



optima

Internet Shutdown Advocacy in Bangladesh: How to Prepare, Prevent Resist.

A Needs and Capacity Assessment.

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About this Report

Internet shutdowns are on the rise around the globe. In 2021, AccessNow documented at least 182 internet shutdowns in 34 countries, affecting the ability of millions of disconnected people to use the internet to access health, educational, social, political, and economic resources.

Governments shut down the internet for various reasons; to restrict the circulation of alternative information, to assert control during elections, protests, contentious political moments; and to target marginalized racial or ethnic communities. Governments often claim that these measures are meant to prevent the circulation of hate speech and ensure public safety and security. Over the few years, human rights advocates have argued that depriving large populations access to the internet is not a necessary and proportionate response to these real problems. The United Nations Human Rights Council condemned such intentional restrictions in a non-binding 2016 resolution.

When most people think about an internet shutdown, they think about full-scale network blackouts or blanket shutdowns; when the government hits the “kill switch” and orders internet service providers to disconnect a population from all forms of internet connection. However, there are other, more targeted (and harder to verify and measure) forms of internet shutdowns, including the blocking of popular social media platforms and messaging apps, and throttling bandwidth such that the internet is so slow that users cannot effectively access or share information. As described by Gustaf Björkstén in Accessnow’s [“Taxonomy of Internet Shutdowns: The Technologies Behind Network Interference”](#), as international pressure and scrutiny increases, governments are increasingly using “targeted shutdowns, throttling, app blocking, or other less obvious forms of disruption, to escape accountability”. Governments often use a mix of different technical approaches to block internet access, for example by throttling connectivity and blocking specific social media platforms in the lead up to an election, and eventually shutting down the entire network.

**No two shutdowns are alike.
Advocacy needs to be responsive
to local threats, challenges, and needs.**

For the past several years, Internews’ OPTIMA project has been working with civil society organizations in countries around the world to better prepare for, prevent, and advocate against internet shutdowns.

DEFINING INTERNET SHUTDOWN

For the purpose of this report, an “internet shutdown” is defined broadly to include not only internet blackouts (when the government completely cuts off access to the internet) but also internet throttling (when the network is deliberately slowed) and major instances of blocking (when major social media platforms and messaging applications are blocked).

As part of this process, Internews conducted a global survey of digital- rights organizations in 2020 to produce the [Internet Shutdown Advocacy Needs Assessment Report](#). This report outlined the key challenges that advocates face when confronted with the threat of internet shutdowns, perceived socio-economic impacts of shutdowns, and key resources and skills gaps that civil society needs in these countries to engage in longer term and more strategic advocacy against shutdowns. Through this survey-based research respondents noted that resource constraints and the rapid-response nature of advocacy around shutdowns leads to short-term campaigns focused on ending a shutdown rather than longer-term advocacy to prevent future shutdowns. They also repeatedly called for support and resources to build multi-sector national coalitions and raise public awareness about internet shutdowns and circumvention strategies. In response, OPTIMA has worked with civil society groups in countries in Africa and Asia to build 'Prepare & Prevent' multistakeholder networks devoted to building localized resources, trainings and advocacy strategies to mitigate internet shutdowns and protect those who are the most vulnerable and targeted. OPTIMA has also developed the [Prepare, Prevent, Resist Internet Shutdowns Resource Library, interactive internet shutdown risk assessment and resource guide](#), and the [OPTIMA network measurement training](#).

Coalitions such as #keepiton, a group of more than 280 organizations from 105 countries who are challenging internet shutdowns, are doing significant work to highlight the threat of internet shutdowns at the international stage, pressure governments, document shutdowns and their impacts, track trends through the keepiton data tracker & annual reports, and coordinate amongst diverse actors in countries experiencing internet shutdowns. **Additional efforts (and resources) are needed to support internet shutdown advocacy at the national level;** to understand the nuanced ways that internet shutdowns impact specific vulnerable populations, to engage in longer-term efforts to

better prepare key groups for potential shutdowns and to build multi-sectoral coalitions able to deter governments from using internet shutdowns.

For this reason, we have worked with key digital rights organizations in four countries to produce this series of Internet Shutdown Advocacy Needs Assessments. These reports seek to better understand the nuanced ways in which internet shutdowns occur in different countries, including:

- the patterns and trends when it comes to the technical mechanisms used in specific places to shut down the internet
- the diverse political and social triggering events and justifications that governments provide for shutting down the internet
- perceptions of the wider impact of shutdowns on economies and societies
- the differential impacts that shutdowns have on specific vulnerable groups and marginalized populations
- the laws and regulations in these countries that contribute to an enabling environment for internet shutdowns and inhibit advocacy around censorship and internet shutdowns
- perceptions about future risk of internet shutdowns
- perceptions about civil society preparedness and advocacy capacity in a variety of areas such as awareness raising and stakeholder engagement, documentation of impact and network measurement, circumvention strategies and protecting vulnerable communities, and building legal capacity to engage in litigation

This research is not simply meant to inform global audiences about specific shutdown threats and civil society perceptions in these countries, but also to serve as a starting point to collaboratively develop national advocacy strategies and engage in deliberate outreach, training and resource development to target identified challenges and needs in each country. These needs assessments extended the survey-based methodology used in the 2020 report to localize and build in additional space for deliberation, debate, and discussion amongst key communities. The methodology for each report included three stages:

1. literature reviews on internet shutdown history & background
2. Survey of key stakeholders: Internews & partner organizations in each country built, localized, and translated survey questionnaires. These surveys were then distributed to target numbers of key stakeholders who are impacted by internet shutdowns or influential in internet shutdown advocacy.
3. Community deliberation and focus groups: Survey findings were analyzed and presented during in-person workshops in each country, inviting respondents and other key stakeholders from the Prepare & Prevent networks to participate to discuss the findings, provide additional nuance or detail, uncover disagreements or differences within stakeholder groups, and to identify recommendations for advocacy strategy and distribution of resources.

It is important to note that the results described in this report, while based on survey findings, are not representative of wider populations in these countries. Our methodology specifically sought to uncover the perceptions and experiences of certain communities central to internet shutdown advocacy. Thus, we ask you to consider this research as largely qualitative in its methods and its findings, and to understand that percentages used throughout this report represent a relatively small non-generalizable sample size.

We hope that these reports are useful to advocacy communities in these four countries as well as to the wider internet shutdown community, donor organizations, and international groups looking to support internet shutdown advocacy. We would welcome and encourage replication of our needs assessment process and methodology in other countries experiencing or at risk of experiencing shutdowns. Please reach out to the authors for more information on this and other OPTIMA internet shutdown advocacy needs reports, our methodology, and our Prepare & Prevent networks and resources.

“The contribution of people on the ground in the fight against internet shutdowns is vital around the world — and it will remain that way until we end this rights-abusing practice for good. We rely on people to report, monitor, run measurements and provide context whenever the internet is shut down. Understanding the local context is crucial in pushing back against internet shutdowns globally.”

Felicia Anthonio

Introduction

Users in Bangladesh have experienced internet shutdowns in various forms almost every year since 2009. Past shutdowns have included wholesale network blackouts, blocking of communication apps and social media sites, and deliberate slowing (“throttling”) of mobile internet speeds. While the government has blamed technical problems or justified such incidents by citing security reasons or a need to combat disinformation, most incidents occurred during protests, elections, and political events, indicating that shutdowns are often deployed to control information for political purposes.

“Shutdowns disrupt the free flow of information and create a cover of darkness that shields human rights abuses from public scrutiny,” the [#KeepitOn coalition](#) wrote recently in a public [letter](#) to the Bangladesh government. “Disinformation and hate speech online are threats to the democracy, peace, and stability of many countries including Bangladesh. However, no evidence suggests that using broad and disproportionate measures like shutdowns and throttling will stop the spread of disinformation and propaganda online,” the coalition added.

It is extremely difficult to estimate the cost and negative impact of an internet shutdown. One day of an internet shutdown [is estimated to cost Bangladesh](#) more than US \$78 million. According to the NetBlocks global internet monitor’s [Cost of Shutdown Tool](#), which helps quantify the economic impact of shutdowns, one day of such a cutoff is estimated to cost Bangladesh more than US \$78 million. In addition to the wide-reaching impact on the country’s economy, marginalized communities are disproportionately impacted, depriving already vulnerable people of income, safe and secure communications, and opportunities to participate in civic discourse and political processes. Internet shutdowns also make it difficult for journalists and activists, who already face significant challenges in the country, to gather and share factual and well-sourced information.

Bangladesh’s government actively promotes a “Digital Bangladesh” agenda “to benefit all so as to avoid the perils of the digital divide,” according to its [Strategic Priorities of Digital Bangladesh](#). One of the intended outcomes of this strategy is that “Citizens of the country irrespective of economic condition, education, race, ethnicity, profession, gender are connected through a network of mobile communications, broadband Internet, audio-visual media for exchanging information and accessing services.” Shutdowns not only contradict this national vision but also put the country at reputational risk for violating human rights as defined by international law and United Nations resolutions.

Civil society plays a critical role, not only to push for transparency and accountability in decision-making about network disruption but also to make citizens and key groups aware of shutdowns and provide resources so they can prepare and respond. However, thus far, there have been few advocacy efforts focused on shutdowns, mainly due to a lack of knowledge and technical skills to advocate for digital rights and the absence of strong organizations in this sphere. The advocacy that does take place is often limited to reactive responses during shutdowns rather than proactive advocacy to prevent and prepare for such incidents.

Bangladesh is undergoing a digital transformation and there is a strong political will to foster digital growth. Internet shutdowns undermine the very idea of Digital Bangladesh, but its social, economic, and political consequences are not well-discussed, well-researched, nor debated within the country. This study attempts to assess what Bangladesh civil society and other stakeholders can do to prepare for and prevent internet censorship, what skills and capacities they might need, and how a freer internet agenda can be achieved holistically – not only in policies but also in practice.

Through a survey of civil society stakeholders as well as co-designed workshops, this report examines how Bangladeshi civil society views advocacy challenges related to internet shutdowns, perceptions on future internet shutdown risks, and the resources required to better prepare for and prevent shutdowns.

The recommendations included at the end of the report are based on collective reflections around these findings and determinations of the strategic priorities of the Bangladeshi “Prepare & Prevent” network. These recommendations are currently being implemented through Internews’ OPTIMA project, and we encourage interested parties to contact the authors to participate in coalition activities and to support this work.



