



EXPANDING CONNECTIVITY TO FIGHT COVID-19: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENTS AND TELCOS

This report is an Access Now publication. It is written by Eric Null. We would like to thank the Access Now team members who provided support, including Verónica Arroyo, Jennifer Brody, Sage Cheng, Marwa Fatafta, Estelle Masse, Peter Micek, Laura O'Brien, Isedua Oribhabor, Javier Pallero, Gaspar Pisanu, Emna Sayadi, Raman Jit Singh Chima, Carolyn Tackett, Berhan Taye, and Donna Wentworth.

Expanding connectivity to fight COVID-19: recommendations for governments and telcos

April 2020

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Executive Summary

Access Now is committed to protecting human rights and helping guide governments' responses to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. These responses must promote public health, prevent discrimination, and ensure access to reliable and timely information; defend unrestricted access to an open, affordable, and secure internet; ensure the enjoyment of freedom of expression and of opinion; and protect privacy and personal data.

Both international and domestic laws recognize that extraordinary circumstances require extraordinary measures. The COVID-19 pandemic is such an extraordinary circumstance, and it requires that telecommunications companies (“telcos”) and governments take extraordinary measures to ensure that people are not cut off from internet or phone service, often their lifeline to vital resources. To keep people safe and healthy in the context of physical distancing and lockdown measures, governments and telcos must work together to provide everyone, and especially women, girls, and others in under-represented and at-risk communities, access to an affordable, open, secure, stable, and high-speed internet.

As COVID-19 continues to spread, governments and telcos around the world are taking a variety of approaches to internet connectivity, some beneficial and some harmful to human rights and public health. Below, we discuss some of these approaches and provide recommendations to help decision-makers increase connectivity and save lives.

I. Introduction

Since late 2019, the world has been fighting the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, now recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a pandemic.¹ As part of the response, governments and telecommunications companies (“telcos”) around the world have been trying to determine how to improve internet connectivity to help ensure people can communicate and access the information and services they need to live. The decisions they make, and the extent to which they can ensure everyone access to an affordable, open, secure, stable, and high-speed internet connection, will be critical for dealing with the crisis and will help determine how quickly our global society can recover.

In the present context it is imperative that everyone, especially those in under-served and at-risk communities, such as low-income people, have access to a high-quality internet connection. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, many services for daily functioning in societies around the world, such as banking, had long ago moved online. The internet today is an essential tool for employment, education, health, communication, political engagement, and accessing a wide array of important resources. Moreover, those without a connection are cut off from enjoyment of a broad range of

¹ *WHO Timeline - COVID-19*, World Health Organization (April 27, 2020), <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/08-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19>.

human rights, including the right to access information. Yet only 54% of the world’s population has an internet connection, despite the fact that 193 countries have signed on to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, including Target 9.c, which calls to “significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the internet in least developed countries by 2020.”²

The COVID-19 pandemic has only made the need for high-quality internet access more clear and urgent. The effort to stop the spread of the disease and “flatten the curve” requires that people stay home and access information and vital services online, in what the U.N. Secretary General calls a move to “mass digitalization.”³ In this movement, existing inequalities are becoming more evident; we are all in this together, but not equally. People who have an internet connection and can work remotely are less likely to suffer economic hardship than those who do not.⁴ It is also easier for them to follow public health guidelines for stay-at-home orders and self-quarantine. Yet we must all act collectively to fight the spread of this disease. At a time when both physical distancing and access to information is necessary to save lives, it is not acceptable for anyone to navigate the situation isolated and without a high-quality internet connection.

Over the past few months, governments and telcos have each taken a variety of approaches to connectivity during COVID-19. In this report, we highlight some of these responses and offer recommendations for decision-makers to expand connectivity and promote an effective global public health and humanitarian response.

II. How telecommunications providers are responding

Telco providers, including those run by government entities, play a critical role in COVID-19 pandemic response. They are best able to determine what temporary relief they can provide to their subscribers, how they can entice new subscribers to their network, and how to ensure that as many people as possible have access to a high-quality internet in these difficult times. All telcos should be thinking about how they can help their communities and subscribers get connected. A pandemic is not the time to maximize revenue to the detriment of public health, human rights, and the broader economy.

