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Internet Shutdown Advocacy in Senegal: 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, Access Now documented at least 182 internet shutdowns in 34 countries, affecting the ability of millions of 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, and 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.

Human rights advocates have argued that, while these sometimes are real problems, depriving large populations access to the internet is not a necessary or proportionate response and may in fact be counterproductive. 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 to slow internet connectivity so much that users cannot effectively access or share information. As described by Gustaf Björkstén in Access Now’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 mix various technical approaches to block internet access, for example by throttling connectivity and blocking specific social media platforms in the lead up to an election, before eventually shutting down the entire network.

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).

**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. 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](#). The report outlined the key challenges that advocates face when confronted with the threat of internet shutdowns, the 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 related to shutdowns leads to short-term campaigns focused on ending a shutdown rather than longer-term advocacy to prevent them from happening in the first place. Respondents 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 multistakeholder "Prepare & Prevent" networks to develop 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](#), the [Interactive Internet Shutdown Risk Assessment and Resource Guide](#), and the [OPTIMA network measurement training](#).

Coalitions such as #KeepItOn are doing significant work to highlight the threat of internet shutdowns on the international stage, pressure governments, document

shutdowns and their impacts, track trends through the #KeepItOn data tracker & annual reports, and coordinate among diverse actors in countries experiencing internet shutdowns. **Additional efforts (and resources) are needed to 1) support internet shutdown advocacy at the national level;** 2) understand the nuanced ways that internet shutdowns impact specific vulnerable populations; 3) engage in longer-term efforts to better prepare key groups for potential shutdowns; and 4) build multi-sectoral coalitions able to deter governments from imposing internet shutdowns.

For this reason, OPTIMA has worked with key digital rights organizations in Bangladesh, India, Senegal, and Tanzania to produce this series of country-specific Internet Shutdown Advocacy Needs Assessments. These assessments sought to highlight:

- Patterns and trends in technical mechanisms used in specific places to shut down the internet;
- Political and social triggering events and government for shutting down the internet;
- Perceptions of the wider impact of shutdowns on economies and societies;
- Differential impacts that shutdowns have on specific vulnerable groups and marginalized populations;
- Laws and regulations that contribute to an enabling environment for internet shutdowns and inhibit advocacy related to censorship and internet shutdowns;
- Perceptions about civil society preparedness and advocacy capacity in areas such as awareness-raising and stakeholder engagement, documentation of impact and network measurement, circumvention strategies and protection of vulnerable communities, and legal capacity to engage in litigation.

This research is meant to not only 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 and background.
2. Survey of key stakeholders: Internews and partner organizations in each country developed, localized, and translated survey questionnaires. These surveys were then distributed to a certain number 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 discuss the findings, provide additional nuance or detail, uncover disagreements or differences within stakeholder groups, and identify recommendations for advocacy strategy and distribution of resources.

It is important to note that the results described in these reports, while based in part on survey findings, are not representative of wider populations in these countries. The methodology specifically sought to uncover the perceptions and experiences of certain communities central to civil society organizations working on digital issues, journalists, entrepreneurs, students, higher education institutions, health providers, telecommunications operators, human rights organizations, women's rights organizations, and minorities and other marginalized groups. Thus, this research is largely qualitative in its methods and its findings, and percentages used throughout this report represent a relatively small, non-generalizable sample size. (For a detailed discussion of the research methodology and demographics for this report, see Appendix A.)

We hope that these reports are useful to advocacy communities in these four countries as well as to the wider community related to internet shutdowns, as well as donor organizations and international groups looking to support internet-shutdown advocacy. We would welcome and encourage replication of this 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 reports on internet-shutdown advocacy needs, the methodology, and the 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

“The cancer of the modern world.” This is how Senegal's President Macky Sall [described](#) social media after protests erupted over his government's arrest of a main opposition leader and Senegal's ruling party lost key local elections early in 2022. In Senegal, a country where 70% of the population is below 40, people have taken to social media to discuss politics, to express their anger, and to organize. In French, Wolof, and English, the hashtag [#freeSenegal became a rallying cry](#) on Twitter and Instagram to mobilize protests. Senegal's civil society is one of the most notably vibrant and diverse free civil societies in Africa. However, the Senegalese government, like too many others in Africa and around the world, sees online dissent and political debate as something to be remedied, and is increasingly using forms of digital repression and censorship to control online spaces. In 2021, as protests and online dissent grew, the government did what so many other governments have started to do: they tried to shut it down.