Key Findings

Shutdowns are common.

Bangladesh has experienced at least 17 shutdowns since 2012 under various circumstances, including tackling communal riots, controlling civic and political protests, and elections. A large majority (88%) of respondents said they had experienced an internet shutdown in the past three years and a half of them had had such an experience within one year.

Shutdowns are likely to continue to occur in the future and are supported by the law.

A majority (58%) of the civil society, digital-rights, and other community leaders surveyed for this report believe that shutdowns are somewhat or very likely to happen in the next three years, and that laws enable the authorities to disrupt the internet whenever they determine such measures are necessary.

Shutdowns are economically and socially costly.

When asked about the main impacts of internet shutdowns, survey participants report significant economic losses, with 82% of the respondents reporting that the greatest effect is on private enterprises that do business online. Respondents also reported that internet shutdowns result in the spread of rumors and speculation and create an environment of “darkness,” in which respondents are unable to communicate with friends, family, and others, and thus quickly feel isolated from the rest of the world. Protesters, election observers, and journalists report that shutdowns significantly impact their abilities to organize, monitor elections, and report on major events.



Key Internet Shutdown ‘Triggers’

- The most common justification government authorities cite for censorship and internet shutdowns in Bangladesh is to prevent or stop violence and instability.
- In 2019, authorities cut off access to mobile internet in Rohingya refugee camps, citing security reasons that rights organizations including Human Rights Watch found disproportionate.
- Civic protests (such as the 2018 student protest for road safety) and elections also ignite nationwide bandwidth throttling and social media blockages, but authorities continued to justify these restrictions by citing misinformation as well as technical problems.
- Instances of hate speech on social media to incite religious violence (for example, during the 2021 attacks on Hindu temples in Cumilla) have triggered nationwide shutdowns.
- Localized incidents of violence, as during the violent 2021 protests in Chattagram against the Indian prime minister’s visit, have triggered disproportionate nationwide shutdowns.

VPN awareness and usage among Bangladeshi civil society is high.

Bangladesh are generally aware of internet shutdowns, and a large majority (74%) of the survey respondents were quite familiar with and reported using VPN services when major communications sites are blocked. In the case of low bandwidth or no internet at all, respondents reported that they resort to using traditional mobile SMS and telephony.

However, civil society capacity for anti-shutdown advocacy is low.

Bangladeshi civil society is neither prepared to respond to shutdowns nor equipped with the skills to prevent them through effective advocacy. Only 6% of the respondents said civil society was prepared to confront a shutdown in the past, and 63% said they were unprepared for such moves in the future.

Bangladesh has a dearth of digital-rights expertise, especially in legal and technical fields related to internet shutdowns:

Participants say Bangladesh lacks an active digital-rights community as well as research on the impact of internet shutdowns to support advocacy. Neither is there any community at the local or national level that does network measurement to document disruptions and inform advocacy initiatives.



Background

Bangladesh, in its 50 years of independence, has positioned itself as one of [the fastest-growing economies](#) in Asia. Its GDP expanded at an annual average of about 6% for the past two decades, due to private-sector investment, exports, remittances, and steady domestic demand. At the same time, however, the degree and quality of the country's democracy has [declined](#), fueled by [corruption](#), repression of civil liberties, and sustained harassment of the opposition, critical media, and civil society. Bangladesh is rated as a ["hybrid regime"](#) in the U.S.-based Freedom House report "Freedom in the World 2021" and ranked among one of the lowest in the Committee to Protect Journalism's [World Press Freedom Index](#).

The stark contrast between economic aspirations and political repression is also reflected in the area of internet freedom. On the one hand, the government prioritizes the "Digital Bangladesh" agenda in development policies and ["employing technology to solve common people's developmental challenges;"](#) on the other hand, it adopts draconian laws like the Digital Security Act, a tool [to suppress critical expression](#) on the internet by making "negative propaganda" punishable by up to 14 years in prison. A recent regulation on social media and "over-the-top" digital media providers (OTT platforms, which provide content directly to consumers without intermediary services such as cable TV or satellite), and the draft Data Protection Act also received [strong criticism](#) from local civil society and international NGOs.

Bangladesh had an [internet penetration rate](#) of 31.5% of the population at the start of 2022, according to Data Reportal, an independent global digital data portal. However, the [latest data](#) from the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) says that, while the number of active internet connections in the country is 126.2 million, only 8.8% of the connections are broadband and mostly exclusive to urban populations. A study by the BRAC University Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) in Bangladesh also indicates a significant gender gap in internet access, as women are [62% less likely to use the internet](#) and 34% less likely to own a mobile phone than men. The digital divide is also much wider for the poorest in the country. A [2019 survey](#) by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics finds that, while while 75% of the richest 20% of households have access to the internet at home, the share is less than 10% for the poorest.

In addition to these digital disparities, Bangladesh is also one of the countries known for consistently blocking internet access. Access Now's [#KeepItOn](#) report finds that Bangladesh was one of the 34 countries in the world that blocked internet access in 2021. "In several incidents, the government interfered in internet communications, filtered or blocked access, restricted content, and censored websites or other communications and internet services," according to the U.S. State Department's [2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices](#). Freedom House rated Bangladesh "partly free" in [internet freedom](#), positioned at #40 between India (51) and Pakistan (25).

Trends in Censorship

In the past two decades, the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications, and Information Technology has imposed internet shutdown measures several times, in varying contexts and circumstances, and ranging from multi-day wholesale disconnection and bandwidth throttling to blocking of websites. As part of this report, authors developed a timeline of internet shutdowns in Bangladesh from the year 2012 to 2022 (see Appendix XXX) and found and analyzed 17 reported incidents of different forms of network disruptions. To develop this timeline, this study consulted Access Now's Shutdown Tracker Optimization Project (STOP) data, major global reports on human rights (including from Freedom House), news articles, and social media posts to confirm and corroborate incidents, and any government publications providing justification and context.

Restrictions on major social media sites in Bangladesh date as early as February 2009, in the aftermath of a [mutiny by paramilitary soldiers](#) who allegedly killed more than 70 people, including 57 army officers, over two days. The government blocked access to YouTube, ostensibly for hosting content deemed to be "subversive to the state." The first report of a nationwide internet shutdown in Bangladesh occurred in [November 2015 for more than an hour](#), blocking Facebook, Viber, and WhatsApp. BTRC later said the outage occurred "mistakenly." The country has experienced varying

forms of internet shutdowns every year in the past decade, except for 2014 and 2017. While the authorities cited security, disinformation, and technical issues to justify the shutdown orders, most of the incidents occurred during – or when there were risks of -- protests, political instability, religious violence, or contentious elections.

On March 26, 2021, the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's --independence -- and following a deadly protest opposing a visit from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi -- mobile internet reportedly [slowed down in many places](#) including Dhaka and Chattagram, and Facebook and its Messenger service were blocked for [more than 72 hours](#). BTRC said the outage was due to a [technical problem](#).

Authorities [restricted 3G and 4G mobile services in Rohingya refugee camps](#) in September 2019, following a large gathering of the refugees to mark the second anniversary of their exodus from Myanmar. The restriction was lifted in August 2020 after repeated requests from the [United Nations refugee agency UNHCR](#) and [other humanitarian and advocacy groups](#), including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Article 19. Slowdowns of mobile internet across the country also have been imposed before major uprisings, including the student-run protests for safer roads and other reforms in 2018, as [BTRC reportedly ordered service providers](#) to shut down high-speed mobile internet. A nationwide throttling of mobile internet was observed ahead of the [Dec. 30, 2018, parliamentary election](#). In a more recent incident, mobile internet in Dhaka's New Market area was restricted in April 2022, as [clashes](#) intensified between college students and local traders over an alleged beating of two child laborers by a shop owner.

Access to social media platforms and/or messaging services, including Skype, Messenger, WhatsApp, and Viber also has been blocked at times. In November 2018, such services reportedly were blocked to prevent the acting chairperson of the opposition party from [interviewing electoral aspirants](#). Earlier incidents included a shutdown in November 2015, reportedly to prevent fallout [after the Supreme Court upheld the death penalty of two war criminals](#); in January 2015

[over “security concerns” amid political violence](#); and in May 2010 after satirical images of the Prophet Muhammad and certain political leaders were circulated on social media.

The trends also suggest a varied and evolving approach to restricting access. For example, from 2012 to 2016, the government mostly blocked social media sites and communication apps to curb violence and protest. [Since a 2016 shutdown drill -- aimed at testing the capability of authorities to shut down networks in response to terror attacks](#) -- most cutoffs have targeted mobile networks by shutting down 3G and 4G internet services. According to Statista, the number of [mobile internet subscriptions](#) per 100 inhabitants in Bangladesh is 17 times higher than [fixed broadband subscriptions](#).

Legal Context

The freedoms of thought, conscience, and speech – of which the right to information is considered to be an inalienable component – are recognized as fundamental rights in the Bangladesh Constitution, [subject to reasonable restrictions imposed by law on eight qualified grounds](#). However, the [Bangladesh Telecommunications Act of 2001](#) authorizes officials to impose restrictions on internet access, based on vague grounds that allow broad interpretations. Under sections 30 and 31, the law mandates powers and responsibilities to BTRC to regulate the establishment, operation, and maintenance of telecommunication services in Bangladesh; carry out the responsibilities assigned and the directions issued by the government; issue necessary enforcement orders; provide instructions or guidelines to licensees and service providers; and “exercise all powers that are necessary to perform its functions and duties.” Under section 46, the BTRC may, at any time, suspend or cancel a license, if it has reason to believe that the licensee has contravened any provision of the 2001 Act or “any regulations made thereunder, or violated any condition of the license.”

Under the terms and conditions (clause 3.17) of the license issued to ISPs, licensees are required to “take adequate precaution and preventive measures against communication of false and threatening message to the end users.” Another clause (3.21) states that “licensee shall not do anything while providing internet and data services which is against the national security and interest.” Similarly, licensing terms for internet interconnection exchange operators (clause 25) hold that a license can be canceled if any licensee has disclosed or is involved with the disclosure of any information to anybody “performing any illegal activities that may hamper National Security, Integrity, Sovereignty, Stability and Harmony;” or who “violates or purports to violate” any sections, terms or decisions of the government. Such clauses can be found in other telecom licenses as well.