² *ICT Statistics: Individuals Using the Internet*, International Telecommunications Union, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>; Sustainable Development Goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization and foster innovation, United Nations, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/infrastructure-industrialization>.

³ Mario Villar, *UN Chief: Post-Coronavirus World Will Be Even More Digital*, EURACTIV (April 3, 2020), <https://www.euractiv.com/section/coronavirus/news/un-chief-post-coronavirus-world-will-be-even-more-digital>.

⁴ See Lesley Chiou & Catherine Tucker, *Social Distancing, Internet Access and Inequality*, National Bureau of Economic Research, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w26982.pdf> (“the combination of having both high income and high-speed Internet appears to be the biggest driver of propensity to stay at home. Our results suggest that the digital divide — or the fact that income and home Internet access are correlated — appears to explain much inequality we observe in people's ability to self-isolate.”).

So far, telcos have taken a variety of approaches to pandemic response, in some cases moving quickly, and acting in ways that have ranged from helpful to harmful. Below, we discuss several case studies from around the globe, and then provide recommendations to strengthen and improve response.

Case studies

Middle East and North Africa

In **Tunisia**, Tunisie Telecom launched the #Men_Dari (“from my house”) initiative, designed to support Tunisians during the country’s confinement period by reducing the price of internet connection and increasing speeds.⁵ It also announced plans to increase international bandwidth from below 300 Gbps to 350 Gbps and may increase its national backbone.⁶

In **Saudi Arabia**, Saudi Telecom, Mobily (Etisalat), and Zain Saudi Arabia are waiving telecom bills for their customers in quarantine for the month of April.⁷

Latin America

In **Argentina**, the National Communications Authority (ENACOM), Argentine Satellite Solutions Company, and several other telcos announced an agreement to ensure connectivity during a mandatory isolation period.⁸ The agreement allows operators to divert data traffic to each other’s networks, if needed, to manage increased network traffic.

In **Costa Rica**, Movistar is providing both prepaid and postpaid customers with free browsing (zero-rated access) for video learning and collaboration tools

⁵ #Men_Dari de Tunisie Telecom pour Accompagner les Tunisiens durant leur Confinement, WebManagerCenter (March 31, 2020), https://www.webmanagercenter.com/2020/03/31/447092/men_dari-de-tunisie-telecom-pour-accompagner-les-tunisiens-durant-leur-confinement; see also *Tunisie Telecom: Vérifiez en Ligne la Capacité Maximale du Débit que Supporte Votre Fixe*, Tunisie Haut Debit (February 4, 2020), <https://thd.tn/tunisie-telecom-verifiez-en-ligne-la-capacite-maximale-du-debit-que-supporte-votre-fixe>.

⁶ MEA Telecom Operators Offering Support During Coronavirus Pandemic, Verdict (March 25, 2020), <https://www.verdict.co.uk/mea-telecom-coronavirus>.

⁷ Chris Kelly, *Saudi Telcos to Provide Free Connectivity for Citizens under Quarantine during April*, CommsMEA (April 1, 2020), <https://www.commsmea.com/business/financials/21632-saudi-telcos-to-provide-free-connectivity-for-citizens-under-quarantine-during-april>.

⁸ *Internet en Cuarentena: El Enacom, Arsat y las Compañías de Telecomunicaciones Anuncian un Acuerdo para Asegurar la Conectividad*, La Nación (April 2, 2020), <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/tecnologia/internet-cuarentena-enacom-arsat-companias-telecomunicaciones-anuncian-nid2350175>.

including Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangout, BlueJeans, and WebEx.⁹

Europe

In **Italy**, Telecom Italia and the government's telecom company, Infratel, are accelerating efforts to improve broadband access in rural areas that currently lack acceptable broadband connections, aiming to deploy fiber networks in up to 320 municipalities by May.¹⁰