On March 4, 2021, following a day of protests and cases of violence, the government allegedly restricted access to Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Telegram, and [suspended two private television channels](#) that had heavily covered the protests. There is limited evidence available about this internet shutdown incident, in part because the shutdowns reportedly occurred early in the morning and only for a few hours. Additionally, as reported by local actors, civil society was not prepared for such a shutdown, with few people equipped to technically measure incidents of network disruption and little capacity on the part of journalists to adequately cite technical evidence and report on the shutdown. Without clear evidence, it remains extremely difficult to verify internet shutdowns and to hold governments accountable.

As described by Felicia Anthonio, the #Keepiton campaign manager, “We know something happened to the internet in Senegal in 2021. Senegalese diaspora Tweeted of restrictions, local media outlets reported blockings, and civil society actors shared what information they had. However, with nobody on the ground able to measure the social media disruption, we haven't been able to verify this shutdown with concrete data. Situations like this underscore the need to have been on the ground measuring — everywhere! To truly paint a picture of how invasive internet shutdowns are, and to give the most power to our advocacy, we need both solid data and to share the voices of those whose lives were affected.”

For a country that has long been seen as one of the most stable democracies in Africa, there are worrying signs of democratic backsliding under Sall. The Press Code, passed in 2017, as well as the [use of national security laws to arrest journalists](#) have constituted significant attacks on media freedom in the country. The government has repeatedly [called for social media regulations](#). In July of this year, the main opposition party's candidates for legislative election [were disqualified over a minor issue](#). Many worry that Sall and his APR party will pursue an unconstitutional third term.

Senegal will hold presidential elections in 2024. Considering escalating tensions in the country and increased repression by the ruling government, there is a need to pay attention now to bolster Senegal's democracy and support Senegalese civil society to organize and prepare for possible election and post-election scenarios. The narrative of "Senegalese exceptionalism" -- that Senegal's democracy is impervious to authoritarian trends and economic/political turmoil -- inhibits Senegalese civil society from making the case for preparations and protections both at home and abroad. There is too much at stake to take Senegalese democracy for granted.

With internet shutdowns occurring with increasing frequency around protests and elections in Africa, this report seeks to provide an in-depth examination of a civil society uncertain about its future and the potential for increased censorship of the media and digital spaces. Drawing on a survey of civil society stakeholders as well as a co-design workshop, this report outlines how civil society perceives the threat of internet shutdowns in Senegal, the gaps that exist when it comes to digital policy expertise and technical data collection, and the resources required to prepare for possible shutdowns.

The recommendations included at the end of the report are based on collective reflections and determinations of key needs and strategic priorities of the Senegalese "Prepare & Prevent" network, coordinated by the Senegalese organizations Jonction and Computech. 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

There is uncertainty about the history of past internet shutdowns and very little awareness amongst civil society leaders about internet shutdowns.

Almost half (47%) of survey respondents reported that there has been an internet shutdown where they live in the past year, 15% in the past two years, and 8% in the past three years. An additional 20% said they were uncertain or didn't know whether the disruption they experienced was a shutdown, and 9% said they have never experienced a shutdown. In focus group discussions with key civil society stakeholders, participants explained that few incidents and little evidence/reporting on the subject has led to low levels of awareness on the subject.

This confusion and lack of understanding is related to low levels of expertise on how internet shutdowns and online censorship occur technically and legally.

