constitution, the right of speech is also subject to reasonable restrictions.

Under what rules could action be taken against companies found to be misusing data?

A sovereign country has the trust of the

people. There is enough existing substance of power under the IT Act about sensitive data and information. There is also the Indian Penal Code.

You've served a notice to Facebook but when could we expect officials of the company to be summoned for questioning?

I will await the nature of their response for further follow-up action.

Players such as WhatsApp are being used to spread fake news. How are you tackling that?

India is becoming a big centre of WhatsApp and I am happy that it is being used in every area but I also worry about its misuse. We need to make a collective decision, without compromising the freedom of speech. OTT (the term for entities such as WhatsApp, a provider of audio, video, and other media services directly to the consumer over the internet, bypassing traditional providers such as broadcast or cable firms) apps are not outside the jurisdiction of Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai). Although norms regarding these apps are not there, they are subject to Trai regulations. The operators of WhatsApp must also be vigilant and ensure their platform is not prone to abuse. Constructive engagement of any data company is not wrong. If I am posting my message on Facebook to reach 5 million young people, what is wrong with that? However, influencing elections using unauthorised means on social media should not be at all allowed.