In **Belgium**, Telenet and Proximus have opened public connections to help children of families without internet connections stay online.¹¹

Africa

In **South Africa**, in response to increased network load, VodaCom SA plans to invest R500m in its network to expand smart energy management solutions, increase capacity, and improve network resiliency. It also cut the prices of some of its plans and zero-rated "essential" services.¹²

In **Zambia**, Zamtel is offering all mobile prepaid customers "complementary five calling minutes, 50 Mb of data and a further ten on-net SMSs on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays while the COVID-19 pandemic lasts."¹³

In **Kenya**, SafariCom is offering data-capped plans with zero-rated educational resources up to 250MB per day for 60 days.¹⁴ SafariCom has also doubled the internet speed of its home broadband customers, free of charge.¹⁵

⁹ *Measures Taken by Telefónica in the Fight against COVID-19: Costa Rica*, Telefónica, <https://www.telefonica.com/ext/westayconnected/index.html>.

¹⁰ *TIM and Infratel Speed Up Rural Fibre Rollouts*, Comms Update (April 3, 2020), <https://www.commsupdate.com/articles/2020/04/03/tim-and-infratel-speed-up-rural-fibre-rollouts>.

¹¹ *Telenet et Proximus Ouvrent Leurs Connexions Publiques aux Élèves sans Internet*, Médias de Bruxelles (March 26, 2020) <https://bx1.be/dossiers/coronavirus/telenet-et-proximus-ouvrent-leurs-connexions-publiques-aux-eleves-sans-internet>.

¹² *Vodacom SA to Spend R500-million on Network as Traffic Increases*, ITWeb (April 15, 2020), <https://itweb.africa/content/o1Jr5Mx96X9qKdWL>.

¹³ Michael Malakata, *Zamtel Launches Fresh Offering as Subscribers Feel the Pinch*, ITWeb (April 9, 2020), <https://itweb.africa/content/LPwQ5Ml6mrvpNgkj>.

¹⁴ *Safaricom, Education Content Providers Partner to Enable Free Access to Digital Learning*, Safaricom (April 2, 2020), <https://www.safaricom.co.ke/about/media-center/publications/press-releases/release/919>.

¹⁵ Dennis Waweru, *Exclusive: Safaricom Doubles Home Fiber Speeds for Current Customers*, Gadgets Africa (March, 17, 2020), <https://gadgets-africa.com/2020/03/17/safaricom-doubles-home-fibre-speeds-for-current-customers>.

Asia-Pacific

In **India**, Airtel is giving those working from home because of the COVID-19 pandemic unlimited data at 1 Gbps speeds over their fiber network.¹⁶ Airtel, Reliance Jio, and Vodafone are improving their wireless plans with more speed and data and extending validity packs.¹⁷

In **Nepal**, Nepal Telecom is extending billing deadlines and waiving penalties for late payments during lockdown.¹⁸

North America

In **Canada**, TELUS, Rogers, and Bell are taking several actions, such as removing data caps and waiving overage fees during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁹

In the **United States**, Verizon removed data caps on its Fios and DSL offerings,²⁰ T-Mobile increased free data allowance for schools and students,²¹ and AT&T

¹⁶ Saba Haider, *India under 21-day COVID-19 Lockdown: Know What Airtel, Reliance Jio and Vodafone Offering*, Gadget Bridge (March 29, 2020), <https://www.gadgetbridge.com/news/india-under-21-day-covid-19-lockdown-know-what-airtel-reliance-jio-and-vodafone-offering>.

¹⁷ Yuthika Bhargava, *Telecom Operators Extend Validity of Packs Till End of Shutdown*, The Hindu (April 18, 2020), <https://www.thehindu.com/business/Industry/telecom-operators-extend-validity-of-packs-till-end-of-lockdown/article31372694.ece>.

¹⁸ *Nepal Telecom to Extend the Deadline for Billing During Lockdown*, My República (March 26, 2020), <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/nepal-telecom-to-extend-the-deadline-for-billing-during-lockdown>.