The broad power and vague grounds of these legal obligations and regulations broaden the ambit of the permissible restrictions and effectively dilute the fundamental rights ensured by the Constitution. It creates scope for government authorities to take discretionary decisions and ignore the principles of necessity and proportionality in imposing a shutdown.

According to lawyers who participated in this research, local services providers – like ISPs and operators of international gateways and mobile networks – “unquestioningly comply with orders issued by the BTRC” based on perceived legal obligations and to reduce the potential risks to business continuity, including penalties, cancellation and non-renewal of licenses, or even imprisonment.

Advocacy Capacity

Public outcry from different stakeholders that leads to stopping or preventing shutdowns is rare but not unprecedented in Bangladesh.

In February 2018, the [government backtracked](#) from a decision to shut down mobile internet in an attempt to fight exam cheating, after several business associations – including the Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS), and the call center and outsourcing community – [criticized the move](#). Civil society organizations including Transparency International often issue isolated responses terming shutdowns as a rights violation.

An example of international advocacy to stop an ongoing shutdown was the case that affected Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar in 2019. In April 2020, a [group of 50 rights and aid organizations](#) – including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' Parliamentarians for Human Rights, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Rohingya Refugee Network -- appealed to Bangladesh's prime minister to end restrictions in Rohingya camps. It took almost a year to restore 3G and 4G services in Rohingya refugee camps, and that occurred as the government was reportedly under pressure from the United Nations, aid agencies, and human rights groups to lift the ban.

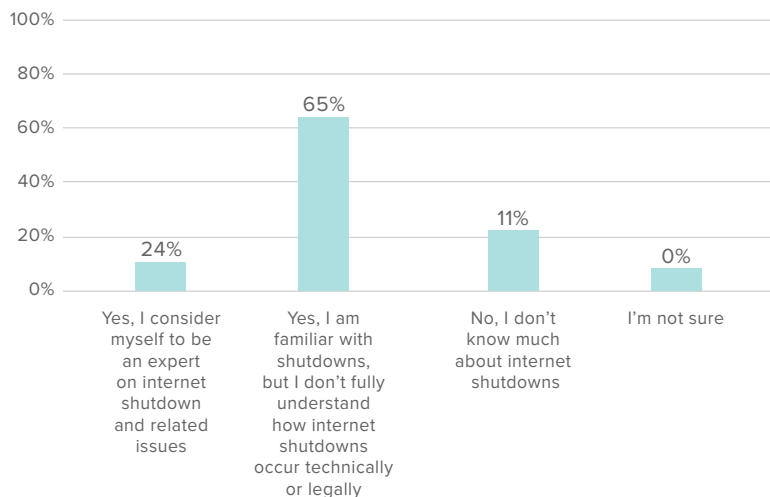


Detailed Findings

Shutdown Experience

Key Stakeholders in Bangladesh are broadly aware of internet shutdowns, as they have experienced restrictions several times in the past decade. In our survey, 88% of respondents said they had experienced an internet shutdown in the past three years. Irrespective of gender, profession, and region, a majority (65%) of respondents were familiar with the concept of internet shutdowns but reported that they do not understand how shutdowns happen technically and legally. A majority (70%) reported that they know the difference between a government-ordered internet shutdown and technical internet connectivity problems, while the rest were either not sure or unaware. About one in four identified as having expert knowledge of shutdowns.

Are you familiar with what an internet shutdown is?



Blocking social media sites and communications apps is the most frequent form of reported internet shutdown. Desk research suggests that from the year 2009, when YouTube was first blocked, this approach dominated until 2021, along with the blocking of Facebook, Twitter, Skype, Viber, and WhatsApp in varying circumstances. In the survey, 61% said that large social media sites are frequently blocked.

¹ N=54

Incidents of bandwidth throttling are increasing in frequency in Bangladesh. The 3G/4G internet network is the typical target of such restrictions, with government authorities ordering service providers [to make only 2G networks available](#), which has the effect of limiting people's ability to use mobile data to stream or upload pictures or videos. Such measures have been employed at the national, local, and even hyperlocal levels. Bangladesh has experienced nationwide suspensions of high-speed mobile internet multiple times, including during the 2018 elections and student protests and during religious violence in 2021. Local-level cutoffs include along the border with India in 2019, and hyperlocal shutdowns include a [2022 mobile internet suspension](#) in a targeted area of violence in the capital. About half (51%) of the survey respondents reported that the government often slows down internet speeds, while 20% said it rarely happens.

Blanket internet shutdowns affecting the entire network are rare in Bangladesh. Almost half of the survey respondents (45%) said a complete blackout of the internet rarely occurs, and 37% said it sometimes occurs. Such instances were mainly observed in 2015 and 2016; in one case, the government said it was a mistake, and another instance was a local shutdown drill in Dhaka. Data collected for this report to build the Bangladesh shutdown tracker (see Appendix XXX) suggests that 80% of these cases of blackout and throttling affect mobile networks only.

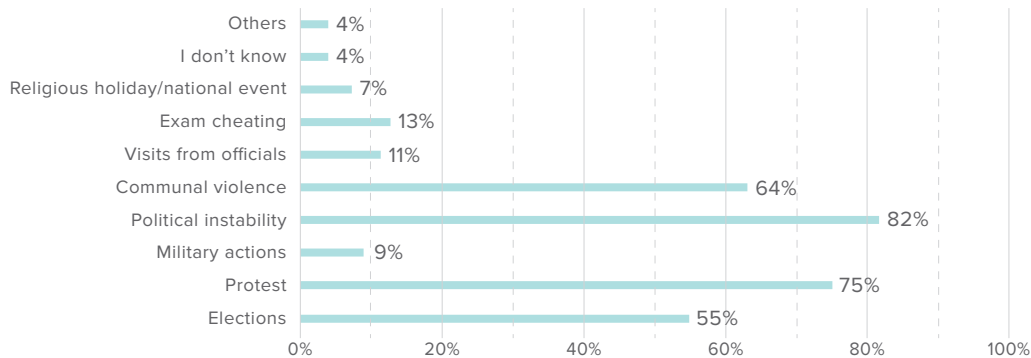
Reasons, Necessity, and Impact

Instability, protests, communal violence, and elections trigger internet shutdowns in Bangladesh. Political and security motivations play a significant role in such decisions. The shutdown timeline developed for this study as well as survey responses suggest that most of the shutdown events that have occurred in Bangladesh since 2012 have happened during religious and other violence (as reported by 28.4% of survey respondents) or been spurred by fear of political instability (21.3%), protests (21.3%), or elections (17%).

Interestingly, the most debate during the structured discussion workshops occurred on the issue of the necessity and proportionality of internet shutdowns. In both workshops – with the internet user group and the strategic advocacy group – participants were divided on the necessity of shutdown measures, as in cases when authorities imposed internet or social media cutoffs after the posting of inciteful social media messages.

Most of the minority representatives, who come from a variety of professions, argued that such measures are often necessary to stop the spread of hate speech over the internet and save minorities from violence. “When such rumors spread, I become concerned about my mother, a hundred miles away from me – whether she is safe and that

What do you believe the reasons have been for the government to shut down the internet? (Select all that apply)



² N=56



no one is attacking her. To stop such violence, I think often shutdowns are necessary,” said a female journalist who is a member of a religious minority group. Other participants said there is little evidence that network restrictions stop or curb violence.

Both groups agreed that such issues could be addressed over the long term with digital literacy programs and other measures to combat fake news and hate speech. They also agreed that throttling or shutting down the internet nationwide or in entire cities is a disproportionate response to violence that mainly affects a neighborhood or a town.

Laws in Bangladesh make it easier for the government to suspend the internet or censor online content. In addition to the vague and sweeping laws and regulations noted above (see Background section), survey respondents perceived the same problems as well. A majority (63%) marked laws as definitively or somewhat of an enabler of shutdowns. Respondents perceived the most common reasons for shutdowns as being security (35.7%), technical issues or mistakes (28.5%), and combating disinformation (14.3%).

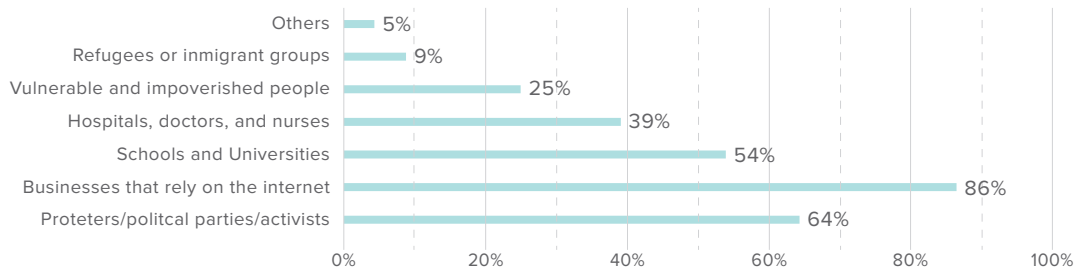
Respondents saw economic losses as a major impact of internet shutdowns. When asked about the impact on sectors and groups, 82% said e-commerce businesses are most affected but that shutdowns also affect the activities of protesters and political activists, as well as the education and health sectors.

Two workshop participants who run their small businesses on Facebook said they suffer on the day of a shutdown as orders stop coming in, and the resulting decline in sales often carries over for at least a couple of days after a shutdown has ended. Workshop participants noted that, in addition to a drop in sales for the vendor, shutdowns prevent hundreds and thousands of delivery people from earning income through online orders of grocery, food, and other products. This particularly affects urban unemployed youths who have benefited from the rise of e-commerce and Facebook-based businesses and have gone so far as to sell assets, borrow money, or spend savings to buy a bicycle to earn a living from delivery jobs. Furthermore, those jobs usually pay on a daily basis, so a day without internet is a day of lost wages.

Internet shutdowns are traumatic experiences for people living in Bangladesh. When asked to describe the specific impact that shutdowns have had on respondents personally, most (85%) report that shutdowns prevented them from communicating with friends and family, receiving news (77%), and doing their jobs (71%).

The workshops also surfaced other personal experiences of internet-outage impacts, ranging from the inability to order food and medicine online to the inaccessibility of tools necessary for education, particularly exams, and even the unavailability of banking services through mobile apps. Amid one sudden shutdown, “I had to cancel my final academic presentation for my course at the last moment,

In your opinion, which groups are most impacted by an internet shutdown?