Most respondents (90%) said they don't know how internet shutdowns occur technically or legally. More than half (59%) said they are unable to or are not sure how to tell the difference between technical connectivity issues and a government-ordered shutdown. During workshop discussions, most participants expressed uncertainty about defining a shutdown and knowing the difference between forms of censorship and shutdowns.

Civil society actors largely believe Senegal will not experience internet shutdowns in the next year, but there is a great deal of uncertainty.

A majority of those surveyed (64%) reported that an internet shutdown is very unlikely next year, while a plurality (30%) said they were uncertain whether a shutdown would occur. Despite political turmoil that can be a harbinger of an internet shutdown, only 5% of those surveyed indicated they believed such an occurrence was "very likely" in the next year.



There are significant worries about social media censorship and shutdowns around the period of the next presidential election in 2024.

When asked specifically about the risk of internet shutdowns and censorship during the upcoming presidential elections in 2024, a majority of survey respondents (56%) report that they fear censorship or shutdowns, and an additional 31% report that they didn't know or were unsure. In the focus group setting, participants discussed concerns about proposed social media regulations and the potential for blocking around the contentious election.

Advocates report they are unprepared for future shutdowns.

Only 20% of the respondents assessed the capacity to stop or prevent future shutdowns as high, and only a few organizations are working on these issues, with varying levels of engagement. A large majority (77%) reported that they do not have any contingency measures in place in case of an internet shutdown. Focus group participants noted that there is a need to make Senegalese civil society aware of the experiences of neighboring countries, the socioeconomic impact of these shutdowns, and the need to engage in preventative advocacy against the possibility of future shutdowns in Senegal.

Civil society reports very little capacity to measure internet performance and technically document internet shutdowns.

Network measurement tools and datasets are not widely used or understood. They also need more knowledge about essential tools and datasets such as OONI, IODA, and Censored Planet.

There is a need to better understand the laws that might enable or allow for future censorship and to build legal expertise.

According to focus group participants, lawyers and judges have little understanding of the human rights implications of internet policies. There is a need to better understand existing and proposed laws and the ways in which they could enable or prevent internet shutdowns in the future.

Participants report low levels of use and awareness of circumvention tools. Only 32% of civil society respondents report having ever used a VPN/circumvention tool.

Focus groups attributed these low levels of general awareness in part to relatively low levels of online censorship, as compared to neighboring countries. Participants described a need to “popularize circumvention tools,” especially among youth, not only to prepare for future censorship incidents but also to protect individuals’ privacy online. Participants also noted that, to their knowledge, there are no resources on circumvention tools in the Wolof language.

Civil society is unaccustomed to engaging with certain stakeholders that are key to internet issues.

The research found civic activists need more and stronger relationships with others in this field, and little expertise on digital issues across Senegalese civil society. There is also little capacity and understanding about how to engage internet or telecommunications service providers or other sectors of society in advocacy.



Background on Senegal and Internet Shutdowns

Digital Economy

Senegal is one of the West African countries where the internet is highly accessible, with an internet [penetration rate of 46%](#). According to the Telecommunications and Posts Regulation Agency (ARTP), [98.2% of internet users access the internet via mobile phones](#).

This is made possible by the existence of relatively robust telecommunication infrastructure, including four international cables and a dedicated Senegal internet exchange point (SENIX). It also has four main internet service providers (ISPs): Orange, Espresso Telecom, FreeE, and Hayo Telecom.

This accessibility helps support Senegal's ambition to accelerate annual economic growth to a “strong, sustainable and inclusive” 7%. To this end, the government launched its [Plan Sénégal Émergent](#) (PSE, Emerging Senegal Plan) in 2014, with the aim of becoming an “emerging economy” by 2035 “with social solidarity and the rule of law.” Although this plan targets multiple sectors and outlines the need for reforms in areas such as governance and regulation to support private entrepreneurship and creativity and to increase investment and exports, the traditional sector of telecommunications will be critical to achieving that transformation.