¹⁹ Carli Berry, *TELUS, Rogers, Bell Waiving Fees, Providing Free TV Channels to Customers During Pandemic*, Infotel News (April 11, 2020), <https://infotel.ca/newsitem/telus-rogers-bell-waiving-fees-providing-free-tv-channels-to-customers-during-pandemic/it72111>.

²⁰ *Verizon Response to COVID-19: What is Verizon Doing to Help Customers?*, Verizon, <https://www.verizon.com/about/news/covid-response-customers>.

²¹ *T-Mobile Update on COVID-19 Response*, T-Mobile (March 13, 2020), <https://www.t-mobile.com/news/t-mobile-update-on-covid-19-response>.

waived overage fees for domestic plans if subscribers seek a waiver.²² All three also signed the “Keep Americans Connected” pledge, written by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, along with 650 other telcos.²³

Google has pledged to help students in rural **California** stay connected by providing free Wi-Fi to 100,000 families for the rest of the school year, and giving out 4,000 Chromebooks to students.²⁴ Similarly, in **Austin, Texas**, the city school district is sending out 110 buses equipped with Wi-Fi for use between 8 a.m. and 2 p.m. to help students in neighborhoods with limited connectivity.²⁵

In **North Dakota**, the BEK Communications co-op is offering free internet for four months to new subscribers and is doubling internet speeds for no additional charge.²⁶

Recommendations for telcos

Ease financial burdens for customers.

During COVID-19, telcos that have the means should waive all fees related to an inability to pay, including overage fees, late fees, and subscription fees. Waived fees should not be contingent on signing contracts for future service and should not be required to be repaid in the future.

Telcos should also waive fees and relax deadlines on device activation, replacement, return, and repair.

²² *COVID-19: Our Responses*, AT&T, <https://about.att.com/pages/COVID-19.html#networkl>.

²³ *Keep Americans Connected Pledge*, Federal Communications Commission, <https://www.fcc.gov/keep-americans-connected>.

²⁴ Jon Porter, *Google Donates Free Chromebooks and 100,000 Mobile Hotspots for Rural California Students*, The Verge (April 2, 2020), <https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/2/21204057/google-free-chromebooks-wi-fi-hotspots-california-schools-students-remote-learning-coronavirus>.

²⁵ Andy Jechow, *Austin ISD Is Rolling Out 110 Buses Equipped with Wi-Fi for Neighborhoods with Limited Online Access*, KUT (April 10, 2020), <https://www.kut.org/post/austin-isd-rolling-out-110-buses-equipped-wi-fi-neighborhoods-limited-online-access>.

²⁶ *BEK Communications “BEK Cares” Initiative in Response to COVID-19 Creates a Connection to the World for Rural Students and Work-From-Home Residents*, BEK Communications (March 25, 2020), <https://cdn.bek.coop/bek-communications-bek-cares-initiative-3.24.2020.pdf>.

<p>Improve service offerings and remove limits on subscription plans.</p>	<p>Telcos should lift limits around total voice or text allowances, data allowances, the types of content people can access, times during which people can use the network, and the expiration of unused data, for at least the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>In service offerings, telcos should also increase speeds and capacity during the pandemic.</p>
<p>Ensure the internet is open, following the principles of Net Neutrality.</p>	<p>Telcos should offer access to an open internet — that is, with no blocking, throttling, or paid priority and zero-rated access — and they should not circumvent these rules through manipulating interconnection points. Especially during a pandemic, telcos should not pick winners and losers in an information ecosystem and act as the arbiters of what information is important to users.</p> <p>Instead of zero-rating or giving priority to certain content or services, telcos should remove data caps. At minimum, telcos should refrain from zero-rating content they produce, own, or have received compensation or entered into arrangements to market or promote.</p>
<p>Be transparent about policies and practices.</p>	<p>Telcos should notify customers directly of policies and practices they implement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic; it is not sufficient to have only a general pandemic website. They should also provide updates as necessary and communicate about any changes in real time throughout the crisis.</p> <p>If possible, they should implement all new connectivity-related policies immediately and automatically, without requiring customers to jump through burdensome hoops.</p> <p>The policies telcos put in place should be easy to understand and not dependent on the day of the week, time of day, or other arbitrary attribute.</p>
<p>Invest in maintaining and improving networks to ensure high-quality internet access now and in the future.</p>	<p>Investment should go beyond creating public Wi-Fi networks. While such Wi-Fi access can be helpful in specific situations, people need access to high-quality, high-speed internet at home to use the internet to its fullest potential, including for remote work and education. Using public Wi-Fi networks often requires close proximity to the router and thus to other people, which goes against social distancing policies. No one should have to risk their lives to connect to the internet.</p> <p>Telcos should upgrade their networks to support an increased number of connections. Network equipment and resources should be redistributed as appropriate to increase connectivity.</p>

