

Out of the Dark: Media's Coping Mechanisms in the Face of Internet Shutdowns

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Introduction



*AI-generated image: Internet shutdowns often serve to silence journalists working in already-underreported areas.
(generated by Dall-E)*

On July 18, 2024, Bangladesh plunged into what would become the longest and most crippling internet blackout in its history.¹ As citizens took to the streets to protest a quota system for allocating government jobs, the ruling Awami League government shut down all broadband and mobile internet services for five consecutive days during violence, chaos, and political uncertainty.²

The State Minister for the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications, and Information Technology justified the internet shutdown “in light of the current crisis in the country and to stop the spread of fake news on

social media.”³ By the time the state partially lifted the blackout on July 23, the death toll had risen to nearly 200,⁴ including three journalists who were fatally shot.⁵

Governments worldwide are increasingly using internet shutdown techniques to control the information space, particularly in countries with autocratic governments and those experiencing democratic declines. 2023 was the worst year to date with 283 documented shutdowns in 39 countries.⁶

Internet shutdowns have broad impacts on society, affecting fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms, including the right to information, free of speech, and freedom of association.⁷ Shutdowns disrupt businesses, deprive people of income opportunities, and hinder access to critical online services, such as health and education.⁸ However, their impact on independent media and the different tools and tactics journalists use to overcome such censorship is particularly severe, yet not consistently documented.

What is an internet shutdown?

When confronted with perceived or actual chaos in their countries, autocratic governments attempt to wrest control through a variety of means. Restricting or preventing access to the internet is a fast and remarkably effective way to control information flows and quash dissent quickly and unilaterally. Governments often attempt to justify internet shutdowns as efforts to impede the deluge of online hate and disinformation that can result from a crisis, election, or other instance of civil unrest; however, every shutdown violates citizens’ human and digital rights.

Access Now, leader of the #KeepItOn Coalition against internet shutdowns, defines them as “an intentional disruption of internet or electronic communications, rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, often to exert control over the flow of information.”⁹ While an internet shutdown can refer to the total absence of internet connection, the term can also be used as an umbrella for several distinct actions. A government deploying one or all of these tactics constitutes an internet shutdown.

A total blackout or blanket shutdown occurs when a government, in conjunction with the countries’ internet and mobile service providers, cuts off all access to fixed-line internet and mobile networks. A total blackout is the most aggressive tactic a government can utilize. Yet, it is also the hardest to apply due to the decentralized nature of internet infrastructure, which requires coordination between multiple actors to ensure the internet is inaccessible from multiple fronts. During total blackouts, all internet-based circumvention tools, such as Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), are rendered ineffective.

Bandwidth throttling is an intentional slowing down of the internet. When bandwidth is restricted, internet speeds slow, data transfers take longer, and high-data files, such as photos and videos, can be nearly impossible to share, upload, and download. Throttling can occur using fixed-line or mobile internet. While throttling still allows for some, usually sporadic, internet access, it drastically slows the rate at which information can be shared. Depending on the government’s aim, throttling can slow the internet equally for all users or a geographic subset, or it can affect only certain websites. Additionally, bandwidth throttling is one of the hardest tactics for civil society actors to verify or track as it can mimic technical difficulties, especially in areas with unreliable internet infrastructure. This can allow governments to deny their actions to their citizens and international observers more easily.

Platform bans render a specific website or platform inaccessible for users in a certain location; often multiple bans happen at once. While platform bans usually target social media and news sites where citizens are accessing information, they can also target certain mobile messaging apps and services. These types of bans are much easier for governments to enforce; however, they are also much easier for citizens to thwart using circumvention technologies.

Regardless of the methods used by the governments or the level of restrictions imposed, internet shutdowns intentionally disrupt the information environment, limiting access to communication.

Impacts of Internet Shutdowns on the Media

Of the 283 documented shutdowns in 2023, 166 occurred in South and Southeast Asia, namely: India, Burma, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Nepal, with 116 occurring in India alone.¹⁰ Four of these six nations also rank among the lowest on Reporters Without Border's 2024 World Press Freedom Index.¹¹

Given the high intensity of internet shutdowns in South Asia, it is useful to examine their impact on the media sectors in Bangladesh, Burma, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka and explore how journalists and news outlets in the region respond and adapt, including documenting the circumvention strategies they employ.

Examining the impact of shutdowns on news gathering, publishing, and distribution can help news outlets prepare for and mitigate the effects of this form of censorship. This increasingly dire situation also highlights the urgent need for a unified and comprehensive response from media development and digital rights organizations. Without a collective effort, information voids will persist, and human rights and democracy will continue to erode.

Internet shutdowns can severely limit journalists' ability to produce and disseminate news. Journalists rely on encrypted messaging apps like WhatsApp and Signal to communicate securely with sources. Audiences' ability to access news is also impacted, since many now rely on social media for news. As a result of the increased difficulty for publishing content and reaching audiences, outlets also face financial difficulties. Shutdowns are especially dangerous for those outlets that rely on digital advertising as a key source of funding or those that rely on online gateways that facilitate subscriber payments and reader donations.

Beyond the impact of shutdowns on the day-to-day operations of journalists and news outlets, prolonged lack of connectivity can have lasting effects on countries' news systems. Three case studies - India, Burma, and Pakistan - help illustrate the various ways in which internet shutdowns affect the media sector.

India's use of internet shutdowns in what the government considers problem areas, like Manipur or Jammu and Kashmir, is well documented. These long blackout periods have made it difficult for local media to remain financially viable and have driven many journalists out of the profession. Burma also has

a long record of using internet shutdowns to repress journalists and activists. However, independent media have found ways to overcome these attempts to silence them through collaboration with digital rights-focused civil society organizations.