As part of this goal, the government is quickly expanding its digital agenda. With the implementation of the strategy [“Sénégal Numérique 2025”](#) (Digital Senegal 2025) in 2016, the digital sector has become one of the engines of Senegal's economic growth and development. In 2020, information and communications technologies (ICTs) represented 8% of Senegal's GDP, and the strategy aimed to increase this to 10% by 2025.

Rule of Law, Democracy, and Politics

The [Senegalese Constitution](#) guarantees all citizens fundamental individual freedoms, economic and social rights, and collective rights (Article 8). These freedoms and rights include “civil and political freedoms, freedom of opinion, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of association, freedom of assembly, freedom of movement,” and the freedom to protest. The Constitution also specifies that these freedoms and rights are exercised “within the conditions provided for by the law.”

That caveat can create hurdles for those trying to exercise those constitutional rights. In the [Rule of Law Index](#), Senegal ranks 57th (out of 139 countries). However, Senegal falls to 96th in the [“Open Government”](#) factor of

the index, which “measures the openness of government defined by the extent to which a government shares information, empowers people with tools to hold the government accountable, and fosters citizen participation in public policy deliberations.” Senegal also scores low (85th) in the index sub-factor that measures judicial checks on government power. If the judiciary is not independent enough to exercise effective checks on the government, and if citizens lack both information about the law and access to government data, the risk escalates that the government can abuse its power with impunity.

Senegal, previously considered one of Africa’s most stable electoral democracies, is fast losing this distinction under President Sall. Factors include complex and long-running disputes over term limits, the 2021 [arrest of an opposition leader](#), and the 2022 [disqualification of that opponent’s list of candidates from National Assembly elections](#), not to mention inflation and economic inequalities.

The result has been a periodic eruption of street protests, highlighting the divisions in Senegalese society over these issues. The 2021 protests over the arrest of the opposition leader, Ousmane Sonko, on a charge of rape, were accompanied by an alleged [partial internet shutdown](#) that disabled “social media and messaging apps including Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube.” Authorities also suspended two private television stations for 72 hours over their coverage of the demonstrations.

While Senegal still is considered one of the strongest democracies in the region, experts and democracy watchdogs are closely monitoring upcoming contentious elections in the country. There is [widespread public uncertainty](#) about whether Sall will seek a controversial third term, so any announcement of his candidacy may spark unrest.

The July 2022 National Assembly elections were held a few months after the distribution of this project’s survey and the associated workshop. Respondents to our survey and workshop participants expressed fears that these elections could lead to an internet shutdown to thwart opposition to

the government. During this time, as part of the OPTIMA project, the Senegal Prepare & Prevent (P&P) network collected network measurements three times before and during the elections. These measurements indicated that the internet remained connected and operating as usual.

Senegal will hold presidential elections in 2024. Sall faces significant political challenges, and opposition parties recently have held demonstrations. In past protests, such as those in March 2021, Senegalese citizens took to social media to mobilize. The president has repeatedly blamed social media for “agitation” and threatened to introduce social media regulations. During the last election, there was significant censorship of many websites during the night of the elections until the results were released.

Freedom of the Media

Senegal’s [media landscape](#) is robust, with at least 27 daily newspapers, more than 20 general-interest and community radio stations, and about 20 TV channels. Despite this appearance of variety, political coverage by the powerful state-owned national TV broadcaster is largely focused on – and favorable to – the parties of the ruling coalition, although some of the private channels cover other political parties.

The country lacks a law guaranteeing citizens access to government information, an absence that significantly hampers news coverage of the authorities. The Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), among other organizations, has in the past [called for](#) lawmakers to draft an access to information law in compliance with international human rights standards.

In June 2017, Senegal adopted a new Press Code that drew criticism from press freedom organizations for [significant gaps](#), particularly its maintenance of criminal penalties for alleged offenses and its very understanding – or lack thereof – of the role of journalism. “On the whole, the Code adopts many overly restrictive, even downright repressive, policies on freedom of expression,” according to the international organization Article 19.