III. How governments and regulatory agencies are reacting

In implementing policy on connectivity during COVID-19, governments have tremendous power to either protect or harm their citizens. For example, legislators, ministers, telecom regulators, and many other public officials can protect people against private-sector abuses such as price gouging, and can enact policies or provide relief to expand and improve access to the internet and make it more affordable. Unfortunately, some government officials are carrying out harmful acts. They are shutting down the internet, engaging in online censorship, levying heavy taxes for access to online platforms, and imposing other restrictions that make it difficult to access and use the internet.

Access to the internet can save lives, particularly during public health crises. Limiting or shutting off access to the internet has obvious problems. When governments shut down or slow access to the internet, or block or restrict access to social media platforms, websites, and other sources, it harms people and interferes with their human rights. This has led the United Nations to condemn internet shutdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁷ During this crisis, people need access to the internet to find out how to protect themselves and others, access telehealth services, communicate with their loved ones, and work and learn remotely, among many other things. Internet shutdowns directly interfere with these actions and impede the public health and humanitarian response. It is imperative that governments respond by immediately removing, not imposing, barriers to connectivity.

Government responses in the wake of COVID-19 outbreak have been varied and multi-faceted, with some responding relatively quickly. Following are several case studies from around the globe, broken down into three categories: internet shutdowns, censorship of content, and other regulatory responses. In some cases, the responses have both positive and negative implications. We provide recommendations based on these examples to help governments improve their approaches.

Case studies: internet shutdowns

Asia-Pacific

In **India**, since August 2019, the government has imposed internet restrictions in the Jammu and Kashmir regions, leaving people without reliable, secure access to an open internet. The government originally implemented a blanket shutdown. After India's Supreme Court intervened, the government restored

²⁷ Michelle Bachelet, *COVID Is "a Colossal Test of Leadership" Requiring Coordinated Action*, High Commissioner Tells Human Rights Council, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (April 9, 2020), <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25785&LangID=E> ("I also urge an end to any blanket Internet and telecommunication shutdowns and denials of service.").

access, but only to 2G mobile internet. As a result, medical staff in the region have been unable to help patients online, download medical data and information about COVID-19 intensive care units guidelines, and otherwise adequately respond to the pandemic.²⁸

In **Myanmar**, since mid-2019, authorities have cut or restricted access to the internet in Rakhine and Chin states, leaving people unable to access the internet during the longest shutdown globally in 2019 (now extended to 2020).²⁹ The government has expanded network disruptions to more townships in these states³⁰ and issued new orders to censor content and information.³¹

In **Bangladesh**, the government has shut off mobile internet connections in refugee camps where Rohingya refugees reside, and disallowed these refugees, who are in close quarters and a high-risk group for COVID-19, from use of SIM cards and other communication tools.³²

In **Pakistan**, authorities have ordered internet shutdowns in former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan and part of Balochistan, disconnecting residents of these two regions from the rest of the world. Reports indicate that while the majority of students in Pakistan have transitioned to online schooling, students residing in ex-FATA and Balochistan regions have been left behind due to the lack of internet access.³³

²⁸ Majid Maqbool, 'An Hour to Download ICU Guidelines': Amid COVID-19, Kashmir Doctors Struggle With Slow Internet, *The Wire* (March 20, 2020), <https://thewire.in/rights/coronavirus-kashmir-slow-internet>.