³ N=56

and the speed was so slow that I could not connect to my teachers in the university,” said a graduate student of a private university. “I prepared a long time for that day, and I got panicked.” Another student said she missed an online job interview because the internet speed was slowed down in her city that day. Workshop participants also pointed out that shutdowns impact lower-income people acutely as they rely on mobile for internet access and information and cannot afford broadband.

The structured discussions elicited another angle – the effect on the large Bangladeshi diaspora and on migrant workers spread across the world. Migrant workers, in particular, become concerned about family and children back home when they hear about a crisis in Bangladesh, and they rely primarily on communications apps like Messenger, WhatsApp, Imo, Viber, and other such services to stay in touch. “My uncle, a migrant worker in Saudi Arabia, couldn't see his departed mother via live video in her last days, as our country was facing internet throttling at that time. He still regrets that,” said a female student. An activist noted, “This has a deep psychological impact on both sides [migrant and his family] that cannot be measured in economic terms. We need to research this deeply.”

Shutdowns don't help tackle disinformation, but rather make it worse. When asked to explain worries related to internet shutdowns, survey respondents and workshop participants reported feeling “lost in darkness,” as they are isolated from the broader world and hear rumors that they can't check, and therefore become targets for misinformation. A fact checker shared his personal experience of communal violence, when misinformation was spread that spurred attacks on Hindu minorities during their largest religious festival and mobile internet was throttled in several parts of the country to prevent an escalation of the violence. But as a result, he said, newsfeeds were not updating, so people scrolling

Facebook were only finding old misinformation, and not the fact-checked correctives that his services were posting. Also, “an internet shutdown in turmoil situations causes open-source information to be inaccessible for the fact checkers when the ceaseless flow of true information is the most necessary,” he added. “Bangladesh [government] already has a [social media] monitoring system in place, and there are ways to track sources of disinformation; we just need to make it more efficient,” said a technologist who argued that there are more effective ways of addressing disinformation than resorting to the blunt instrument of a “kill-switch.”

Survey and workshop participants worried about their rights, including those of free speech and expression and the political rights of protest and activism. “The government censors speech and controls the narrative” during shutdowns, one participant said. When asked about differences that emerged from the survey about who was most affected by shutdowns, workshop participants said activists and protesters are significantly impacted. They cited the example of the 2018 Road Safety Movement, when students who were not able to share stories about the attacks against them and couldn't counter disinformation that began to gain traction online. At least



two journalists mentioned that they struggled to cover both that student protest and the 2018 election because of bandwidth throttling that affected live coverage and news gathering. During recent clashes between college students and shop owners in Dhaka, a student participant said, “During the first hours of the clash, rumours flooded social media, blaming the students for it; but as the internet was down, many of us who were there couldn’t share the facts, which people eventually came to know much later that day.” A representative of an election-watchdog group said in one workshop that shutdowns also created an environment of fear for election observers who are unable to communicate with teams in the event of incidents during elections.

Workshop discussants argued that there is a need to better understand these diverse impacts of shutdowns and to collect different kinds of evidence on social and economic impact for strategic advocacy. “We need serious research on shutdowns and their impact -- more, and in-depth,” said a workshop participant who urged the development of data and evidence-based arguments to inform the advocacy of civil society and trade associations.

The participants particularly emphasized the economic effects of internet censorship in a country where e-commerce businesses are burgeoning and spinning off millions of jobs in delivery and courier services, outsourcing, and other sectors. Economic arguments also make for persuasive entry points to engage BTRC and other state agencies in favor of rights-respecting policies. And some workshop participants asserted the need to research whether internet disruptions in fact contribute more to the spread of misinformation instead of solving the problem.

Discussions at both of the workshops raised a basic question: Is the public at all aware that internet access is a fundamental right, and do they understand the fundamental impacts of shutdowns, including on their own lives? And could public-education campaigns have a positive effect? In the workshops, skeptics about the potential effectiveness of such campaigns note that people in Bangladesh are faced with existential issues that they may see as more important: price hikes, crime, corruption, power outages. But others pointed out that very view may be rooted in lack of awareness about online rights and how online rights enable economic and social development.

When asked how civil society might increase that awareness, many suggested that it is a long-term process. But in the short term, organizations could start by educating the youth, who in any case make up the largest segment of the Bangladesh population and the largest group of internet users. Technology is a part of their lives, and they are generally rights conscious. The founder of a popular social media channel shared examples of successful public-awareness campaigns on other social issues, including gender stereotypes. In times of crisis, people flock to their site and pages to get information and share views, so a digital-rights awareness campaign could be highly effective through such channels.



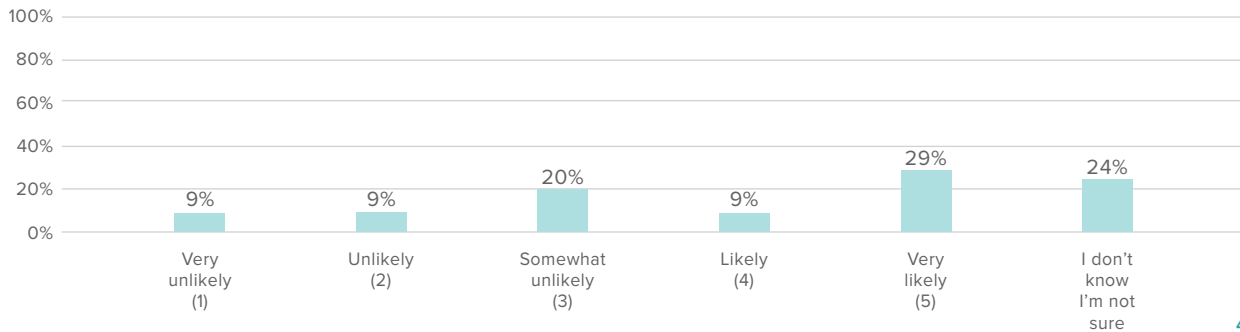
Future Risks

Bangladesh is at risk of more internet shutdowns in the future. A majority of survey respondents (58%) said they believe it is somewhat likely or very likely that a shutdown will occur in the next three years, and a large majority (82%) of the respondents expressed concern about online censorship or shutdowns during the upcoming national election scheduled for late 2023. Elections in Bangladesh are often preceded by protests and violence. The 2018 election period generated the first election-related internet shutdown, and at least four incidents of internet censorship

occurred during that time, the highest annual number to date. Three of these shutdowns were triggered by protests or other election-related issues.

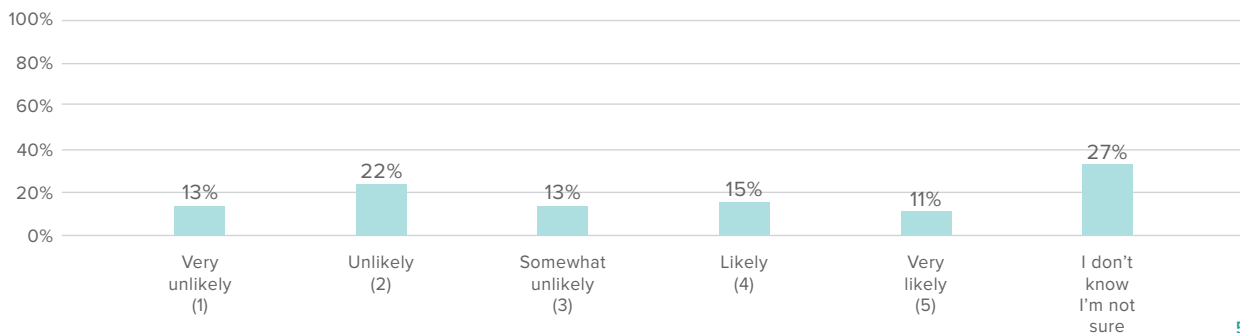
As in that instance, restrictions during national elections can be and are documented and usually reported in national media. However, “local UP (Union Parishads, a local government) elections also sometimes face internet throttling that goes unreported by news media, and some students of mine failed to appear in online exams on those days,” said a senior lecturer at a law school.

How likely do you think it is that the government shuts down the internet in Bangladesh in the next 3 years?



4

How likely do you think it is that the government shuts down the internet in Bangladesh in the next year?



5

⁴ N=55

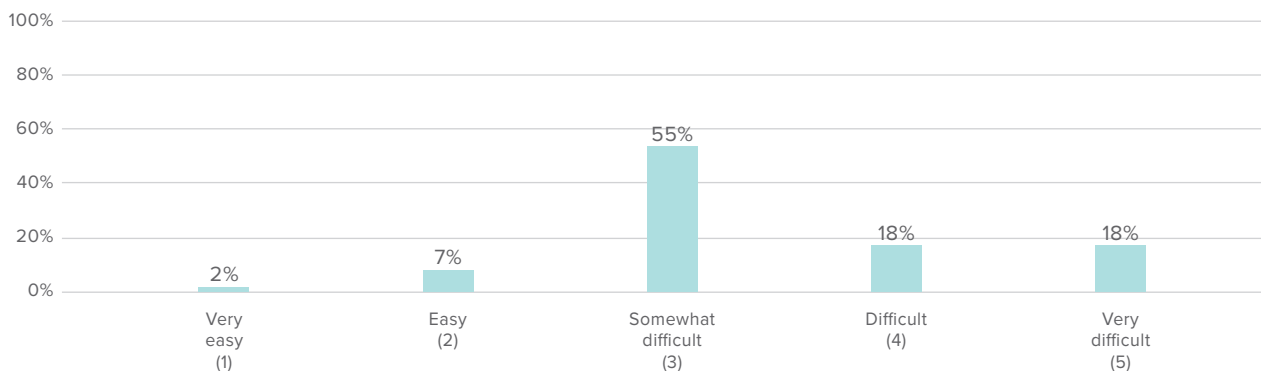
⁵ N=55

Civil Society Capacity to Address and Prevent Disruptions

Bangladeshi civil society is not prepared for future shutdowns, nor was it in the past. Only 6% of all survey respondents said civil society was prepared to confront shutdowns in the past, and 63% said they were unprepared moving into the future. Representatives of civil society, rights groups, and international organizations specifically said they felt civil society is somewhat (31%) or completely unprepared (51%). And an overwhelming 88% of all respondents said they themselves were either completely or somewhat unprepared in the past.