Senegalese authorities have a record of making arbitrary arrests of journalists, such as [in the case of TV news reporter Oley Mane](#), who shared a meme of President Sall on a private WhatsApp Group. Her arrest and imprisonment in November 2018 was seen as a means of intimidating news media – and social media users generally -- ahead of the country's 2019 presidential election. Another instance occurred in August 2019, months after Sall was re-elected as president, when journalist Adam Gaye [was arrested](#) for Facebook posts that allegedly compromised public security and offended the president. Under [Senegal's Penal Code](#), the two offenses carry maximum punishments of five and two years' imprisonment, respectively, and fines of 1.5 million CFA Francs (US\$2,327) each.

While Senegalese media professionals have rarely faced physical violence in recent years compared with other African countries, March 2021 was different. On March 4, a day after the protests broke out over opposition leader Sonko's arrest, individuals partially destroyed the walls in front of the building housing the RFM radio station and the L'Observateur newspaper. Further, rioters attacked and ransacked the premises of several media outlets, taking equipment. Media also reported that individuals attacked and set fire to the premises of the national daily, Le Soleil. At the same time, the National Council for Broadcast Regulation (CNRA) [suspended](#) two privately-owned TV channels, SenTV and Walfadri TV, for alleged irresponsible news coverage and breach of regulations.

Reporters Without Borders [ranks](#) Senegal 73rd of 180 countries globally in its 2022 Press Freedom Index, a considerable fall from its ranking of 49 in 2021.

An Uncertain History of Internet Shutdowns

Social media platforms are used extensively in Senegal, and these spaces have become central to political engagement and electoral campaigning. In the past years, there has been scattershot anecdotal information about inaccessible social media platforms during contentious political moments. However, there is scant evidence available to prove that these outages occurred and were ordered by government officials.

On June 23, 2016, there were allegations of a social media blockage believed to be connected to the release of Karim Wade from prison. Karim, the son of former President Abdoulaye Wade (who is considered one of Sall's main opponents), had been arrested and jailed for embezzlement of public funds. This blockage was briefly reported by [Dakarposte](#), but was not documented by major news stations, digital rights-focused CSOs, or network-measurement organizations.

In the runup to Senegal's last presidential election on Feb. 24, 2019, a coalition advocating a free and open internet called for ISPs to ensure stable internet access during the entire electoral process. While no major internet services were blocked, [OONI Explorer Data](#) shows that at least four news media sites were inaccessible during that period - sunubuzzsn.com, thieydakar.net, new.sen360.sn and sudfmsenradio.com. There were further anecdotal reports of many online media platforms, such as popular media outlets like Leral.net and Xibar.net, that were inaccessible until election authorities had published the final election results.

According to the network-measurement organization, Netblocks, [Senegal experienced an internet shutdown in the early morning on March 5, 2021](#), when protests against Sonko's arrest broke out across the country and led to looting. The National Audiovisual Regulatory Council (CNRA) suspended two television stations, SENTV and WALF TV, over their coverage of the protests. Data also shows that Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and [Telegram](#) were restricted on leading cellular network operator Orange/Sonatel for a number of hours in the early morning.

The local chapter of Amnesty International denounced the censorship, and the @YourAnonCentral Twitter account of the [international hackers group Anonymous](#) (@YourAnonNews) [tweeted](#) at Sall, "@Macky_Sall if you have a case against your opposition leader that is one thing. But you have no excuse to cut the internet or harm protestors. If you have nothing to hide let the world see and the people speak. #FreeSenegal."

Senegal has also experienced network disruptions in the past for technical reasons that apparently were not connected to any government orders. [OSIRIS reported](#) that on Dec. 19, 2012, a technical issue led to a breakdown on the SAT3 submarine cable, depriving people in Senegal of access to the internet and international voice communications beginning at approximately 10:30 p.m. "The gradual return of the service was only noted" the next day "from 10 p.m." Although disconnections and technical issues occur from time to time, the general quality of network infrastructure in Senegal is good and continues to improve, reinforcing coverage and access across the country.