²⁹ *Myanmar: Lift Internet Restrictions to Protect Public Health*, Fortify Rights (March 26, 2020), <https://www.fortifyrights.org/mya-inv-2020-03-26>.

³⁰ Thu Thu Aung & Sam Aung Moon, *Myanmar Reimposes Internet Shutdown in Conflict-torn Rakhine, Chin States: Telco Operator* (February 5, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rakhine/myanmar-reimposes-internet-shutdown-in-conflict-torn-rakhine-chin-states-telco-operator-idUSKBN1ZZ0LC>.

³¹ *Blocking of 230 Websites in Myanmar Based on Directive from the Authorities*, Telenor (March 30, 2020), <https://www.telenor.com.mm/en/article/blocking-230-websites-myanmar-based-directive-authorities>.

³² *Bangladesh: Internet Blackout on Rohingya Refugees*, Human Rights Watch (September 13, 2019), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/09/13/bangladesh-internet-blackout-rohingya-refugees>.

³³ Umar Daraz Wazir, *DRM Exclusive: Internet Shutdown in Former FATA – Online Classes a Hurdle to Right to Education of Students in the Region*, Digital Rights Monitor (April 20, 2020), <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/drm-exclusive-internet-shutdown-in-former-fata-online-classes-a-hurdle-to-right-to-education-of-students-in-the-region>.

Case studies: censorship of content

Asia-Pacific

In **Myanmar**, the government has blocked more than 200 websites. Most recently, the government censored news agencies and those that are serving and based in Rakhine state.³⁴

Middle East and North Africa

In **Algeria**, the government has blocked websites for The Maghreb Emergent and Radio M, which provide critical health and other information amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁵

In the **United Arab Emirates**, in response to a COVID-19 lockdown, the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority lifted a block, on an “exceptional” and temporary basis, of several VoIP platforms and applications, such as Google Meet, WebEx, Blue Jeans, and Slack, to allow for distance learning.³⁶ However, the government continues to block apps such as WhatsApp, Skype, and FaceTime, which have been essential tools for communicating, especially among migrant workers and foreign nationals. Use of VoIP products that are not licensed (those not provided by telcos Etisalat or Du) could be punishable under the cybercrime law.³⁷

Latin America

In **Venezuela**, government-owned CANTV, the largest telco in the country, blocked coronavirusvenezuela.info, a website created by the National Assembly to disseminate official information about COVID19.³⁸ After a fire in a networking facility, the block was lifted.³⁹ In addition, Movistar Venezuela blocked teleconsulta.presidenciave.org, a website for medical information.⁴⁰

³⁴ Rebecca Ratcliffe, *Myanmar Blocks Hundreds of News Sites and Threatens Editor with Life in Jail*, The Guardian (April 1, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/31/myanmar-editor-could-face-life-in-jail-for-interviewing-rebel>.

³⁵ *Algeria: Maghreb Émergent and Radio M Online Media Blocking*, The Maghreb Times (April 15, 2020), <https://themaghrebtimes.com/04/15/algeria-maghreb-emergent-and-radio-m-online-media-blocking>.

³⁶ *Additional Apps for Distance Learning*, Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (March 30, 2020), <https://www.tra.gov.ae/en/media-hub/dgspeech/2020/3/30/additional-apps-for-distance-learning.aspx>.

³⁷ *Freedom on the Net 2017: United Arab Emirates*, Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-arab-emirates/freedom-net/2017>.

³⁸ *Bloquean Sitio Sobre Coronavirus COVID-19 Organizado por la AN y Juan Guaidó*, VE sin Filtro (March 18, 2020), https://vesinfiltro.com/noticias/bloqueado_portal_coronavirus_AN.

³⁹ Tweet by VE sin Filtro (April 7, 2020), <https://twitter.com/vesinfiltro/status/1250581767549059073>.

⁴⁰ Tweet by VE sin Filtro (April 15, 2020), <https://twitter.com/vesinfiltro/status/1250579061937770496>.