We also asked survey respondents to rate the ease or difficulty for civil society groups to operate in Bangladesh. More than half of the respondents reported finding the environment in Bangladesh somewhat difficult for civil society to engage in advocacy and that it is often impeded by laws, norms, and threats. Only 2% believe it is easy for civil society to operate. Workshop participants said the increasing repression against civil society in Bangladesh sometimes makes it difficult to get approval or support for projects that are considered sensitive to the authorities. Civicus, a global civil society alliance, also rates the civic space in Bangladesh as [“repressed,”](#) meaning significantly constrained.

How easy is it in Bangladesh for civil society groups to operate safely & engage in advocacy?



⁶ N=55

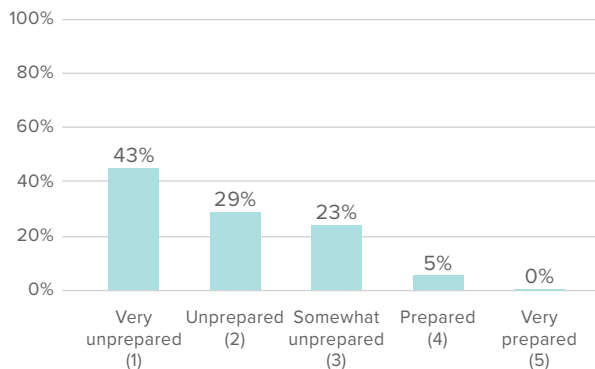
Specifically on internet shutdown advocacy, according to a senior executive of a top International NGO, civil society leadership in Bangladesh has not evolved with changing conditions and often resists new ideas. He urged the development of staff and volunteers who understand issues of internet-related rights and the impact of connectivity on governance, transparency, and democracy. “If they cannot transform with time, civil society will further lose its credibility,” he added.

Another international NGO representative similarly noted that most rights organizations are so occupied with projects in their specific mission areas that they never focus on digital issues. He raised the question of whether it makes more sense to develop digital-rights expertise in Bangladeshi civil society organizations that already excel in other areas or rather concentrate efforts on supporting organizations and new initiatives that can dedicate their attention and have an interest in this topic.

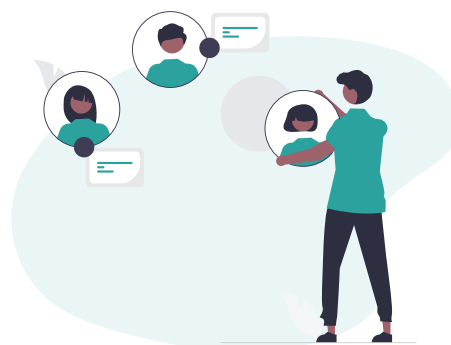
Workshop participants agreed that there is little coordination or communication on digital issues.

Participants discussed the possibility of establishing a network that would connect organizations interested in digital-rights issues with a platform – be it a WhatsApp group or Telegram channel or any other means (though of course that in itself would be vulnerable to shutdowns when they occur) – to regularly exchange information, share and learn from each other’s experiences, and engage other stakeholders in the discussions. One activist said it would be beneficial to “Arrange virtual measures to improve awareness of civil rights, provide fundamental understanding of internet shutdowns (how they cease/limit democratic freedom or aid awareness of developments) and train protesters or reach restricted segments of the society when required.”

Should there be an internet shutdown in Bangladesh within the next year, how prepared do you think civil society is to confront it?



7



⁷ N=56



The digital-rights community is almost non-existent in Bangladesh. Participants in two workshops argued that due to the lack of civil society organizations that solely focus on digital rights, except for a few individual voices, anti-shutdown advocacy has never truly been possible. Article 19 launched the [Bangladesh Internet Freedom Initiative Working Group](#) in 2021 to help address the [key issues of constitutional, legal, and moral rights of citizens](#). However, there is little done on shutdowns and their impact in the broader field of internet governance. As a result, internet shutdowns don't receive much media coverage or academic attention.

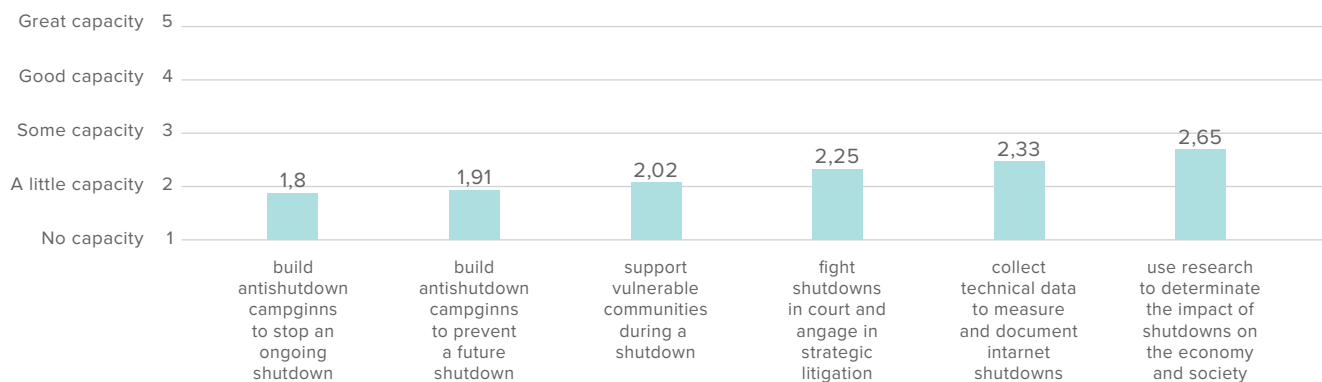
Even in the major cases of blocked social media sites or throttling, responses from rights organizations or coverage in the media -- other than reporting the incident -- has been limited. Workshop participants attributed this to media's and civil society's lack of familiarity with the issue. An overwhelming majority of survey respondents (73%) said such organizations have little capacity, if any, to campaign for ending an ongoing shutdown, and responses were similar for the prospects of building movements to prevent future restrictions. "Our NGOs are 0 to 1 capable on the

scale of digital capacity to promote advocacy among policymakers," said a technologist in a workshop.

Following from questions about risk, research participants were asked to assess civil society capacity in a variety of forms. Across all of the internet shutdown expertise and capacity areas, respondents reported very low to moderate levels of capacity, ranging from 1.85/5 average score to 2.65/5 on a Likert scale. Participants in the workshops noted a dearth of human resources and expertise on digital policy and technology issues among civil society organizations in Bangladesh. Even interested organizations lack the staff who understand the nuances of internet freedom and governance and its growing importance in society, and who have the technical skills to create evidence-based advocacy on this issue.

Young and mid-career professionals in related fields, such as academics, lawyers, and civic activists, might be good candidates for nurturing in this direction, according to workshop participants. A top executive of a leading NGO said, "Building a new generation of advocates not only helps the existing organizations, but also helps to support and

Civil society capacity in Bangladesh

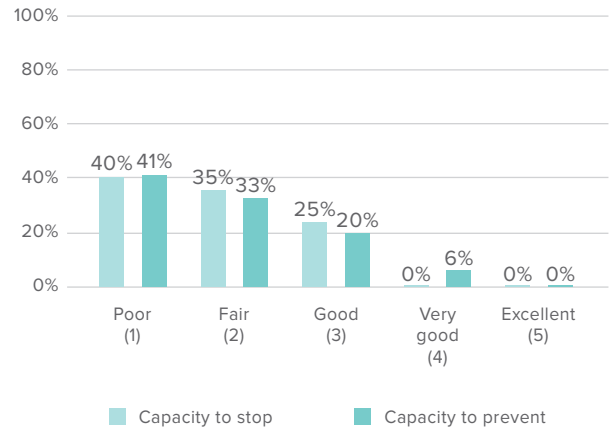


⁸ Respondent numbers varied from 53 to 55

grow new organizations that are interested in technology, social media, and their impact on the society.” A technologist working in an international tech-focused NGO observed, we need to “support new organizations that can grow and cater to the needs of the digital space.”

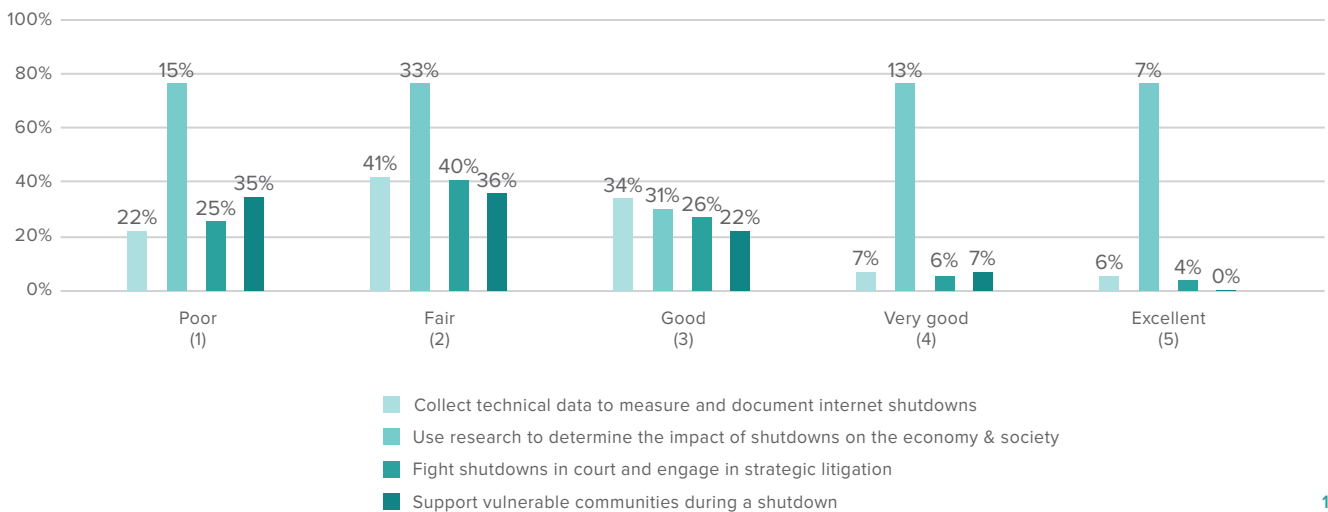
Civil society has moderate capacity to conduct research on internet shutdowns and their impact. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents said that CSOs have a low- or moderate capacity to determine the impact of shutdowns on the economy and society, and 14% reported no capacity. Participants in the workshop also pointed out, as described above, the acute need for more research generally on the socio-economic impact of shutdowns on Bangladesh. A thorough keyword search in Google Scholars shows only [one relevant academic paper](#) that focuses on Bangladesh.