In Pakistan, the government has repeatedly deployed shutdowns during electoral periods and political crises, leaving journalists unable to communicate or get support in the field, leading to an information deficit during important civic engagement periods.

Despite the various excuses and tactics each of these governments use to shut down the internet, disrupt citizen engagement, and exert unilateral control, they are all threats to a free press and a free information ecosystem. These three case studies highlight specific ways in which governments and their allies, such as internet service providers, deploy shutdowns as part of a broader strategy of censorship and repression for their citizens and the media.

The case of India

In 2019, ahead of anticipated political unrest,¹² Indian authorities imposed a security lockdown and communications blackout in Jammu and Kashmir, banning social media platforms until March 2020 and barring mobile internet access almost entirely until 2021.¹³ This not only served as an information blackout, but essentially functioned as a siege on local media, starving them of funding until many were eventually forced to shutter.

The shutdown made it nearly impossible for journalists to report on what was happening in the region. To send information to their newsrooms, they either had to travel 500 miles to Delhi or use a government-created media center with only a few desktop computers. The center was officially monitored and journalists feared using the computers because of the lack of privacy control. "They did not even give you access to the internet on your laptop; you had to use desktops, which were already connected."¹⁴

"To be honest, nobody has adapted and most of the people reporting on these issues have either fled or have completely shut down. Other local newspapers print only what the government is saying. No real reporting is happening anymore." – A journalist from Kashmir, India.¹⁵

During the early days of the blackout, Yash Raj, an editor at The Kashmir Walla, an independent media outlet, was unable to use a mobile phone or access the internet and searched for a place to send his article to the newsroom. He ended up in a local market shop with the only working phone, a land line, dictating a 700-word story to a friend. "Then, I shared my email ID and password with her and asked her to send it to my editor," he told the [Al Jazeera Media Institute](#).¹⁶ Various other local media outlets struggled to report and publish stories, even if they had been able to gather information, and ultimately lost their audiences.

After the internet ban in 2019, Kashmir Walla couldn't publish any new content on its website but they continued to take out print issues of the magazine every week. Once the internet services were resumed in the valley, they went ahead with publishing important stories online, said a journalist who closely observed the rise and fall of the independent outlet.¹⁷

As financial struggles continued, according to a report by The Nation, Fahad Shah, editor-in-chief of The Kashmir Walla, was charged with sedition in February 2022 for reporting on a gunfight. Following his arrest, the remaining staff were targeted by a government harassment campaign and between the legal costs¹⁸ and a loss of advertisers,¹⁹ the outlet was in deep financial trouble.

As a result, over half of the staff were laid off, and those remaining endured multiple pay cuts. By the time of its closure in 2023, The Kashmir Walla was reduced to just six employees.²⁰ On August 19, 2023, its website and social media accounts were blocked by authorities and the outlet was evicted from its office.²¹ The eviction marked the outlet's closure.

As of August 2024, The Kashmir Walla's content is no longer accessible even outside of India. The website now redirects to a gambling site, its Facebook page with more than 500,000 followers is unavailable, and its X account has remained silent since the blocking.

"The internet is the lifeline of independent media. So, when one takes away the internet, they are rendered useless. They have nothing to publish,"²² said the editor and founder of The Kashmiriyat, another independent news website that, within a few months of launching its Facebook page in 2018, gained more than 600,000 followers and regular readers by reporting on common issues in Kashmir and presenting diverse perspectives.

Kashmiriyat's young editor was summoned to a police station and later jailed in 2019 for his reporting on the political unrest that was used as a pretext for the internet shutdown in Kashmir.²³ "We had 37 people working with us in 2018 and when I returned in 2020 [from jail], we had 27 people working with us; and today [in 2024], we have only seven. So that is the impact it has," he said.²⁴

The longest shutdown in Indian history significantly impacted newsgathering and access to information and services for the Kashmiris.²⁵ But it also fundamentally changed the media landscape in the region. Financial constraints prevented journalists from having colleagues outside of Kashmir publish their content. Meanwhile, their audiences were unable to view the content even when it was published from outside districts. Due to this double challenge, the outlets that relied on YouTube and Google ads, where revenue is tied to views and clicks, were heavily affected by the prolonged shutdown, losing revenue and advertisers.²⁶

The shutdown caused several publications to shut down completely or scale down operations as advertisers lost trust and interest in independent media. Similarly, investments in independent media dwindled as investors doubted the viability of commercial media outlets in internet shutdown-prone Kashmir.²⁷ Independent outlets, particularly those on platforms like YouTube, suffered the most due to their heavy reliance on the internet for news distribution and revenue.

As newsrooms struggled to earn revenue, their staff bore the burden, making them the ultimate victims of the long shutdowns. There are several instances of journalists being driven out of the profession. For example, a veteran photographer preferred to start a confectionery shop as there were no remaining opportunities for freelancers, a staff reporter switched to a spice sales job, and another photographer turned to plumbing.²⁸ "I know dozens of people who switched professions. We could not pay our reporters because a news organization's income flow was zero,"²⁹ an editor said.

Kashmir observed a rise in independent media outlets following a 2016 uprising. A new generation of young journalists came together to start online outlets, inspired by the promise of the internet and social media to reach a larger audience. Although there has been internet censorship in the region for a long time, the prolonged 2019-21 shutdown dealt the biggest blow to these digital media outlets.³⁰

Internet shutdowns and their impact on independent media outlets should be considered part and parcel of wider attacks on press freedom. As one Kashmiri journalist noted, the shutdown weakened the news media sector and heralded a broader assault on press freedom. "There was a massive crackdown on the internet, on newspapers, and media organizations; many journalists were arrested and booked in cases; and this whole ecosystem was diminished, damaged, and fractured."³¹

The case of Burma



Figure 1 Monks protesting in Burma in 2007. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Burma's experience with internet shutdowns is a story of cooperation and innovation in the face of heavy-handed repression. The country has a history of shutting down the internet to stifle dissent dating back to the Saffron Revolution of 2007.³² In the years since, a thriving community of digital rights organizations developed in Burma, taking advantage of the relative freedom afforded by the country's political opening in 2011. That community has proven invaluable in supporting the continued survival of independent journalism in Burma following the 2021 military coup.