Europe

In the **European Union**, Market Commissioner Thierry Breton asked CEOs of large platforms (e.g., Netflix and YouTube) to throttle their services to prevent bandwidth issues on the network.⁴¹ The parties made agreements to do so by phone, outside the scrutiny of telecom regulators or legislators. It is not clear whether there is a congestion problem to address, as the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications, the E.U. telecom regulator, released a report indicating an increase in overall traffic but no problems in handling it.⁴²

Case studies: other regulatory responses

Asia-Pacific

In **Pakistan**, the government directed telcos to offer cheap student and work-from-home packages of 2Mbps with a 40GB data limit at a reasonable rate of less than Rs600 per month.⁴³

In **Thailand**, the government approved a scheme by the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission to provide mobile subscribers with 10GB of free data per month until June 30 if they text a specific number.⁴⁴

Africa

In **Uganda**, since June 2018, the government has been taxing citizens \$0.05 *per day* (or approximately 4% of monthly income) to access critical communications and information platforms like Skype, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Igor Bonifacic, *EU Asks Netflix and Other Services to Stream in SD to Ease Internet Burden*, Engadget (March 19, 2020), <https://www.engadget.com/2020-03-19-eu-netflix-sd-streaming-to-conserve-internet.html>.

⁴² *Updated BEREC report on the status of internet capacity in light of Covid-19 crisis*, BEREC (April 6, 2020), https://berec.europa.eu/eng/document_register/subject_matter/berec/press_releases/9247-press-release-updated-berec-report-on-the-status-of-internet-capacity-in-light-of-covid-19-crisis.

⁴³ Ramsha Dahangir, *PTA Asks Internet Providers to Launch Cheap Packages During Outbreak*, Dawn (April 5, 2020), <https://www.dawn.com/news/1546558/pta-asks-internet-providers-to-launch-cheap-packages-during-outbreak>.

⁴⁴ Komsan Tortermvasana, *Mobile Users Get 10GB Perk from April 10*, Bangkok Post (March 31, 2020), <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/1890240/mobile-users-get-10gb-perk-from-april-10>.

⁴⁵ *Social media is free. But not in Uganda*, Free Social Media, <https://freesocial.media/#intro>.

North America

In the **United States**, the telecom regulator granted several wireless carriers, including Verizon, AT&T, T-Mobile, and U.S. Cellular, access to additional spectrum to help address the increase in demand.⁴⁶ The agency also granted the Indigenous Navajo Nation access to unused airwaves.⁴⁷

Recommendations for governments

Do not shut down the internet under any circumstances.

Internet shutdowns are especially harmful at a time when access to the internet is imperative to survive the COVID-19 pandemic and to operate in modern life. There should be no deliberate internet shutdowns anywhere, and all such shutdowns and restrictions should immediately be lifted.

Governments should take extra measures to ensure that people in at-risk groups (such as people in low-income communities, refugees, and others) are not disconnected from the internet. Where they have been disconnected, access should be swiftly restored so they can reconnect.

Ensure access to an open internet.

People should be free to access information from a variety of sources without interference, and neither governments nor telcos should manipulate network traffic to silence or favor particular voices or content, for profit, political advantage, or other reasons.

To protect a free and open internet, governments should pass and enforce strong Net Neutrality rules, prohibiting blocking, throttling, paid priority, and zero-rating content, and disallowing the circumvention of those rules through manipulation of interconnection points.

Any network management that is necessary and directly caused by quarantine-related network congestion should be application-neutral and temporary, lasting only through the end of the congestion period.

In addition, governments should permanently lift bans and blocks of lawful websites and applications, particularly communications platforms, as

⁴⁶ *FCC Grants AT&T and Verizon Further Temporary Spectrum Access to Keep Americans Connected During Coronavirus Pandemic*, FCC (March 20, 2020), <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-363211A1.pdf>; *FCC Provides T-Mobile Temporary Access to Additional Spectrum to Help Keep Americans Connected During Coronavirus Pandemic*, FCC (March 15, 2020), <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-363051A1.pdf>; *FCC Provides U.S. Cellular Temporary Access to Additional Spectrum to Help Keep Americans Connected During Coronavirus Pandemic*, FCC (March 17, 2020), <https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-363114A1.pdf>.