How would you rate civil society's capacity to build an anti-shutdown campaign to stop a current shutdown or prevent a future shutdown?



9

How would you rate civil society's capacity to...?



10

⁹ Respondent numbers varied from 54 to 55

¹⁰ Respondent numbers varied from 53 to 55

That lagging capacity for research also affects CSO capacity for strategic litigation. Most survey respondents said they find civil society to have low or moderate capacity to fight shutdowns in court, and 24% said there is no capacity. Citing lack of research and technical documentation on the topic as a major problem, workshop participants reported that it's crucial to undertake serious and in-depth studies to support arguments about the negative impact of shutdowns. Furthermore, lawyers in the workshop explained that, even though there are examples of remedies when issues are taken to court (as in the case of BTRC formulating guidelines for direct-to-consumer content providers (OTT) and social media after a court order), internet shutdowns are a sensitive topic, and more discussion and understanding of nuances is needed before seeking legal solutions.

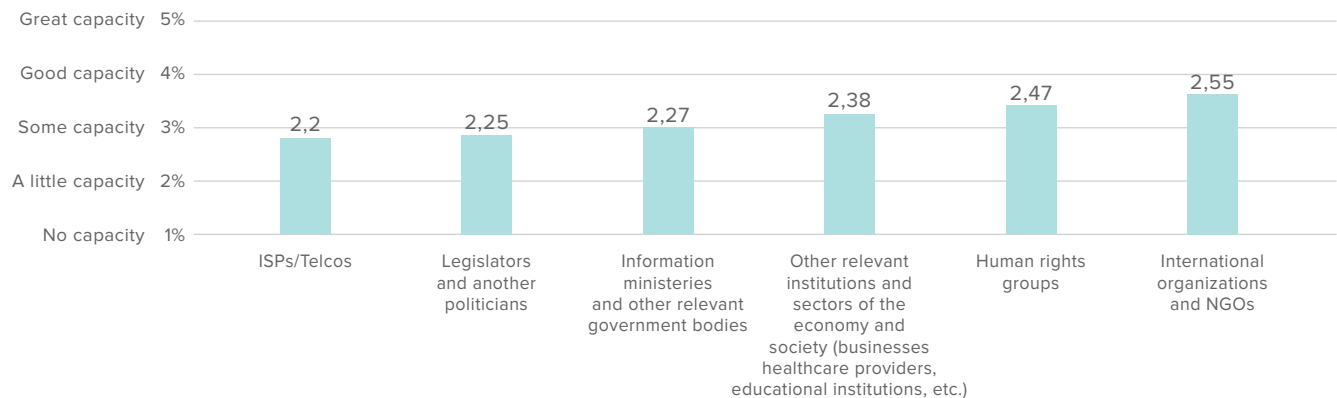
There is little to no capacity to protect vulnerable communities during a shutdown: Two-thirds of the respondents -- and almost all respondents who reported belonging to a marginalized or minority group -- said civil society has no or low capacity to support vulnerable communities during a shutdown. Workshop discussions suggested that, for highland and lowland indigenous groups who are disproportionately poor and underprivileged, the key problem is having any access to internet services at all. Apart from access, historically, mobile networks and internet speeds are slow in hill tracts and other areas where most of these communities live, but there hasn't been much advocacy focused on these areas.

On the other hand, internet shutdowns are often perceived by these communities as safety measures to protect religious minorities from the kind of online incitement to violence that often targets them. Civil society members in the strategy group workshop said these are larger security, governance, and media literacy issues that should be brought into anti-shutdown discussions. Due to lack of awareness regarding internet rights, the concerns of minorities and marginalized groups go unheard.

Workshop participants said grassroots organizations are better placed to help the vulnerable, and with the right training and support, could help produce information resources in the Bangla language for the most essential information. But shutdown-preparedness skills would be extraneous in areas that don't even have access to high-speed internet at all, so some participants suggested the greatest initial need is to advocate for affordable and equitable internet access throughout Bangladesh.



CSO capacity in Bangladesh to engage with stakeholder groups (average rating)



11

Respondents report varying levels of capacity to engage a range of stakeholders in anti-shutdown advocacy.

A survey question probed civil society's capacity to engage with other key actors, including ISPs and telecommunications companies, legislators, human rights groups, international NGOs, and information ministries, as well as other relevant sectors like healthcare providers and educational institutions. Responses show that civil society is more able to engage with rights groups, international organizations, and other social and economic organizations than with the telcos, politicians, and authorities.

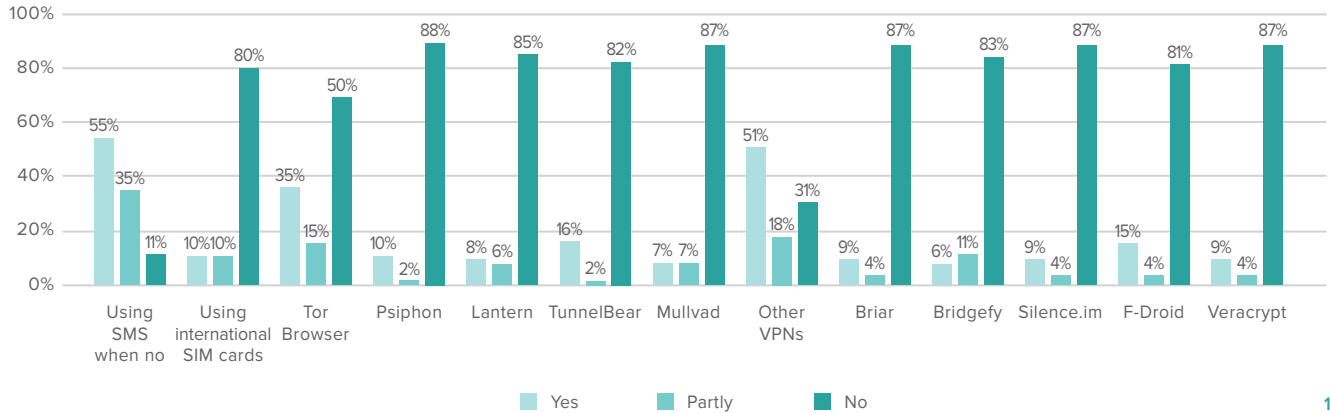
Specifically, survey and workshop participants emphasized that existing organizations lack the negotiation and strategic communication skills required to engage government officials and institutions, tech companies, and business associations. Communications with government actors and companies can be sensitive, especially in a context such as Bangladesh. However, engagement with these actors is vital to achieving results when it comes to preventative advocacy. "But who is going to do that," asked a civil society representative, noting the eroding trust between the government and civil society, in part due to

governance failures. "When there is no political governance, how would you expect internet governance issues to be addressed," said an activist.

However, most agreed that any discussion of internet shutdown policy is incomplete without engaging BTRC, law enforcement agencies, and related ministries, considering their governing power. Such skills could be attained with exposure of the network members to regional and global practices, facilitated training and workshops, and connection to global resources and experts. Workshop participants also called for regular dialogues with all relevant stakeholders, informed by research and evidence. "Criticism without substance only brings mistrust," said an NGO representative. One survey respondent wrote: "First, some technical trainings. Second, developing extensive negotiation skills to get in touch with the political actors and administrative staff."

⁸ N=55 for all

Are you familiar with using these circumvention tools?



12

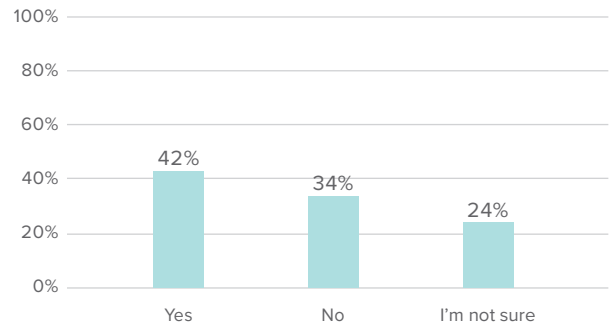
Civil society and other such leaders are quite familiar with VPN services and other tools as a way to circumvent restrictions. Three-quarters of survey respondents (74%) reported that they had used VPNs or circumvention tools when major social media sites or communications apps were blocked, and only 13% said they had never used circumvention tools.

Offered a list of VPN and other circumvention tools, a majority reported having used “other VPN services” and that they are familiar with tools like the TOR browser. In instances of low bandwidth or no internet, they resorted to traditional mobile SMS and telephony, while only a few were familiar with using international SIM cards. Workshop discussions showed that younger users generally prefer free VPN services.

Participants indicated a general reluctance or apathy among the civil society community to use paid VPNs and tools that have been advertised to civil society groups, with one representative of an international NGO reporting that they had offered free access to paid VPN services to the activists and civil society members after a series of trainings but none showed interest.

VPNs and circumvention tools are not illegal in Bangladesh. And BTRC has on several occasions [publicly ruled out blocking VPNs](#), as it would hurt several other services and sectors. However, 42% of the survey respondents reported that they had fears about using VPNs.

Do you have any fears about using VPNs/circumvention tools?