Internet shutdowns in Burma are deployed variably across different parts of the country. Rakhine state, the site of the military's genocidal campaign against the Rohingya ethnic group in 2016-2017, was routinely hit with shutdowns before the coup in 2021.³³ Now, internet shutdowns in Rakhine are so frequent³⁴ that local groups struggle to document each instance of censorship.³⁵

"We have only two reporters who collect information from Rakhine state and travel to Sittwe to send the news or information to us," said an editor of an independent media outlet that extensively covers the Rakhine state.³⁶ "We had 20 citizen journalists, and after the internet shutdown [targeting Rakhine state in January 2023] we could not manage to connect with any of them."³⁷

Notably, Rakhine and Chin states were the sites of one of the world's longest internet shutdowns from 2019 to 2021, following the eruption of conflict between government forces and an armed ethnic group.³⁸ This elevated attacks on internet access to a major digital rights issue among Burmese civil society. Organizations like Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO) expanded their work in documenting shutdowns by building partnerships with international groups like Open Observatory of Network Interference, Access Now, and other digital rights groups.³⁹ They also began engaging in advocacy and providing training to the journalist and activist communities as an extension of their digital security programs.

These organizations found their capacities tested in the wave of targeted internet throttling that continues in the wake of the 2021 coup. Many townships are often left with access to only 2G connections.⁴⁰ Shooting photos with DSLRs (digital single-lens reflex camera) "results in files of at least 20-30 megabytes each, making uploading a single picture a laborious task in areas with 2G internet."⁴¹

*"On the very first day of the internet shutdown [which started in 2023], I got some footage of the military killing three innocent people. However, I could not send or publish it anywhere as I didn't have internet access at that time. That's how a breaking story died for lack of internet," — a journalist from Rakhine, Burma.*⁴²

Although there are technical workarounds that allow Burmese journalists to circumvent shutdowns, many of these come with significant security risks and can be expensive to implement. For example, journalists find it very risky to use mobile operator-based SMS services due to security risks and potential surveillance. With the support of exiled media outlets and the digital rights community, some journalists in border areas of Burma are able to use international SIM cards to access the internet and communicate with their newsrooms. Others rely on end-to-end encrypted apps like Signal, even through instances of internet throttling, however these present risks to journalists' safety: "The military now knows that if you use Signal, you are anti-military."⁴³

Digital rights activists also reported that at least two newsrooms in Burma used Starlink or satellite internet to run news operations. According to them, it is too expensive for most local newsrooms and requires setting up distinct infrastructure, including a dish antenna to receive signals. The physical evidence subsequently increases the risk of detection and prosecution by the military.⁴⁴ Additionally, the more remote the area is, the more costly the installation becomes. This makes it impossible for under-resourced newsrooms to access even if the physical infrastructure exists in the area. According to an activist familiar with the process, a Starlink system that would traditionally cost \$500 to set up can end up costing nearly \$15,000 to deploy in a remote location in Burma.⁴⁵

As a result, journalists in Burma are forced to find new ways to connect with their audience, which were often more traditional than technical. In remote areas like Rakhine, where accessing even 2G internet often requires climbing up a mountain, independent news outlets rely on radio and printing to distribute news. According to Burmese civil society organizations, there are instances where media outlets produce a PDF newsletter and share it with the local community by hand using portable USB memory drives and radio stations use mobile radio transmitters in vehicles to broadcast news and updates over local radio frequencies.

Any discussion of Burma's media and civil society landscape would be incomplete without also addressing the large number of news outlets and advocacy groups that operate from beyond the country's borders. Since the coup in 2021, most independent media in Burma moved into exile. These independent newsrooms continue to operate from neighboring countries. Despite significant safety risks, journalists adapted, resisted, and are continuing their reporting despite internet shutdowns.⁴⁶

Similarly, much of Burma's civic tech and digital rights communities moved into exile, where they have been key to bolstering media resilience by supporting journalists through innovative technologies, security

trainings, and resources. This collaboration between these communities and local and international media development organizations facilitates connections with global rights and civic tech communities, and is led locally by organizations such as the Myanmar Internet Project and further supported by international organizations like Access Now, International Media Support, and EngageMedia. The coordination helps develop solutions, mobilize resources, and strengthen the local community of activists dedicated to areas such as network measurement and censorship documentation, promoting alternative communication solutions, digital security and preparedness, and effective digital rights advocacy at local and international levels. While such support has largely benefited exiled communities and local reporters near the borders, journalists in remote areas of Burma are often left out, primarily due to the challenges posed by ongoing armed conflicts and heightened safety risks in these regions.

“Our digital literacy training provides various measures to overcome service-based internet shutdowns, while digital security training focuses on supporting personal safety, particularly in handling sensitive information,” said an activist.⁴⁷ “However, we face a challenge in establishing the most effective communication channels for individuals residing in areas affected by regional internet shutdowns,” he added, echoing affected journalists in Rakhine and other regions.⁴⁸

“In the last three years, we have been trained four or five times, but not [for skills] related to internet shutdowns - like how to work or how to send news during a shutdown - but these are very important to learn now.” — an editor from Rakhine, Burma⁴⁹

The strength of the Burmese civil society response to internet censorship is that it is locally led, supported by international groups, collaborative in nature, and centered around a relationship of trust and solidarity between activists, journalists, and their supporters. Activists’ responses to online censorship and surveillance are often coordinated with local digital rights groups, exiled newsrooms, and international organizations. This coordination amplifies local voices to a global level.