Legal Context for Internet Shutdowns

According to Justin Oumar Bamah Ossovi, a Senegalese legal expert who participated in this research, there are no specific laws allowing or prohibiting internet shutdowns. In the absence of such a law that could explicitly allow internet shutdowns, authorities can rely on existing laws that give regulators the right to control telecommunications networks and shut down the internet, throttle bandwidth or censor content. As a result, provisions aimed at curtailing freedom of expression are scattered throughout the various existing laws and allow for action to be taken on the actors involved in the distribution and sharing of information, such as online media, social networks, etc.

For example, the [Electronic Communications Code](#), submitted on June 6, 2018, by the government of Senegal and approved by the National Assembly on Nov. 28, 2018, [mentions in its Article 27](#) that "the regulatory authority may authorize or impose any traffic management measure it deems appropriate to preserve competition in the electronic telecommunications sector and ensure fair treatment of similar services." Without proper judicial review that could determine whether government requests to ARTP to shut down the internet actually comply with the

traffic- management requirements set forth in the Electronic Communications Code, this law provides the Senegalese executive with a potential legal mechanism to impose network limitations, including on freedom of expression.

In addition, Article 181 of the [Press Code](#) makes online publishers [criminally and civilly](#) liable for content hosted on their websites. This article promotes censorship and affects online press freedom in Senegal. In its August 2017 analysis of the adopted code, Article 19 recommended that Article 181 "retain only the potential civil liability of online media companies. Any reference to criminal liability should be dropped." The organization also called for Section 3, which contains this and other articles, to be "completely revised with the aim of abolishing the vast majority of administrative and criminal sanctions in this section."

Finally, Article 2 of [Law No. 2016-33 of Dec. 14, 2016](#) on intelligence services and the [draft law 2020](#) on homeland security are considered potential laws that could be used to implement bandwidth limitations or other forms of internet shutdowns for reasons of national security or territorial defense. In addition, [Law 2021-33 of April 2021](#) amended the Penal Code and also strengthened the criminal component that could infringe on fundamental rights and freedoms, including the right of access to information (internet by extension).

Furthermore, for the past year, the Senegalese government [has been making statements](#) about the need to adopt a bill to regulate the use of social media. This is a strategy used in many other countries to censor and control online speeches. For more information on existing legal provisions in Senegal related to telecommunications as well as analysis on their impact on freedom of expression online, please see [CIPESA's 2021 legal review](#).

¹ <https://netblocks.org/reports/social-media-and-messaging-apps-disrupted-in-senegal-amid-political-unrest-eA1R5pBp>

Detailed Research Findings

Knowledge About Shutdowns and Past Shutdown Experiences

The respondents were first asked about their past experiences of internet shutdowns in Senegal as well as their knowledge about internet shutdowns.

When asked if there had been an internet shutdown where they lived, 47% of the respondents reported that they had experienced a shutdown in the past year; with an additional 15% reporting they experienced a shutdown in the past two years and 8% during the past three years. An additional 20% reported that they were unsure or didn't know whether the disruption they experienced was a shutdown. Only 9% reported that they had never experienced an internet shutdown. In the focus groups, participants discussed the circumstances surrounding the 2021 internet shutdown, and noted that it was early morning when Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube were restricted. This meant that, according to participants, only a small population of those using social media experienced the internet shutdown. As one participant argued, "There's a time of day when people in Senegal tend to be more online. If shutdowns happen outside that time-window, most people won't even notice." Several participants described their beliefs that this shutdown was meant to target the communications of journalists reporting on the arrest of Sonko, particularly as the blocks restricted sharing audiovisual content. Only a few participants reported being awake and trying to access online services during the shutdown. As one participant noted "For my part, I was sleeping when the shutdown happened." Another participant (a journalist) described how they were working and had to use a VPN that they had previously downloaded to "bypass the shutdown." Other participants noted that there was not much reporting on the shutdown. As one participant asserted, "during the shutdown linked to Karim Wade's arrest, people were not made aware of the shutdown by traditional media and therefore they could not defend their right to information." Another participant said they only found out about the shutdown from other digitally focused activists' social network posts.

