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Telenor follows Myanmar orders to block alleged 'fake news' sites

Telenor follows Myanmar orders to block alleged 'fake news' sites

[Thompson Chau](#) 31 Mar 2020

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A woman talks on her phone in downtown Yangon in November 2017. Photo: Phoe Wa/The Myanmar Times

Telenor follows Myanmar orders to block alleged 'fake news' sites

Norway's Telenor says it will follow Myanmar's other mobile operators and comply with the government's order to block a list of "fake news" sites, including prominent ethnic media outlets, after initially refusing to do so.

Myanmar has directed all four of its mobile operators to block access to a total of 221 websites, but it has not made a list of the sites public or clarified the legal basis for the move.

A senior government official was reported as saying the clampdown was linked to publication of fake news over the COVID-19 pandemic, but the sites are said to also include adult content, child pornography as well as ethnic media outlets such as Development Media Group and Narinjara, both based in the restive state of Rakhine.

The Ministry of Transport and Communications initially issued a directive to the four telecoms operators to block 207 specified websites under Article 77 of the Telecommunications Law, according to Telenor. On March 23 a further directive was issued for the blocking of 14 more websites which the ministry accused of disseminating misinformation, or "fake news".

There has been no public statement by the government or other operators. Telenor, state-owned MPT, Qatar's Ooredoo and military-run Mytel operate in Myanmar.

Telenor said it initially did not comply with the request to block sites in the category of "fake news" as it was unable to establish sufficient legal basis for this part of the request.

But the Norwegian company said that on March 30 it had decided to block a further 67 sites, bringing the total to 221.

"Telenor has assessed that the risk involved in not following the directive as regards fake news is likely to have wider implications in terms of servicing the public," the company said, following talks with the ministry.

Article 77 of the Telecommunications Law allows the ministry to impose restrictions or bans in an "emergency situation" out of public interest. The government has not explained what kind of emergency it is invoking or how it might extend to adult content or pornography.

But Director general of the Directorate of Communications U Myo Swe told Frontier Myanmar that the news stories about COVID-19 so we have very recently instructed operators [to block them]."

The senior official said he had "no exact list" of blocked websites because not all had been banned on their own," he said.

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According to Frontier Myanmar, Rakhine-based Development Media Group and Narinjara were among websites listed for blocking on the basis they were “fake news” sites.

However, implementation of the order did not appear to be consistent and *The Myanmar Times* was able to access both news sites on Ooredoo’s network early on March 31.

Digital rights groups called on all the operators and the ministry to publish a list of the blocked sites.

Myanmar ICT for Development Organisation executive director Ma Htaike Htaike Aung said “blocking access to information is not a democratic nor an effective way to deal with mis/disinformation.”

Instead, the authorities should disseminate up-to-date information and allow the public to seek out official information via hotlines and websites, she added.

“The government should be open about areas of concerns or uncertainty, so to avoid creating a void of information which could be filled by rumours,” Ma Htaike Htaike Aung told *The Myanmar Times*, adding that it should work with the media and fact-checking organisations to ensure information accuracy.

[The reported blocking of two of Rakhine state’s ethnic media websites follows a months-long internet shutdown in nine townships there and in Chin State imposed by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s government.](#)

Vicky Bowman, head of the Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business, criticised Nay Pyi Taw for not being open about its orders to block certain websites.

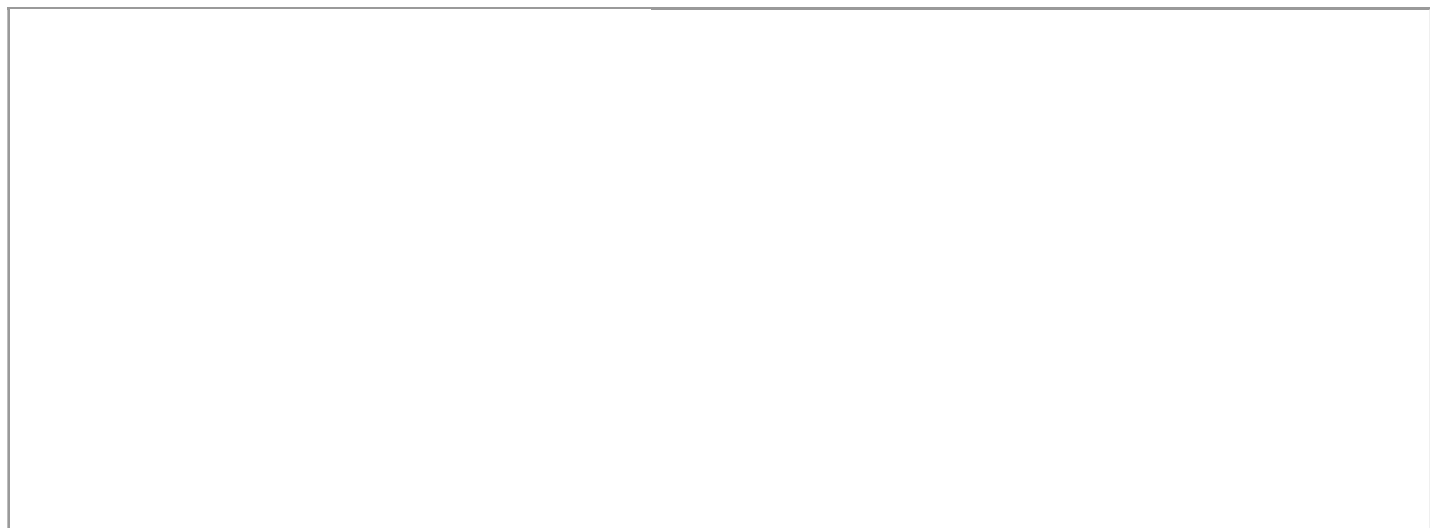
“Both the government and the operators should be transparent about the actions they are taking and report this publicly, giving a clear legal basis. Telenor’s public statement highlighting their actions and concerns reflects their status as the telecoms operator most actively committed to operating responsibly in Myanmar,” she commented.

“However, in view of their commitment to the Global Network Initiative, we encourage them and other operators to publish a list of all blocked sites and the reason for blocking them, and of course the Ministry of Transport and Communications to do the same.”

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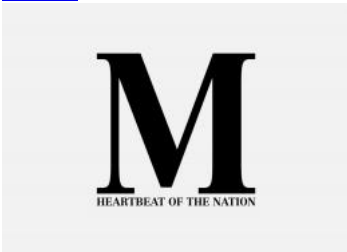
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