The relationship between media and civil society in Burma can be traced back to the community leaders who worked together during the Saffron Revolution and the years that followed. According to a researcher who closely observed the community’s growth, “these connections were also helped as some people transitioned from journalism into digital rights.”⁵⁰

The response to internet shutdowns in Burma is now led by a second generation of activists who came of age during the short but vibrant reform era, upholding the legacy of early-generation activists. “Many of the young people you see in international organizations came from established local digital rights organizations, like MIDO or Phandeeyar. They are the ones who tie the knot between local civil society and international organization collaborations,” said a researcher who spent most of her time in Burma during its reform years.⁵¹ “It’s about a group of committed people, working as a community, more than it is about individual organizations,” she continued.⁵²

The case of Pakistan

In Pakistan, internet shutdowns have escalated in the past five years, with the government routinely citing concerns over national security as the basis for its digital repression. According to an expert, “the government is using [internet control] more strategically for their political designs.”⁵³ They are using various shutdown tactics to target political parties’ online campaigns as well as interfere on election days and in the post-election process.

Pakistan’s media regulators have continually blocked⁵⁴ specific social media platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter), often refusing to provide information in a timely manner.⁵⁵ In May 2023, when former Prime Minister Imran Khan was arrested, internet connectivity was temporarily disrupted followed by social media bans as the government blocked access to sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.⁵⁶

In February 2024, Khan's party called for protests following a government official's admission of voter manipulation during that month's national elections.

Shortly after, access to X was blocked in the country. Initially the government and the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority denied the interference until rights groups brought a lawsuit against them. It was not until April 2024 that Pakistan's Ministry of Interior acknowledged they were behind the X shutdown.⁵⁷

In a document submitted to the Islamabad High Court in response to the lawsuit about the shutdown, the Ministry of Interior admitted that "the decision to impose a ban on X in Pakistan was made in the interest of upholding national security, maintaining public order, and preserving the integrity of our nation."⁵⁸

During the February 2024 national elections, Pakistani journalists faced challenges due to mobile internet throttling. With no other means of communication, they relied heavily on nearby households to provide Wi-Fi access so that they could inform their newsrooms. A broadcast journalist from Pakistan stated, "on election day, as anticipated, there was a mobile network and internet shutdown, but landline internet and Wi-Fi were still available. Our reporters connected to Wi-Fi and sent video footage, allowing us to provide some of the best coverage among all TV channels."⁵⁹

This method introduces significant safety and security risks to the journalists and their sources as there is no prior knowledge of the Wi-Fi's security protocols nor is it guaranteed that the households or shops will be friendly towards the journalists' endeavors.

As Pakistan's government and telecommunications and media regulators continue to restrict internet connectivity during periods of vital civic engagement, citizens and journalists face compounding challenges with access to information, physical and online safety, and isolation.

Internet throttling also affects journalists' ability to use critical communication apps. Whether they are associated within mainstream or digital news outlets, most journalists rely on collecting information and sharing stories with their newsrooms through apps like WhatsApp, Signal, and Telegram. As summarized by a digital rights advocate from Pakistan, "these news processes come to a halt during a shutdown."⁶⁰

Many of these challenges are not ones that Pakistani newsrooms are able to solve themselves with current resources. An expert states, "journalists do not know how to circumvent disconnections to connect to their sources and newsrooms. And the newsrooms themselves have not been paying attention to this because they are not ready to spare resources."⁶¹

According to a digital rights advocate in Pakistan, one of the reasons for the lack of preparedness among newsrooms against internet shutdown tactics is the perceived "lack of interest among international media development organizations to work in Pakistan and to build Pakistani journalists' technological capacities."⁶²

This external support is vital for newsrooms. He continues that he hopes "[success] can be achieved by working through collaborations between global and local media development organizations and empowering local groups to engage with newsrooms in a more systematic and transparent way."⁶³

Broader Implications

While each of these case studies demonstrates different internet shutdown tactics, one common theme is evident: shutdowns represent a recurring pattern of behavior from governments seeking to stifle the free flow of information. Rather than a knee-jerk response to brewing crises, shutdowns are increasingly employed as a tool for long-term repression, especially in areas with a history of political unrest. These tactics serve to silence journalists working in already-underreported areas and starve local news outlets of the resources they need to survive.

Restrictions on freedom of movement often accompany shutdowns, making it even harder for journalists to report on local issues. Officials often check mobile phones at security checkpoints.⁶⁴ At the same time, curfews imposed alongside internet shutdowns cause a complete halt on civilian movement, preventing reporters from traveling to the incident or accessing sources who can provide first-hand information.

Depending on how they are deployed, internet shutdowns can essentially allow authoritarian governments to create news deserts. While larger, mainstream news outlets based in urban centers might have the resources, knowledge, and capacity to circumvent shutdowns, small, local newsrooms often cannot afford or are not aware of available circumvention tools.

As the India case demonstrated, with the experience of media outlets in Kashmir, internet shutdowns can have an impact on media's financial sustainability. Outlets lose out on advertising from being unable to publish or post on social media, and they become less attractive to donors and investors because they cannot sustain an audience if they aren't putting out content.