13

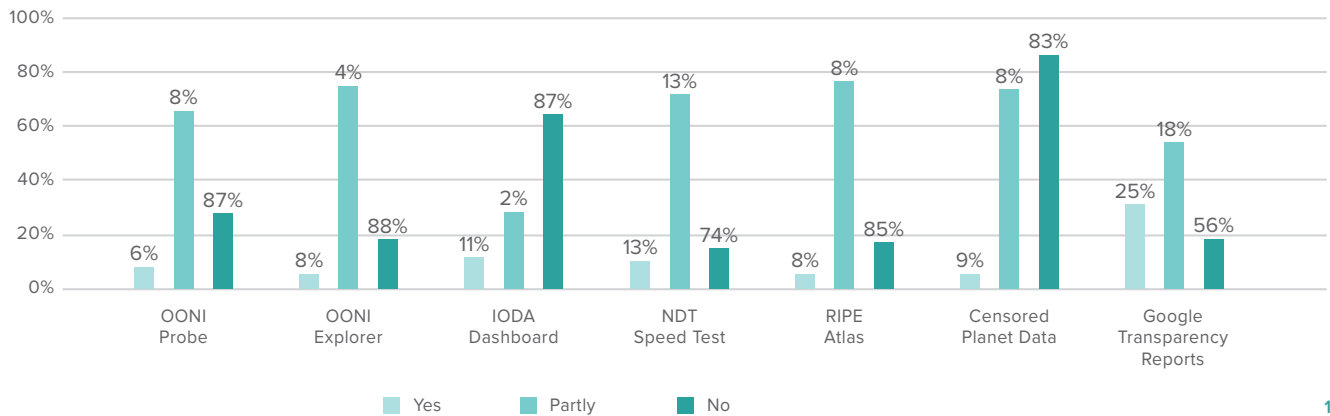
¹² Respondent numbers varied from 46 to 55

¹³ N=48

Bangladesh doesn't have a network-measurement community. Respondents report that advocates do not measure network disruptions because they do not have the necessary technical skills. As a result, CSOs don't have the data they need to make informed arguments against shutdowns and to quantify their impact. A majority (62.5%) of the survey respondents reported that organizations have low or moderate capacity to collect technical data to measure and document such restrictions. However, when probed further during the workshops, respondents appeared unfamiliar with most measurement tools. The survey provided a list of measurement tools/datasets to examine this further. Only 25% said that they are familiar with Google Transparency reports, and there was even less familiarity with Censored Planet Data, RIPE Atlas, NDT speed test, IODA dashboard, or OONI Explorer and Probe.

One workshop participant with expert knowledge on network measurement said he is not aware of any organizations in Bangladesh that document disruptions or conduct research in this area. "Training 10 or 20 individuals on measurement is never enough," and Bangladesh needs a strong community, spread across the geographic regions and supported by experts to document and analyze the data, he said. Local organizations need the ability to not only measure networks regularly but also to familiarize their communities with circumvention techniques. "Such tools and techniques are only adopted when shared by an organization that has trust within the community," he said.

Are you familiar with using the following measurement tools/datasets?



¹⁴ Respondent numbers varied from 52 to 55.

Recommendations

In addition to an exchange of views on shutdown needs and capacities, the survey and structured discussions in the workshops generated goals and objectives for future internet shutdown advocacy in Bangladesh. As a first step, participants recommended focusing on building the capacity of civil society and the technical community on legal and technical issues. They also noted that any meaningful change will require constructive discussion with authorities, including BTRC, as well as engaging the private sector and conducting more research such as measurement to support evidence-based arguments in anti-shutdown advocacy.

Create an informal working group or network of individuals and organizations interested in digital-rights issues, and provide training, connections to experts, and other support. This grouping should connect young and mid-career researchers, journalists, academics, lawyers, and civil society representative, to build their understanding of the legal- and rights aspects of network disruptions, their impact on the economy and society, and how to run effective advocacy campaigns on preparedness and prevention. This should include ensuring reliable and secure technical platforms – such as a Telegram channel (to the extent they are available and reliable to all members) -- to share information, learn from each other's experiences, and engage other stakeholders in these discussions. Training also should cover negotiation and strategic-communications skills required to engage government officials and institutions, tech companies, and business associations that are crucial contacts in any advocacy program.



Support technical skill-building and provide support for ongoing measurement.

There is a clear need to train a cohort of experts on network measurement to begin building out Bangladesh's expertise in this field, to bolster the credibility of any advocacy on internet shutdown issues. The cohort should be spread across geographic regions and supported by experienced international experts and built through collective learning and growth. This expert group should provide evidence of network interruptions and performance information for advocacy with key stakeholders such as government and international advocacy organizations. These experts should also be a part of the broader network, able to communicate technical topics to journalists, lawyers, and the general public.

Conduct extensive research on diverse impact (social, economic, political) of internet shutdowns on different stakeholders and communities.

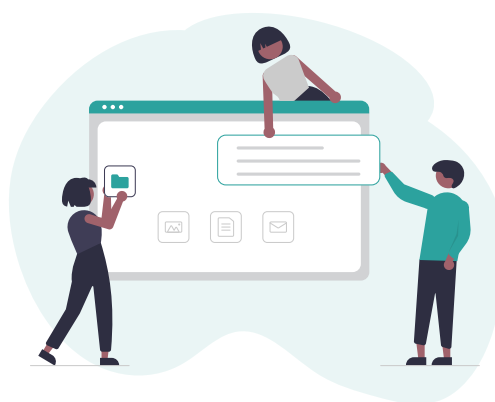
This should include industry- and issue-specific research that could help engage these communities and bring their voices to policymakers, thereby strengthening advocacy. Research also should explore the non-economic socio-political effects of internet cutoffs, such as the spread of disinformation and the inability to communicate with family and friends within Bangladesh and beyond, especially in times of emergencies. This could particularly focus also on such effects on vulnerable communities such as migrants and the poor, as well as on youth and those who rely on digital platforms for work.

Ensure vulnerable communities are key participants in advocacy. To ensure the involvement of marginalized communities, efforts should be made to include civil society organizations that already have trust and credibility in these communities in trainings and coalition-building activities. Guides, applications, and other resources in the Bangla language could be particularly helpful in this regard. Efforts to understand digital literacies and usages of these groups should be incorporated into wider engagement strategies to better understand how to provide contextualized support. Additionally, any advocacy in those communities also should start with discussion, where relevant, of affordable and

equitable access to internet services to start with, as some communities have no online options at all.

Raise public awareness by engaging youth. This research has identified youth as key stakeholders who are invested in reliable digital infrastructure and are more digitally savvy, able to build on existing technical skills and creative multimedia content. Efforts to bring youth into digital-rights work should include public education and social media information campaigns, as well as through offline programs that can better reach marginalized and rural segments of society. Additionally, youth groups could be core partners to promote the use of safer and more secure circumvention tools.

Develop advocacy narratives and engagement strategies that contend with the challenges of confronting hate speech and misinformation and the inadequacy of shutdowns as a solution. This research suggested that, even amongst civil society groups, there is support for control mechanisms to respond to communal violence and to stop the spread of hate speech. Disinformation and hate campaigns on social media are often blamed for igniting and escalating communal violence, and are the cited reason for many shutdowns in the country. Workshop participants discussed the need to push for alternative solutions to these real challenges that are necessary, proportionate, and effective at countering misinformation and online hate.



As one participant described, “[the] Bangladesh [government] already has a [social media] monitoring system in place, and there are ways to track sources of disinformation; we just need to make it more efficient,” rather than resorting to the blunt instrument of a “kill-switch.” Longer-term programs also should be developed on digital and media literacy, including in secondary education curricula so that people can identify mis/disinformation. Additional research should be considered to understand the negative impacts of shutdowns on the spread of rumor and mis/disinformation.

Identify opportunities for engaging policymakers, telecommunications companies, ISPs, and businesses, as well as law enforcement agencies and related ministries and other authorities, such as the BTRC. This could be done in whatever order would be most immediately fruitful. Key persuasive arguments would include the potential economic losses and reputational risks of internet shutdowns. The aim should be regular dialogues informed by research and evidence to help build trust between different stakeholders. Accountable internet governance, in a Bangladeshi context, requires a multistakeholder approach. More frequent dialogue is needed among parties to better understand best practices around control of hate speech and disinformation and necessary and proportionate policies that don’t infringe on human rights and potentially contribute to greater fear and uncertainty. Additionally, there is a need to engage different actors to build transparency into existing shutdown order protocols. Civil society and trade associations can play important roles in developing more research on the economic impact of shutdowns in the country. There are opportunities to build spaces for collaboration within existing multi-stakeholder forums such as the Bangladesh Internet Governance Forum and through the Bangladesh chapter of the international public policy organization Internet Society.



Conclusion

Internet shutdowns are a common occurrence in Bangladesh. For almost a decade, various government authorities have used their powers to order blocking of social media platforms, throttling of internet speeds in specific localities, and shutting off the internet entirely in times of protest. The deteriorating human rights situation and increasing government repression against activists signals a potential worsening of conditions, and participants in this research agreed that internet shutdowns are likely to continue.

This research has identified a clear need for community-building related to digital-rights issues and for the development of networks able to address and advocate against shutdowns. While many Bangladesh residents have experienced such outages, the issue is not often discussed, documented, or well-researched. There is little advocacy or mobilization to prepare for or prevent deliberate, government-imposed internet disruptions. As a result, the people of Bangladesh have little awareness of their digital rights, much less the resources or recourse to respond or prepare for such situations.

While civil society groups in Bangladesh face considerable constraints when it comes to advocacy and activism, there is a need to engage on the subject and come up with narratives and strategies that could achieve progress, even in challenging political contexts. Without coordinated pushback and well-researched documentation and arguments against shutdowns from diverse stakeholders, the government will continue to resort to network disruptions -- and thus further suppress civic life -- under the cover of containing violence or disinformation.

But civil society lacks the knowledge, resources, and coordinated efforts to undertake this task. Unlike many other countries working on digital-rights issues, Bangladeshi civil society needs to start from scratch. Support is needed to develop basic understanding, prioritize urgent needs, develop skills to negotiate and to continue the dialogue with the authorities, research and document impacts, technically measure networks, engage media, support vulnerable groups, and collaborate with regional and international counterparts.

There is no quick fix, but there are hopeful signs: a vibrant youth population, a history of a strong civic presence, a rapidly growing e-commerce sector, and a robust political vision to foster a digital economy.

