

Number of Pakistani accounts reported to Twitter drops

KARACHI: The number of accounts reported by Pakistani authorities to Twitter dropped to around 2,300 between July and December last year from 3,000 in the first six months of the year, according to a biannual report of the social networking website.

The website's transparency report released on Friday said that between July and December, the government sent requests for removal of 193 accounts and reported 2,349 profiles to Twitter.

While Twitter did not completely remove any account, it removed some content from 204 accounts for violating Twitter's Terms of Reference as compared to 141 in Jan-Jun 2018.

Interestingly, after the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf party took over the government in July, 192 removal requests were sent by the government and law enforcement agencies and only one request was sent through a court order. In Jan-June 2018, three requests for account removal were sent through court orders.

In recent months, users, both local and international, have reported they have received notices from Twitter that termed their tweets "in violation of Pakistani law".

PM's focal person cites platform's non-compliance for decline in requests

In terms of information requests for accounts, Pakistan made requests for 17 accounts and specified 23 in the second half of 2018 as compared to 22 information requests and 54 accounts specified in the first six months of the year.

According to a Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) spokesperson, by the virtue of Section 37 of the Prevention of Electronic Crime Act, the authority reported unlawful content that included anti-state, blasphemous, hate speech, in contempt of court or defamatory posts.

Twitter, however, declined all the requests for account information and removal.

"Twitter's non-compliance and lack of willingness to work with governments is reflected in this report as globally the request rate has dropped," Prime Minister's Focal Person on Digital Media Arslan Khalid said while speaking to Dawn. As opposed to Twitter, he said, Facebook's cooperation was "overwhelmingly positive".

In February, authorities had announced the creation of a new enforcement arm to root out social media users accused of spreading "hate speech and violence" as part of the crackdown.

Asked what the government was doing to curb the increasing "weaponisation" of social media, Mr Khalid maintained that efforts to limit hate speech and misinformation would continue. "I will push Twitter to help fight negative propaganda and also request it to verify official government accounts to avoid spread of fake news and confusion," he said.

The platform in its biannual report also shared information on some changes it had made, adding that it was now differentiating between when content was being blocked due to a court order or because of local laws.

PAKISTAN'S REMOVAL REQUESTS TO TWITTER							
Reporting Period	Removal requests (court orders)	Requests (govt, other)	%some content withheld	Accounts reported	Accounts withheld	Tweets withheld	Accounts (TOS)
July - Dec 2018	1	192	0%	2,349	0	0	204
Jan - June 2018	3	240	0%	3,004	0	0	141
July - Dec 2017	0	75	0%	674	0	0	42
Jan - June 2017	0	24	0%	82	0	0	19
July - Dec 2016	0	13	0%	32	0	0	12
Jan - June 2016	0	8	0%	33	0	0	27
July - Dec 2015	0	12	0%	60	0	0	9
Jan - June 2015	0	6	0%	24	0	0	

In the last six months of last year, the government filed two “emergency disclosure” requests and sought information of seven accounts from Twitter. When such requests are filed, Twitter may disclose some information to law enforcement agencies if they meet the criteria.

According to Twitter: “We evaluate such requests on a case by case basis to determine if there is information to support a good faith belief that there is an imminent threat involving danger of death or serious physical injury to a person. In these situations, if we have information relevant to averting or mitigating the threat, we may disclose that information to law enforcement.”

Pakistan also filed two requests to preserve two accounts.

Explaining what constitutes a preservation request, Twitter said: “Government entities issue these requests so that information pertaining to an investigation stored by service providers like Twitter is temporarily saved while they go through the necessary steps to get the valid legal process required to lawfully obtain that information. Upon receipt of a valid preservation request, we will temporarily preserve, but not disclose, a snapshot of the relevant account information for 90 days, pending issuance and service of valid legal process.”

There was no non-government information request for the period from Pakistan. This refers to information about requests received in civil actions as well as requests made by criminal defendants. During this reporting period, Twitter received only 3 per cent more non-government information requests from around the world, but notably, the volume of accounts specified in these requests increased by 48pc.

27,000 accounts reported

The Twitter's latest transparency report shows that the company received approximately 8pc fewer global legal demands in the second half of 2018, impacting approximately 2pc fewer accounts compared to the previous reporting period. However, there was an 84pc increase year-on-year between 2017 and 2018, impacting 114pc more accounts.

The platform received legal demands specifying 27,283 accounts from 47 different countries, including Bulgaria, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, and Slovenia for the first time. According to the report, 74pc of the total global volume of requests originated from only two countries: Russia and Turkey.

During the six months, Twitter suspended 166,513 accounts for promoting terrorism and suspended 456,989 accounts over child sexual exploitation.

"We first review all reported content in each demand for TOS violations, and this resulted in some content being removed from Twitter on 8,720 accounts," it said.

During the reporting period, 253 accounts of verified journalists and news outlets were the subject of 146 legal demands globally.

In response to these requests, Twitter said: "In total, the following actions were taken: three tweets were removed for violations of Twitter's TOS, and three Tweets and one account were withheld in Turkey due to violations of Turkish anti-terrorism laws. Twitter withheld two Tweets in India based on a court order."

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