Journalists in Sri Lanka faced similar difficulties. The Sri Lankan government blocked social media several times in recent years, such as in 2018 and 2019 amid communal riots,⁶⁵ and in 2022, during the anti-government protest sparked by the financial crisis.⁶⁶

*“Journalists were getting photos and live updates from people in the field. So, when they shut down social media, it became difficult to get information because journalists were mostly connected with protesters through social media channels” - a reporter in Sri Lanka, referring to the 2022 social media ban in his country.*⁶⁷

In 2022, these blocks coincided with paper shortages that forced many major print media outlets to switch to digital only, leaving them especially reliant on social media for news dissemination. Additionally, fuel shortages made it more difficult and costly for journalists to travel for their reporting. For journalists without access to circumvention tools, this meant walking for miles to cover certain areas. As was the case in Kashmir, all of these mounting costs forced many journalists out of the profession, as the outlets they depend on for their salaries lost revenue due to the blocking.⁶⁸

“I depend on social media for hits to my website, *Colombo Gazette*,” said one Sri Lankan journalist. “The print publication I work as a social media consultant for, *Daily Mirror*, was also affected since their live-streaming of events, which they recently introduced, was impacted due to the block. All this affects advertising as well.”⁶⁹

The impact of these blockings also differed depending on where journalists are based. Journalists in urban centers used free VPN services to circumvent social media blocking, though those tools are not ideal. In many cases, journalists were unaware of the privacy risks of free apps, which include potential data theft and surveillance by malicious actors or state authorities. However, semi-urban or rural reporters do not have access to VPNs, free or otherwise, making it much more difficult for them to function through shutdowns.

To adequately prepare journalists to navigate and circumvent internet shutdowns, the digital rights and media development communities need to examine the patterns surrounding their use. Commonalities are evident across how different governments in Southeast Asia utilize shutdowns: short-term national blackouts and blocks during periods of unrest or significant events like elections, and long-term targeted throttling in an effort to silence regions or communities that pose a threat to the regime. No matter the type of shutdown, the impacts on the media sector can be profound and long-lasting.

Bangladesh, for instance, has a long history of both nation-wide throttling and social media blocking in periods of unrest and of targeted shutdowns dating back to 2009,⁷⁰ with around two dozen instances of social media blocking, throttling, and location-specific restrictions, often during opposition party rallies. However, there have been few advocacy efforts focused on shutdowns. This is due to a lack of strong organizations with the knowledge and technical skills to advocate for digital rights and an overarching advocacy approach that is reactive during shutdowns, rather than proactive.

“For a complete shutdown, people might go for circumvention methods but for throttling, it’s very hard or impossible to circumvent. Sometimes, the throttling is not measurable, and authorities could easily deny the event.” - A technologist from Bangladesh.⁷¹

As was the case in Sri Lanka and India, Bangladeshi newsrooms’ ability to function during internet shutdowns depends heavily on their location and resources. For example, during the 2018 election in Bangladesh, when mobile internet was shut down nationwide, a television channel set up several fixed points with broadband connections in major cities. This allowed reporters to gather at these points, send footage to the newsroom, and appear live on-screen during news reports.⁷²

Stations equipped with financial and technical resources used vehicle-mounted satellite newsgathering systems to cover the election. With adequate funding and preparation, these newsrooms were able to provide live coverage even through the shutdown.

Some well-connected journalists also managed to circumvent the total blackout that affected the country during the July 2024 protests by leveraging relationships with internet service providers. Shafiqul Alam, Agence France Presse’s bureau chief in Dhaka, had an emergency wired connection to four devices in his office, which became a hub for around 40 journalists from other outlets.⁷³

“We had a deal with one of the major internet service providers,” he said. “If there was any shut down, they would give us a backup line. But until July we never tested it.”⁷⁴

Journalists are ill-prepared to find new avenues of communication, especially when they are in the field covering elections or conflict. This can result in difficulty reaching sources or sending footage or content back to newsrooms, as it did in Pakistan, but this can also leave journalists vulnerable if violence breaks out.

*“During the October 28, 2023 rally, there was an attack on journalists, but we didn't know how many journalists were attacked, and where. If there was internet, we could have avoided that area. Instead, we had to wait for someone to make a phone call and let us know where to go.”- a Bangladeshi reporter.*⁷⁵

Although a variety of circumvention tools exist, journalists need to be trained on both circumvention tools and strategies, and on the privacy and safety risks involved with tools like free VPNs or messaging apps that are not end-to-end encrypted. The experiences of media outlets in Burma, who benefitted from having a well-established digital rights community with roots in journalism, point to the importance of fostering such partnerships to prepare media outlets to navigate shutdowns.

Unfortunately, a country with an active digital rights community does not guarantee success. India, for instance, has an active digital rights community with organizations that have a strong track record in advocating against internet shutdowns. However, despite some success in legal advocacy by organizations like the Internet Freedom Foundation or in documenting shutdowns by the Software Freedom Law Center, India, capacity-building efforts and resources to help media outlets tackle the impact of shutdowns have been inadequate.

A recent study under Internews' OPTIMA project found that while civil society in India has moderate to high capacity for strategic litigation and research, their capacity to support more vulnerable communities during shutdowns is low.⁷⁶

As a result, unlike Burma, where journalists had the support of civil society organizations with experience working from exile, cross-border collaboration did not occur in Kashmir. According to journalists and experts, the local civil society groups that may have supported them were also under pressure.⁷⁷ A freelance journalist from Kashmir notes: “Innovation has yet to happen because there is no civil society support, and in fact, civil society does not even exist anymore in Kashmir.”⁷⁸

Kashmiri journalists report that they have not received training on how to handle internet shutdowns and often resort to spontaneous reactions, like using VPNs without clearly understanding the safety risks.

Activists acknowledge the lack of training and capacity-building to tackle shutdowns in regions like Kashmir and Manipur. It is risky to operate in such environments because governments justify shutdowns by citing national security aims, such as combating terrorism and maintaining public order during religious or political violence. Additionally, restrictive foreign contribution laws stifle local and international NGOs, limiting the scope of collaborations in fighting digital repression.⁷⁹

The lack of capacity within traditional civil society to confront and respond to internet shutdowns is prevalent in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. In Bangladesh, for example, there have been few advocacy efforts focused on shutdowns.⁸⁰ This is due to a lack of strong organizations with the knowledge and technical skills to advocate for digital rights, and an overarching advocacy approach that is reactive - during shutdowns, rather than proactive - to prevent and prepare for such incidents.⁸¹

In Pakistan, one of the reasons for the lack of preparedness among newsrooms is “the lack of interest among international media development organizations to work in Pakistan and to build Pakistani journalists' technological capacities.”⁸²

Civil society organizations can play an effective role in helping media outlets counter internet censorship by documenting shutdowns for evidence-based advocacy, producing research showing the adverse impact of shutdowns on news reporting, creating awareness among media, building the technical capacity of newsrooms for circumvention, and acting as a resource hub for tools and solutions when needed.