Education and empowerment, whether for civic and grassroots organizations or a target group of the population, is resource- and time-intensive. In order to achieve meaningful change, Bangladesh will need a long-term commitment to support a diverse anti-shutdown community, not only to transform the older rights groups, but also to grow new organizations and individuals who can take on the mission.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Timeline of shutdowns

Date Started	Date Ended	Date Started	Affected Network	Affected Sites (if Blocked)	Define Others	Geographic Scope	Official Justification	Actual Cause
9/17/2012	6/5/2013	Blocking	N.A	YouTube		National	Communal Riot	Communal Riot
2/28/2013	2/28/2013	Blocking	N.A	Facebook		National	Disinformation	Political Tension
1/17/2015	1/21/2015	Blocking	N.A	Others	WhatsApp, Viber, Tango, Mypeople, Line	National	Security	Political Tension
11/18/2015	11/18/2015	Blackout	Both mobile and broadband	N.A		National	Technical issue	Protest
11/18/2015	12/10/2015	Blocking	N.A	Facebook	Messenger, Viber, WhatsApp	National	Security	Political Tension
12/13/2015	12/14/2015	Blocking	N.A	Others	Twitter, Skype, Imo	National	Security	Political Tension
8/2/2016	8/2/2016	Blackout	Both mobile and broadband	N.A		Local	Security	Drill
2/11/2018	2/11/2018	Throttling	Mobile	N.A		National	Exam cheating	Exam cheating
8/4/2018	8/5/2018	Throttling	Mobile	N.A		National	Technical issue	Protest
11/21/2018	11/21/2018	Blocking	N.A	Others	Skype	National	Technical issue	Election
12/29/2018	12/30/2018	Throttling	Mobile	N.A		National	Disinformation	Election
9/10/2019	8/28/2020	Blackout	Mobile	N.A		Local	Security	Protest
12/30/2019	1/1/2020	Blackout	Mobile	N.A		Local	Security	Stop Migration
3/26/2021	3/26/2021	Throttling	Mobile	N.A		Local	Security	Protest
3/26/2021	3/29/2021	Blocking	Mobile	Facebook		Local	Technical issue	Protest
10/13/2021	10/15/2021	Throttling	Mobile	NA		National	Technical issue	Communal Riot
4/19/2022	4/19/2022	Throttling	Mobile	N.A		Local	Security	Violence

Appendix 2: Outlined Advocacy Needs

ADVOCACY NEEDS BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER SHUTDOWNS		
BEFORE	DURING	AFTER
Build capacity of the civil society and media on internet rights and advocacy.	Support journalists and communities with tools and techniques to respond to network disruptions.	Build the technical capacity of civil society to document disruptions, and share preparedness knowledge with communities.
Develop and distribute localized resources on shutdown preparedness in Bangla language	Share the resources with communities and organizations when network disruption is in progress.	Develop and share online training on shutdown preparedness and internet rights.
Try to engage the government to develop rights friendly internet policies.	Communicate with the authorities and advocate for transparent, necessity-driven and proportionate actions.	Promote dialogues between policy makers and other stakeholders with evidence-based research and findings.
Train and develop a network measurement (NM) community spread across the country.	Support the NM community to document, analyze and share the disruptions data.	Engage civic organizations to grow the number of NM experts across the country for sustained testing.
Raise awareness among public and policy on internet rights and economic, social and psychological impact of shutdowns.	Support social media campaign and news reporting to inform people on shutdown, its impact, and response.	Promote internet rights, and shutdown preparedness and response education among students and the youth to build a community around it.
Engage business community as a strong entry point to foster prevention discussions with different stakeholders.	Measure disruptions and document immediate impact and communicate with the business community.	Support research on impact of shutdowns and share with business community to facilitate discussions.
Support and develop a local network with people and organizations with high interest in digital- rights issues.	Help local network (groups) to engage and collaborate with regional and global networks to amplify their messages.	Support participation of local advocates in international and regional forums to exchange views and learn from the peers.
Develop capacity of CSOs to better engage with internet service providers and telcos.	Push service providers to be accountable and transparent in implementing shutdown instructions.	Engage with service providers to develop a transparent protocol on internet shutdown and report such incidents.
Engage the law community in anti-shutdown discussions and build their capacity.	Document impacts to help the law community to develop arguments.	Strategic litigations to engage authorities to develop a pragmatic policy.

Research Method, And Survey Demographics

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method research approach, including desk research, a survey, and follow-up discussions in workshops. The desk research sought to analyze existing research and documentation to provide historical, legal, political, and social context behind internet restrictions. The survey was designed for and distributed to key civil society stakeholders to assess the risks and trends of shutdowns; their impact on public life; existing advocacy capacity of civil society to prepare, prevent, and respond to shutdowns; and current needs for strengthening advocacy.

The survey findings were then shared in workshops for structured discussion with groups of respondents to gather additional and more nuanced qualitative information on needs, civil society's capacity for advocacy, and the associated risks. Legal experts were also consulted as part of this process, to better understand the impact of existing laws on shutdowns and advocacy possibilities.

Shutdown Timeline Methodology

A timeline of internet shutdown events in Bangladesh was developed for this assessment. Although instances of blocking communications apps and social media sites are apparent from 2009, this study considered 2012 as a base year to gather shutdown data as in [June 2011](#), a UN Human Rights Council report termed the internet as a human right. And as Bangladesh lacks a strong network measurement community, this study relied on secondary sources to gather related data. The data collection and verification method included advanced Google search techniques with specific keyword combinations in both Bangla and English language, within specific news websites and specific time-range.

To confirm the time and date of a shutdown event and justifications provided by the authorities, each finding was corroborated with at least three different news sources, and the links were archived in "[archive.org](#)". The data were then matched with AccessNow's [KeepItOn database](#) of internet shutdowns that maintains a spreadsheet since 2016. It also consulted major global reports, like [Freedom on the Net](#) and US State Department's [Human Rights Reports](#) to find and corroborate reported shutdown events.

Survey

The study relied on a more purposive snowball sampling, and participant groups were selected to secure diverse perspectives, drawing on communities of university students, professionals, internet users, and activists of different fields – as well as civil society, rights, and other organizations.

The survey was web-based and distributed to the related stakeholders via email and encrypted messaging platforms. Data were collected between March 1 and March 15, 2022, and most of the respondents submitted their responses electronically. A few respondents preferred to be interviewed, and the research team filled in their responses accordingly.

The survey yielded 56 unique responses, and the respondents were segmented based on their answers to questions about occupation, location, and gender. Responses were voluntary and the respondents could choose to answer anonymously.

Workshops

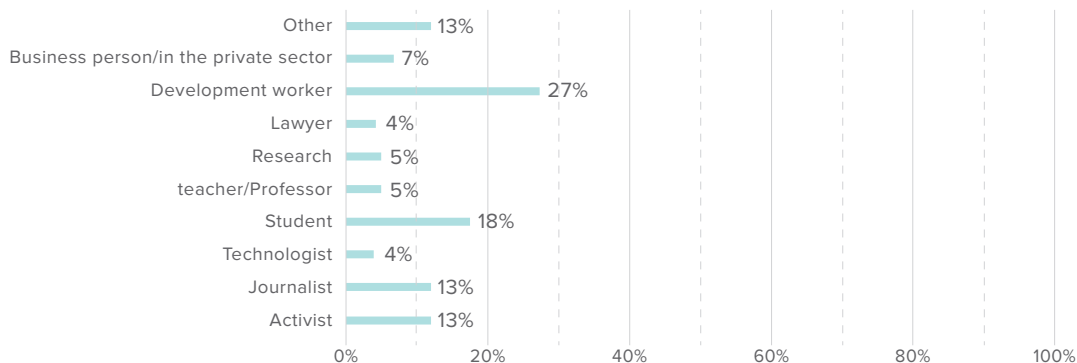
In addition to the survey, the company Digitally Right and the organization VOICE organized two workshops to obtain a qualitative assessment of the needs and capacities of civil society and other stakeholders to prepare for and respond to internet shutdowns. A total of 44 participants attended the two workshops, with 34% female representation.

The first workshop was organized to discuss the needs and challenges of internet users when faced with internet shutdowns. This group included students, journalists, online-business owners, and organizations representing marginalized communities, all of whom provided deeper insight into the impact of shutdowns and the needs of different communities to prepare for and prevent shutdowns.

The second workshop included representatives of local and international civil society organizations, academia, lawyers, communications professionals, service providers, and technologists. It attempted to assess the existing advocacy capacity of Bangladesh’s civil society and collectively reflect on the needs of the community, and to set strategic objectives and an agenda to build capacity in this area.

During each workshop, key findings from the survey were presented, discussed, and documented. Following these presentations, organizers ran additional focus-group discussions on strategies for future advocacy. All contributions to the events were anonymized and conducted under Chatham House rules.

What best describes your profession? (Select all that apply)



¹⁵ N=56

Respondent profile

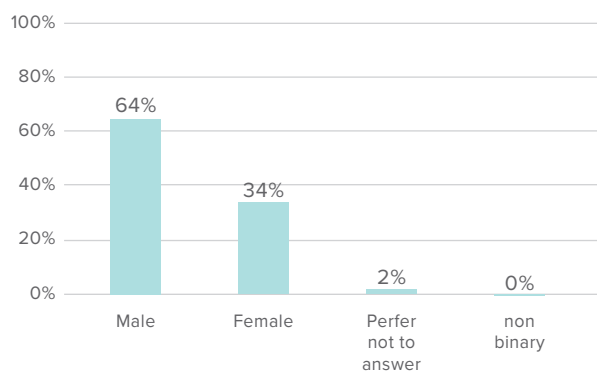
Demography

- This survey represents a wide range of stakeholders including activists, journalists, academics, civil society groups, students, and other professionals. However, it is not geographically representative, as many of these stakeholders operate in the capital city of Dhaka. Only 10% of the respondents are from regions outside the capital and mainly represent students, activists, and minority and marginalized groups.
- Seven respondents identified themselves as from marginalized or minority linguistic, cultural, and ethnic communities, including the indigenous Chakma and Garo people, Bihari and Rohingya refugee communities, and racial minority ethnic groups such as Dalits.
- Efforts were made to achieve a gender balance in the selection of participants. However, only 34% of the respondents identified as female and 64% as male. This is in part explained by existing gender disparities in some of the target stakeholder groups, but is also likely exacerbated by the gender digital divide. Amongst the respondents, women have strong representation from development organizations, activist groups, students, and minority communities.

Professional Role Diversity Among Survey Respondents

- The highest share (25%) of respondents by occupation or role identified as working in the development sector. These respondents represent international organizations, human rights, and other civil society groups, all working in the areas of transparency, press freedom, gender, refugee rights, and economic development.
- Only seven respondents identified as activists. These respondents identified themselves as activists working in the fields of gender equality, racial justice, minority rights, and freedom of expression. While saying they lacked expert knowledge, most of this group (6) reported familiarity with internet shutdowns and know that these cutoffs threaten human rights.
- The survey captures feedback from a wide range of professionals, including doctors, educators, researchers, technologists, and lawyers, and private-sector representation from e-commerce businesses, ISPs, banks, and web-based services. These groups constitute 25% of the responses and provide insights on the impacts of the shutdown on different spheres of life, as well as advocacy needs and capacity in Bangladesh, and the potential for these stakeholders to contribute to anti-shutdown efforts.

To which gender do you most identify?



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¹⁶ N=56

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