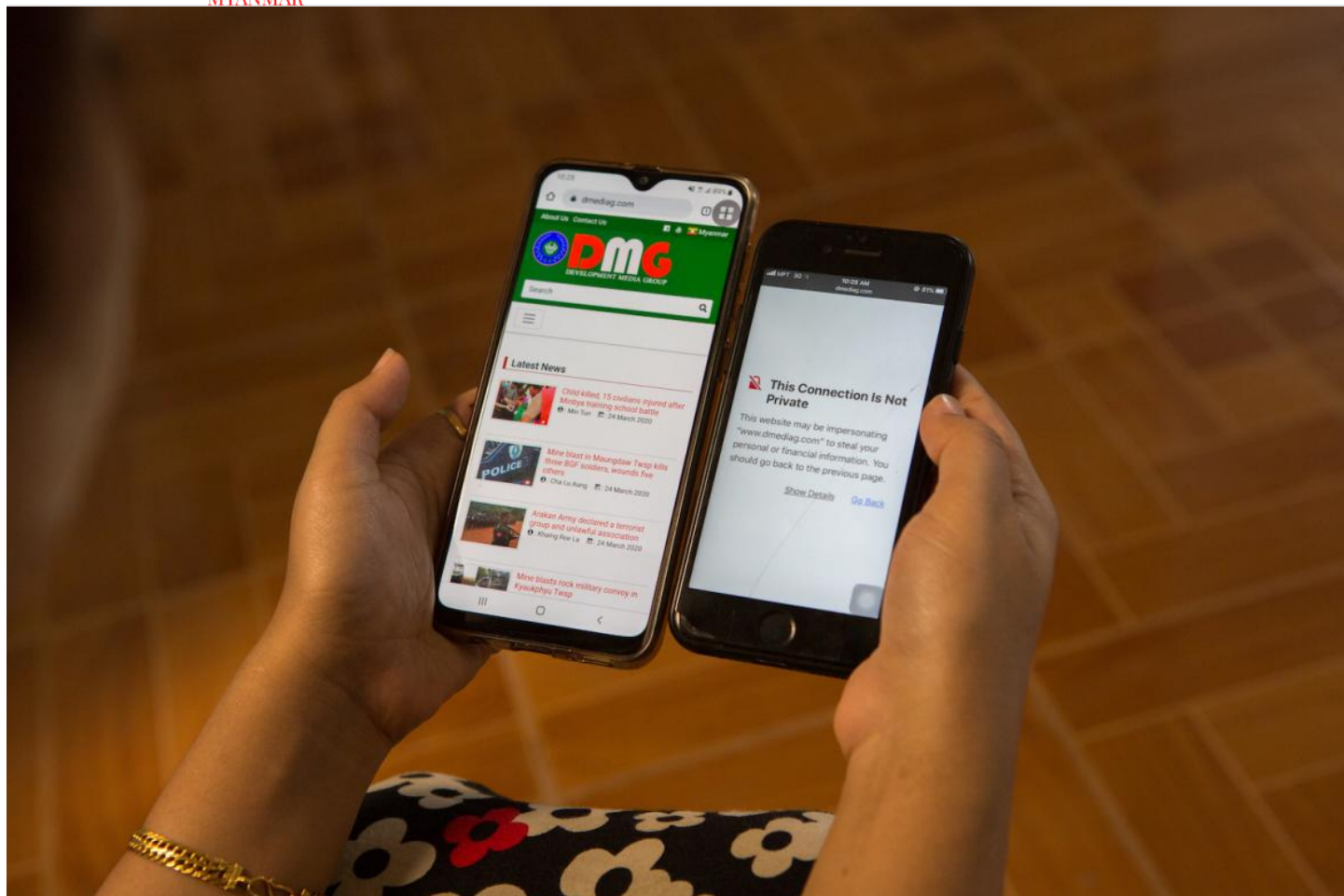




Operators split as Telenor rejects govt order to block 'fake news' sites

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Digital rights groups and journalists have criticised a recent government order to block more than 50 sites accused of spreading fake news, including prominent Rakhine-based media organisations – an instruction that mobile operator Telenor has defied, saying it has “no legal basis”.