However, civil society can play this role effectively only when there is a shared culture of trust and engagement among newsrooms, digital rights groups, and media development organizations. Internet shutdowns have largely been confined to the agenda of digital rights groups, who often have less access to newsrooms than media support groups.

On the other hand, while traditionally strong media development organizations have access to newsrooms, tackling internet censorship has seldom been a media development priority. This is why journalists and activists have called for greater collaboration to better support the media in the face of internet censorship.⁸³

“[Success] can be achieved by working through collaborations between global and local media development organizations and empowering local groups to engage with newsrooms in a more systematic and transparent way.” – a digital rights activist from Pakistan.⁸⁴

Recommendations

Ultimately the issue of governments deploying internet shutdowns and other intentional disruptions to hamper free speech and free expression is a critical human rights violation and true eradication of the practice would require stricter international interventions and norm settings. However, there are ways that the media development sector, the human rights and digital rights communities, and the citizens and journalists facing these shutdowns can work individually and collaboratively to lessen the devastating impacts that internet shutdowns have.

Experts argue that strategic litigation is necessary for combatting shutdowns since censorship is often imposed under legal jurisdiction. However, this approach requires substantial evidence and data to support the cases in court. In India, notable litigations, such as the Anuradha Bhasin case and the Foundation for Media Professionals (FMP) case, have demanded proportionate restrictions and the restoration of 4G internet services in Jammu and Kashmir in 2020.⁸⁵

The former case established that every order restricting internet access must be reviewed by a Review Committee to ensure procedural and substantive safeguards. The latter case reinforced accountability by creating a Special Committee to examine the necessity of internet restrictions and consider alternatives. Unfortunately, in a majority of shutdown cases, authorities fail to publish shutdown directives or review committee orders, leaving citizens to try and obtain them through right-to-information requests, which are often denied or left unanswered until the shutdown is over.⁸⁶

In Sri Lanka, civil society groups like Hashtag Generation have attempted to gain transparency around internet shutdowns by filing Right to Information (RTI) requests with the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRCSL) and Sri Lankan Internet Service Providers (ISPs).⁸⁷

Both requests were rejected - one on national security grounds, the other because ISPs aren't considered public authorities under the RTI Act, said a Sri Lanka-based researcher working in a digital rights organization.⁸⁸ She underscored the need for stronger collaboration between civil society and media organizations, noting that media coverage is essential for amplifying the impact of civil society's efforts as it informs the public and holds authorities accountable.

“I don't think you can solve a political problem using technical language. Honestly, you cannot hold [the government] accountable that way. The thing is, we put pressure on the government. How do we do that? We record it, document its impact, and ask tough questions.” - a digital rights activist in India.⁸⁹

While strategic litigation and broad strokes advocacy at national and international levels are necessary components of fighting the practice of internet shutdowns, they are not easiest for media development organizations, civil society, or journalists to implement, nor can they be effective without broader evidence and cooperation between all stakeholders.

Media development organizations, journalists and newsrooms, and digital rights communities must ensure that newsrooms are resilient to the censorship threats against them and have access to localized circumvention technologies and the knowledge to utilize them safely. Additionally, increased alignment between the media development sector and the digital rights community needs to lead to increased evidence about how internet shutdowns affect media ecosystems and the broader information space. Finally, the media must be perceived as a key ally in the fight against censorship more broadly.

Increased Newsroom Resilience

Usually when an internet shutdown occurs, the initial response in newsrooms is one of shock. The shutdown typically coincides with highly newsworthy events such as violence, protests, rallies, elections, or conflicts. They often catch journalists off guard and leave them struggling to respond quickly and effectively. During a shutdown, journalists are often unsure of how to communicate and share photos, videos, and other evidence with their newsrooms while maintaining their own safety and security. These issues largely stem from a lack of awareness and preparedness.

Preparedness is key in responding to the threats and adverse effects of internet shutdowns. Journalists require tailored training programs with a specific focus on internet shutdowns, especially in the lead-up to events like elections. However, local and hyper local outlets seldom have the privilege to receive shutdown circumvention training or resources.

Journalists and activists in both Sri Lanka and Pakistan report that there are no formal channels within media organizations to access resources, tools, or guidelines for handling these digital restrictions. They noted that the only journalist training programs they were given emphasized news ethics and reporting practices.⁹⁰

While highlighting important topics, these trainings did not focus on digital privacy and security, nor did they cover any topics related to digital journalism. They leave a knowledge gap for the journalists where topics directly related to some of the largest issues the journalists are facing in their everyday work, such as censorship and digital safety, are not taught or discussed in a mainstream way.

Although internet shutdowns are common in several South and Southeast Asian countries, addressing their impact on the news sector has not evolved as a core media development issue. The conventional approach to tackling or circumventing network disruptions has broadly been a part of digital security training offered by digital rights and media development organizations, rather than a distinct topic in its own right.

Even in Burma, where CSOs actively engage with journalists by providing training and tools for alternative communications and circumventions, it has benefited the journalists in exile more than the citizen journalists and journalists on the ground inside conflict regions.