Respondents were then explicitly asked if they have a clear understanding of what qualifies as an internet shutdown. A majority of the respondents (62%) reported that, while they were familiar with shutdowns, they didn't fully understand how internet shutdowns occur, technically or legally. An additional 28% of respondents reported that they didn't know how to describe or define an internet shutdown. Only 9% of respondents said they considered themselves to have "expert" level knowledge in order to define an

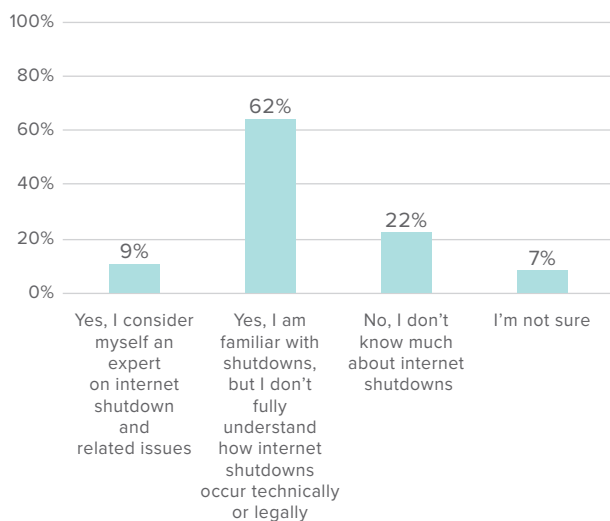
"During the shutdown linked to Karim Wade's arrest, people were not made aware of the shutdown by traditional media and therefore they could not defend their right to information."

-Workshop participant, 2022

internet shutdown. During workshop discussions, most participants expressed uncertainty about defining a shutdown and knowing the difference between forms of censorship and shutdowns. As one participant described, “most people associate shutdowns with blanket shutdowns – therefore, anything else that is more targeted or subtle will often go unnoticed.” Participants noted that there are few ways to prove whether a shutdown was ordered by the government or merely a technical issue.

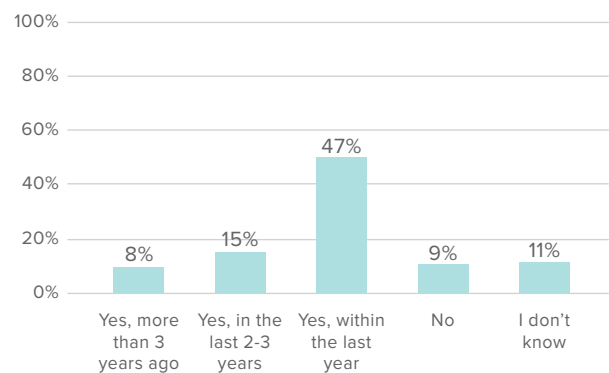
Respondents were also asked to list the reasons or “triggering events” that they believed have led the government to disrupt the internet in the past. Respondents listed protests (39%), elections (39%), and political or social instability (34%) as the most likely rationales. Other triggers included violence (18%), national education system exams (11%), visits from important officials (7%), and military activities (5%). An additional quarter of the respondents noted that they “don’t know” the government’s reasons for shutting off the internet.

Do you know what an internet shutdown is?



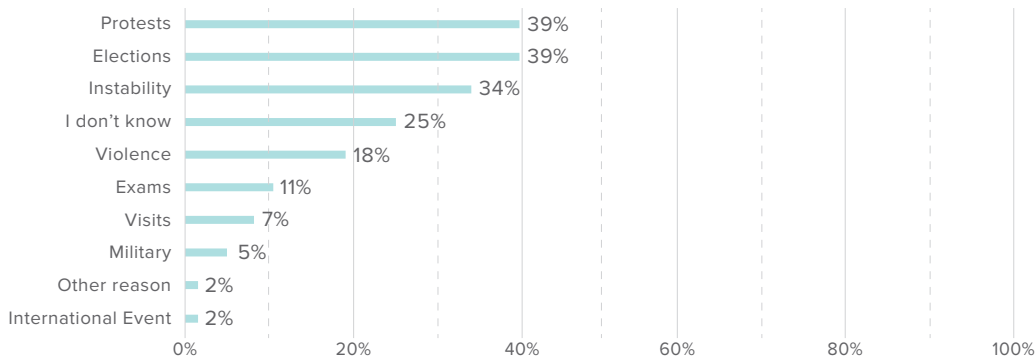
2

To your knowledge, has there been an internet shutdown where you live?