By KYAW LIN HTOON and THOMAS KEAN | FRONTIER

Mobile operator Telenor has rejected a government order to block around 50 “fake news” sites, including prominent ethnic media outlets such as Development Media Group and Narinjara.

The country’s three other operators – state-owned MPT, Ooredoo of Qatar and military-aligned Mytel – appeared to have at least partially complied with the order to block news sites. *Frontier* was unable to access some of the sites on March 26 but implementation was not consistent and some of the restrictions appeared to have been rolled back this morning, particularly on Ooredoo’s network.

All operators also appear to have blocked access to around 150 sites allegedly containing explicit content, including child sexual abuse, also on the instructions of the government.

A Telenor spokesperson said the Ministry of Transport and Communications issued a directive to the company on March 19 and 20 to block a total of 207 websites under section 77 of the Telecommunications Law, which allows the government to direct licence-holders to block sites in “emergency situations”.



Telenor began blocking 154 of the sites at 11pm on March 23, the spokesperson said, but refused to block 53 that the government had described as disseminating “fake news”.

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“Telenor Myanmar has not complied with the request to block sites in the category of ‘fake news’ as it has not been able to establish sufficient legal basis for this part of the request. Telenor Myanmar believes in open communication and regrets if any inconvenience is caused to the customers,” the spokesperson said.

A senior government official confirmed to *Frontier* that it had ordered the operators to block explicit and fake news websites.

“Fake news and disinformation can easily undermine the stability of the state. At this moment, there are so many fake news stories about COVID-19 so we have very recently instructed operators [to block them],” said U Myo Swe, director general of the Directorate of Communications.

Myo Swe claimed he had “no exact list” of blocked websites because not all had been banned on the orders of the department. “The operators have also blocked some websites on their own,” he said.

Myo Swe also said that the decision to block sites spreading “fake news” and “disinformation” had been supported by groups like the Myanmar Press Council.

However, MPC member U Zayar Hlaing said the government had not consulted the group over the decision.

“If the government is blocking news media houses that are established legally and working according to ethics and journalism principles, then it is definitely a breach of media freedom,” Zayar Hlaing told *Frontier*.

While the press council [did name](#) 15 online news outlets last month that it said were allegedly spreading disinformation, the list did not include recognised ethnic media outlets like DMG or Narinjara.

Journalists and digital rights activists criticised the decision to block recognised news sites, describing it as a violation of freedom of expression and the public’s right to information.

Myanmar ICT for Development Organization executive director Ma Htaike Htaike Aung said the group had received numerous reports from people having trouble accessing ethnic media websites and was still trying to confirm an exact list of blocked sites.

“If it is proven that the government ordered the censoring of these sites, this would be a very serious attack on press freedom and freedom of expression,” she said.

Referring to the government’s decision to block mobile internet access in nine townships in Rakhine and Chin states, she added: “We also continue to be greatly concerned by the ongoing internet shutdown in Rakhine and Chin states. Now, perhaps more than ever, people need access to information. This could be a matter of life or death.”

Editors of media groups targeted by the order said it showed the government was biased against ethnic minority voices.

“We are news media officially registered with the Ministry of Information. We have never posted fake news ... What we are doing is unbiased. But because we are Rakhine people, I think they [the government and military] targeted us,” said U Khaing Myat Kyaw, the chief editor of Narinjara, a Rakhine-based media group. “There are many other media covering about the conflict in Rakhine State but they oppressed more upon us because we are Rakhine. They might also suspect we are supporting the Arakan Army as well.”

Phadu Tun Aung, an editor at Development Media Group, added, “In Rakhine, [DMG and Narinjara] are the only media distributing up-to-date news about what is happening in the state. By blocking



our websites, [the government is] restricting the people's right to information."

Ms Vicky Bowman from the Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business, which in 2015 conducted an assessment of the sector that covered digital rights issues, said it was troubling that the government had apparently used section 77 of the Telecommunications Law to order the operators to restrict access to websites.

"If the government is using this legal provision to demand takedown of websites and contents, the demand should be clearly anchored in law. Any takedown requests should explain why taking down content relates to protecting public interest in an emergency situation, and should target specific pieces of content, rather than access to whole domains," she said.

"Both government and the operators should be transparent about the actions they are taking and report this publicly explaining the legal basis."

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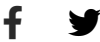
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