“In the last three years, we have been trained four or five times, but not [for skills] related to internet shutdowns - like how to work or how to send news during a shutdown - but these are very important to learn now.” — an editor from Rakhine, Burma.⁹¹

Newsrooms need additional training not only on how to circumvent censorship, but also on how to grasp the basics of network disruption - understanding potential triggering events and how to plan around them. Additionally, unlike large media organizations in the Global North that have established standard operating procedures (SOPs) for digital security and circumvention tactics, small and independent newsrooms in South and Southeast Asia lack comprehensive guidelines or SOPs for navigating internet shutdowns.

Experts suggest that media development initiatives can support small and medium outlets in shutdown-prone countries in developing their own safety and communication protocols, thereby enabling them to quickly respond to internet shutdowns.

“Media organizations [who are well-funded or in the Global North] can hire an IT guy or digital security expert to craft their safety policies. Staff can follow a written policy with ease, without any doubt or any insecurities in mind, but small media organizations lack these kinds of resources.” – an expert from Thailand.⁹²

Access to Anti-Censorship Technology

One major hurdle journalists encounter in areas prone to internet shutdowns is the limited functionality of existing circumvention tools, whether because the tools are too new and unreliable or because they are not sufficiently localized. Experimental technology can be costly to newsrooms already facing budgetary constraints and one-size-fits-most solutions can be dangerous to journalists operating in exceptional circumstances like conflict zones and repressive environments. Developers and the media must coordinate more frequently to tailor existing tools and ensure that journalists have safe, easy mechanisms for circumventing internet disruptions.

According to experts in Burma, encrypted messaging apps, which are preferred to ensure privacy and safety, can sometimes compromise the safety of journalists by exposing phone numbers and lead to arrests. As a result, there is a pressing need for localized circumvention tools tailored to the specific challenges faced by journalists in these regions. While some progress has been made in this area, further support for software development and localization efforts is necessary to address this critical gap.

During mobile internet blackouts, journalists and activists often resort to Bluetooth or Wi-Fi based communication apps. However, these apps only operate in a short range and are often ineffective in communicating in conflict situations. Some experts see promise in alternative communication technologies like LoRa (Long Range).⁹³ LoRa is a low-power, wide-area network (LPWAN) technology that allows users to transmit data over longer distances without relying on the internet.

However, this technology is not yet at a point where it can reliably be used as an alternative form of communication. It cannot yet handle high data consumption tasks, such as sending photos or videos. “We tested LoRa devices and found the bandwidth too low for practical use, allowing only three English sentences or one and a half sentences in Burmese due to Unicode's higher data consumption,” said an expert.⁹⁴ According to him, in Burma, if LoRa devices could transmit voice recordings, it would be a game-changer, as the devices are affordable, portable, and could facilitate easier communication through mesh networks.

There are examples from other regions where developers and civil society have worked together to create innovative, tailored solutions. In Cameroon, young tech-savvy individuals have developed technology like SMS Without Borders, which allows users to send emails or social media messages without an active internet connection,⁹⁵ to assist others in communications during internet shutdowns.

Innovation and localization of tools such as Briar or Bridgify, which are secure chat apps that come with built-in end-to-end encryption designed for activists and journalists, can empower communities to

address communication barriers effectively. With the support of media development organizations, journalists can better leverage these technologies and relationships with tech partners to continue reporting during crises and conflicts.

In addition to new technologies, access to existing alternative communication tools becomes crucial for journalists and media outlets in shutdown-prone areas. For instance, during the 2019 internet shutdowns in Sudan, many turned to foreign SIM cards and satellite phones to stay connected. Civil society organizations played a vital role in providing these tools, which would otherwise prove difficult or impossible to obtain, to journalists and activists in the region.

While these technologies offer a possible workaround for communication during internet shutdowns, they also present new challenges and vulnerabilities. The high costs associated with satellite-based communications and roaming fees for foreign SIM cards make them impractical for many newsrooms and independent freelancers. The government scrutiny of foreign SIM cards and the risks involved in transporting satellite phones to conflict regions and across government checkpoints pose real security concerns.

However, experts also note that international SIM cards have proven useful in some contexts. They suggest that SIM cards from countries with robust democratic principles may offer greater safety, privacy, and security for users. Despite the challenges, the availability of these alternative communication tools remains essential for maintaining connectivity and information flow during periods of internet shutdowns.⁹⁶

Alignment between Media Development and Digital Rights Communities

Most newsrooms are under-resourced and they need the tools and infrastructure necessary to tackle internet shutdowns. Journalists, particularly from small and independent newsrooms, do not know how to access a secure VPN, which types of communication tools they should use during a blackout, or how to access international SIM cards or satellite phones. Without a robust, aligned network of international and national partnerships to rely on, they can remain secluded from advancements in technology that can aid their work and they can be unable to acquire the necessary infrastructure and tools.

In countries where shutdowns are prevalent, a support hub or a civil society-led help desk can be a vital resource for journalists. These services provide quick, real-time knowledge and tools such as reliable and safe VPNs, international SIM cards and burner phones. As a rapid response tool, these resource-hubs can offer, or support the development of, localized solutions ranging from alternative communication technologies, guides, tip-sheets, guidelines and practical advice when it's most needed.

Media development organizations can play a crucial role in supporting newsrooms when they are faced with internet throttling by providing infrastructure such as broadband connections in critical locations, particularly during elections, that allow newsrooms to maintain connectivity and access information. A journalist from Bangladesh noted, "I don't think any broadcast media or journalist in Bangladesh got any type of support to overcome the shutdown challenges. However, it is very necessary because these types of shutdowns will happen again and again."⁹⁷

Media development organizations can play the role of connectors, working with digital rights groups to ensure that the tools they make are getting into the rights newsrooms. Journalists often have different needs than the users' digital rights groups are used to working with. For example, journalists often have more increased sensitivities; their actions are more heavily surveilled in contexts prone to shutdowns and their personal safety is often much more at risk. Media development organizations can ensure that on-the-ground partners in newsrooms can trust the help they are receiving from vetted digital rights groups.

