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PORN: Reliance Jio, Airtel, RCom, Vodafone, Telenor mull parental firewall for parents

The companies want to make the point that they are aware of the government's concerns while respecting the freedom of individuals.

Danish Khan | ETTelecom | Updated: January 19, 2016, 17:19 IST

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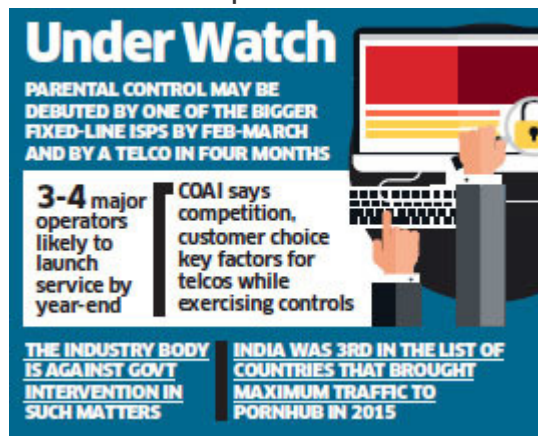
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Internet experts said there were no legal provisions for the government to ban pornographic websites.

NEW DELHI: Telecom companies including [Bharti Airtel](#), [Vodafone](#), [Reliance Communications](#), [Telenor](#) and Reliance Jio Infocomm are said to be considering a plan that will make consumers responsible for barring access to porn sites by offering them a censorship tool.

This comes after a ban, albeit short-lived, was imposed by the government on about 900 porn sites last August. The move had to be scrapped after a furore on social media over censorship.



The companies want to make the point that they are aware of the government's concerns while respecting the freedom of individuals to choose what they want to access,

besides safeguarding a significant revenue earner, said several people aware of the plan.

Telcos and Internet service providers (ISPs) are in "active" talks with New Zealand-based Bypass Network Services (BNSL) to deploy its Buddy Guard parental control solution, said Matthew Jackson, the company's cofounder. He declined to name its possible clients but the discussions were confirmed by executives who didn't want to be named.

Buddy Guard is aimed primarily at parents who may want to regulate the online behaviour of their children. Consumers can choose to opt for the control on a daily, weekly or monthly basis as with any other value-added service (VAS), such as ringtones.

Jackson said the interest of telecom companies and ISPs in parental control had risen after last year's porn ban.

The option will be debuted by internet service provider (ISP) Spectranet by February-March and by a telecom company within four months, starting with a few service areas and widening its reach gradually. Separately, Telenor India plans to launch network-level safety and child sexual abuse filters - already running in its global markets - in the country

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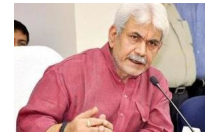


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shortly, a person familiar with the matter said.

Reliance Jio, [Airtel](#), Vodafone, Reliance Communications and Telenor didn't respond to ET's queries. Pavan Duggal, a Supreme Court advocate who specialises in cyber law, said that the introduction of controls would be a step in right direction as it will help empower parents.

"We need to align to the fact that parent software adoption levels in India have been dramatically poor because of the lack of awareness of their requisite functions," he said. The kind of move being contemplated wouldn't attract privacy concerns if users are required to opt for it voluntarily, he said.

"I would be surprised if we don't see three-four major operators with the service by the end of this year," said Jackson. If one of bigger telecom companies deployed it across its network, two to three million people could start using this service in the next few months, he said. Third-party apps are currently available to filter browsing behaviour but this would be the first at network level.

The [industry](#) feels government intervention in such matters should be kept to a minimum. "Competition and customer choice are potent factors for those who are concerned to exercise such controls. Given the complexity and wide range of content and applications, this is best left to the industry to manage," said Rajan Mathews, director general of the Cellular Operators Association of India, the GSM lobby group. "We do not believe that government should intervene, other than to provide guidelines to users who may be concerned about this."

The country has the second-largest number of internet users in the world and Indians are among the most prolific consumers of internet pornography, according to a recent survey by Pornhub, one of the world's largest porn websites. It said that India was third in the list of countries that brought maximum traffic to the site in 2015.

Telcos are wary of the effect that censorship could have. Some estimates show that the August ban on porn could have had an impact to the extent of 70% of data revenue earned by carriers. This currently accounts for a fifth of

industry revenue but is the fastest growing element with voice revenue plateauing.






In the west, there's robust demand for such products, while the [Indian market](#) is just opening up, given the recent increase in internet consumption.

"The reason why we haven't seen this action (porn ban) in NZ is because the industry has self-regulated, and rather than having the compliance posed on the industry by the government, the industry is providing this control to reduce the amount of compliance cost that has been levied through regulation and legislation," Jackson said.

ET VIEW

Let (parents of) consumers decide

No one likes a government meddling in people's private affairs — even if such meddling comes at the behest of vested interests and nosey parkers from the citizenry. The mature way for the government to deal with adult entertainment now freely available over phones is to lay the responsibility for its consumption not at its source (which is, for all practical purposes, impossible) but where it is consumed. To keep pornography out of the reach of curious minors, parental controls hardwired into data services is the best way forward, given that it doesn't go against any adult's 'do not disturb' sign.

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