⁴⁷ *U.S. Grants Navajo Nation Authority to Use Unassigned Airwaves*, Santa Fe New Mexican (April 18, 2020), https://www.santafenewmexican.com/ap/u-s-grants-navajo-nation-authority-to-use-unassigned-airwaves/article_55e26b01-749b-5fa3-b3ef-f673a142ed8b.html.

	<p>stay-at-home and similar quarantine orders make these services essential for people to remain connected.</p>
<p>Make it easier for people, particularly those in low-income communities, to access the internet.</p>	<p>Governments should develop or expand emergency funding to help broaden connectivity initiatives, both to help ensure infrastructure build-out (including to anchor institutions like schools and libraries) and to increase the affordability of connections. This may include direct infusions of capital or government subsidies to individuals for internet access. During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments should seek to deploy the resources of Universal Service Obligation Funds or other equivalent programs, exploring ways they can be used to cover data usage by individuals, especially women and girls,⁴⁸ and those from low-income or otherwise under-represented communities. Where regulatory changes or legal authorizations may be required, governments should expeditiously seek the approval of such measures. The new connections should be forward-looking and future-proof, and the funding should be easy to access.</p> <p>Governments should require telcos not to disconnect anyone for pandemic-related reasons. Voluntary agreements like those instituted by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission are a step in the right direction but a mandatory requirement will better protect people.⁴⁹</p> <p>Governments should remove barriers to access to technology like mandatory SIM card registration. Mobile phones and laptops, where possible, should be made available to those in need.</p> <p>Women and girls, often afforded fewer opportunities to control ICT devices,⁵⁰ should receive targeted support to ensure that digital access and literacy levels grow despite the crisis.</p>

⁴⁸ *Universal Service and Access Funds: An Untapped Resource to Close the Gender Digital Divide*, Alliance for Affordable Internet (March 20, 2018), <https://a4ai.org/research/universal-service-and-access-funds-an-untapped-resource-to-close-the-gender-digital-divide>.

⁴⁹ See *Order of the Governor of the State of Maryland*, <https://governor.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Executive-Order-Prohibit-Termination-of-Residential.pdf> (“No ... telephone, ... cable television, ... or internet service provider ... shall terminate the service of a [residential] customer.”).

⁵⁰ See *In Tech-Driven 21st Century, Achieving Global Development Goals Requires Closing Digital Gender Divide*, UN News, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/03/1034831>.

Avoid relaxing or repealing pro-consumer policies like Net Neutrality and privacy protections.	Regulators may be tempted to reduce regulatory “burdens” on telcos during the COVID-19 pandemic, but now is not the time to sacrifice human rights and the basic principles that underlie the internet, risking negative repercussions that last well beyond the crisis. Governments should avoid making these types of policy changes.
Allow temporary use of unused wireless spectrum to improve internet service.	Temporary use of certain bands of spectrum may help address a COVID-19-related increase in network traffic (particularly wireless), but a policy for such allowance should revert to the prior regime once the COVID-19 pandemic is over, and the temporary use should not impact unlicensed bands.
Encourage the growth of community networks and internet infrastructure.	<p>Governments, particularly municipalities, should consider creating their own networks and investing in infrastructure, especially where private telcos cannot or will not ensure high-quality internet access.</p> <p>Governments should also ease restrictions on publicly owned or publicly run networks.</p>

IV. Conclusion

In today’s digitally connected world, high-quality internet access is a necessity at all times for all people, including those who are especially at risk, such as people in low-income communities, the disenfranchised, refugees, and others. Getting connected is even more urgent during this global public health crisis, when access to information and physical distancing will save lives. Telcos and governments must step up to protect people by keeping them connected to the internet, consistent with their obligations under international human rights law. This report provides several recommendations for how they can do that. Working together, now and in the aftermath of the pandemic, we can reach the goal of global, universal internet access that benefits everyone.

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