Media Must Be Perceived as a Key Ally Against Censorship

Internet shutdowns and their impacts are often under-reported in the media. Most reporting tends to treat them as isolated events or simply relay government information without going into the broader implications. Journalists have a critical role to play in highlighting these impacts and bringing them to the forefront of public discourse. By shedding light on how shutdowns disrupt access to information, stifle freedom of expression, and impede the functioning of the media, journalists can contribute to a better understanding of the issue and advocate for change.

“Media has to amplify [an internet shutdown] and let the others know how it impacts freedom of press, and civil society can only amplify if media capture their own troubles.” – a representative of a global internet freedom organization⁹⁸

By the same token, more research and data collection are needed to help activists argue against the use of internet shutdowns as a tool to curb the spread of mis- and disinformation and hate speech. Governments often use public safety arguments to justify shutting down the internet.

Collecting data on the impacts of internet shutdowns on the spread of misinformation, as well as their impacts on independent media and the economic climate more broadly, can create a base of evidence for researchers and activists. As the human rights community views media more as a trusted source of information and allyship, they can propose more iterative, research-backed solutions to routinized censorship. This evidence base can be used to implore the media development sector and large donors to open more funding streams.

Media sustainability in the face of prolonged shutdowns has emerged as a major challenge in the region often intertwined with armed, prolonged political conflict. In Kashmir, the impact of shutdowns, compounded by broader repression of independent media, has forced several outlets to collapse. Revenue losses due to internet shutdowns, scared-off investments, and limited funds for sustainability are exacerbated by local laws that restrict grants to independent media. In Burma, advertising revenue for major media outlets has dried up,⁹⁹ and while exiled outlets continue to mobilize donor funding, such support is reportedly declining.¹⁰⁰

The situation for local media in high-conflict areas like Rakhine is even more dire, as mentioned separately by two journalists. Survival itself is a life-or-death struggle and the ability to secure grants is not a realistic priority. Even sending salaries or fees to journalists within conflict zones has become increasingly risky and life-threatening, further undermining the sustainability of both media outlets and journalists.

There are regional examples of adapting to increased censorship and threats. For example, The Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) decentralized its operations when most of its staff moved into exile. DVB sets up 'satellite stations' in Oslo, Melbourne, Atlanta, Toronto, and Chiang Mai, all coordinated under a non-profit entity based in Thailand - a complex structure that also better facilitates local fundraising.¹⁰¹

Such examples have the potential to inspire other outlets in conflict areas. Media development organizations must explore more effective approaches to support struggling media in conflict regions, especially in addressing financial sustainability, and a more robust evidence base can help aid this process.

Conclusion

The relentless struggle of the media to persist in delivering vital information to the public during internet shutdowns remains largely unseen, frequently overlooked, and under-researched. While the digital age has made connectivity indispensable for news gathering, dissemination, and financial sustainability, shutdowns disrupt these essential functions. This significantly hampers both journalists' ability to report and citizens' access to credible, factual information.

As journalists and media adapt to the growing frequency of internet shutdowns, many are forced to rely on traditional news distribution methods. Better equipped and higher capacity outlets use VPNs where relevant, and in rare cases adopt alternative communication technologies such as LoRa or Starlink, despite the high costs and legal risks involved.

These adaptations, while resourceful, often occur in an ad-hoc manner to meet immediate needs, revealing critical gaps in the necessary skills and preparedness within newsrooms. The increasing number of journalists being forced into exile highlights their growing vulnerability to these disruptions and the chilling effect internet shutdowns are having on news production and distribution.

This situation underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive and coordinated response from media development and digital rights organizations. To effectively support journalists, these organizations must focus on building newsroom capacity, localizing technologies to circumvent disruptions, and creating robust support systems in order to provide alternative connectivity options and establish newsroom protocols and processes to respond adequately. Moreover, there must be a concerted effort to increase reporting on shutdown incidents to raise global awareness of these ongoing threats to free expression. The role of the media itself in exposing censorship and advocating against such practices is crucial, as it underscores the adverse impacts on press freedom and the broader implications for society.

There must be a greater understanding that internet shutdowns are not just about media production, distribution, and access to information; they also directly threaten the safety and security of journalists and jeopardize the sustainability of the media industry. Recognizing this is critical for shaping development efforts that build media resilience against digital repression and empower the media to fulfill its essential role in sustaining democratic societies and healthy information environments.

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- ⁹³ Semtech, "What Is LoRa?," <https://www.semtech.com/lora/what-is-lora>, accessed June 13, 2024.
- ⁹⁴ An alternative communication expert from Thailand in an interview with Miraj Ahmed Chowdhury, February 4, 2024.
- ⁹⁵ For more information, see: <https://smswithoutborders.com/>.
- ⁹⁶ A global internet freedom representative from Ghana in an interview with Miraj Ahmed Chowdhury, March 4, 2024.

⁹⁷ Journalist from Bangladesh, in an interview with author, March 11, 2024.

⁹⁸ A global internet freedom representative from Ghana in an interview with Miraj Ahmed Chowdhury, March 4, 2024.

⁹⁹ David Maas, "Reporting in the shadows in Myanmar: The case of the Democratic Voice of Burma," International Journalists' Network, April 22, 2024, <https://ijnet.org/en/story/reporting-shadows-myanmar-case-democratic-voice-burma>.

¹⁰⁰ Tommy Walker, "Myanmar's Media Fight for Survival of Independent Journalism," *Voice of America*, July 11, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/myanmar-s-media-fight-for-survival-of-independent-journalism-/7174908.html>.

¹⁰¹ David Maas, "Reporting in the shadows in Myanmar."