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Ryanair, Elon Musk trade insults over Starlink in-flight Wi-Fi costs

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Dhaka: Ryanair CEO Michael O'Leary and SpaceX founder Elon Musk have engaged in a public war of words after the Irish low-cost carrier rejected installing Starlink's Wi-Fi connectivity across its fleet, citing concerns over fuel efficiency and operating costs.

O'Leary said Ryanair would not adopt Starlink because fitting the required antenna and radome would incur a "two percent fuel penalty" due to added weight and aerodynamic drag. The airline operates one of Europe's largest Boeing 737 fleets and is known for its aggressive cost control and ancillary revenue-driven business model.

Starlink rejected O'Leary's claims. Michael Nicolls, vice president of Starlink Engineering, said the two percent figure relates to older-generation systems. Starlink's newer lightweight equipment results in a

fuel-burn penalty of just 0.3 percent or less on aircraft such as the Boeing 737-800.

Musk responded online by accusing O'Leary of being misinformed, prompting the Ryanair chief to escalate the dispute during an appearance on Irish radio broadcaster Newstalk. O'Leary dismissed Musk as "an idiot—very wealthy, but still an idiot," and described Musk's social media platform X as a "cesspit."

The exchange intensified on X, where Musk called O'Leary "an utter idiot," claimed he had made a "factor of 10" error in his fuel-burn calculations, and demanded Ryanair "fire him." Shortly afterward, a technical outage disrupted X, leading Ryanair to mock the platform by asking Musk if he "needed Wi-Fi."

The dispute comes as in-flight connectivity becomes increasingly common, particularly in the United States, where several airlines have adopted Starlink to offer free high-speed Wi-Fi. In 2025, a Cornell University research paper regarded Starlink as one of the world's best on-the-move Wi-Fi providers, which achieves more than 200 Mbps.

However, the European air travel industry differs. For Ryanair, an airline that typically charges for optional services, it would be reluctant to subsidize connectivity costs, even as passenger expectations for in-flight Wi-Fi continue to rise.

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