3

What do you believe the reasons have been for the government to shut down the internet?



4

² N=53

³ N=55

⁴ N=55

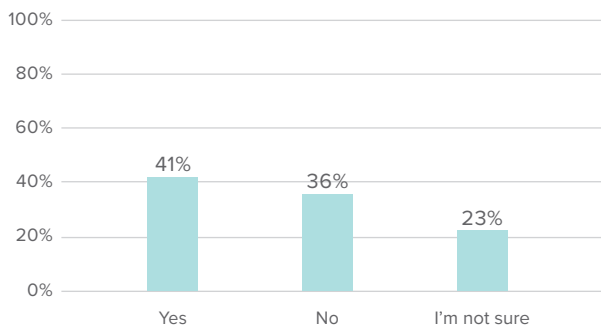
Distinctions Between Intentional Shutdown and Infrastructure Problems

Respondents were asked if they understood how to tell the difference between an intentional government-ordered internet shutdown and technical challenges with internet infrastructure. The respondents were divided, with a plurality (41%) of the respondents reporting that they knew how to tell the difference. However, more than half (59%) of respondents reported that they were unable to or were not sure if they could tell the difference. Participants in the workshop discussed this challenge, saying that especially in terms of the 2021 shutdown, the short length of the suspension mimicked regular service interruptions that internet users experience all the time. As one workshop participant described, “Here in Senegal, the quality of the network infrastructure is not good, so often it will be the case that people will blame that, instead of thinking of other causes that might be responsible for the internet not working.”

During focus group discussions, participants had an extensive debate about Senegal's past disruptions and how to tell whether a shutdown was due to technical malfunctioning or political intentions. Participants generally agreed that one way to try to determine if a shutdown is intentional is to correlate it with major political events.

However, without proof via government or ISP disclosure or technical evidence, participants noted that this is not enough. Therefore, it was concluded that additional work must be done to push the government to provide more information if there is deliberate network interference. As one participant argued, “We need to allow for civil oversight of the ARTP.” Several participants expressed skepticism about the potential for government openness, with one saying, “I’m not going to trust the ARTP to know whether a shutdown is live or not.” Another participant noted, “It is neither in the interests of the regulating agency nor that of the ISPs to acknowledge technical problems.” Many participants cited examples from neighboring countries in Africa as evidence that governments and ISPs will not willingly acknowledge and verify shutdowns without pressure from civil society. For these reasons, there was acknowledgment that civil society cannot rely on the government to disclose information about shutdowns and must work collectively through better technical data collection and reporting to provide evidence and hold government to account.

Do you know how to tell the difference between a government-ordered internet shutdown and internet connectivity problems/technical issues or problems with infrastructure/electricity?



5

“We need to be precise that in Senegal, considering Article 25 and most of the Code of Electronic Communications, the neutrality of the internet is well-protected on paper. However, this same Code allows for the government to legally enforce decisions through the regulating agency (ARTP), as well as passing restriction orders onto internet Service Providers. In that scenario, it is extremely difficult to assert the origins of internet shutdowns, since it is neither in the interests of the regulating agency nor that of the ISPs to acknowledge technical problems. Moreover, we need to face the fact that in Senegal, during a period of social or political crisis or during an election period, never will ISPs acknowledge that they have received an executive order from the government requiring that specific content be blocked, or areas of Senegal be shut down from internet. No operators will ever do that in Senegal.”

Workshop participant, 2022

⁵ N=56

Shutdown Impact

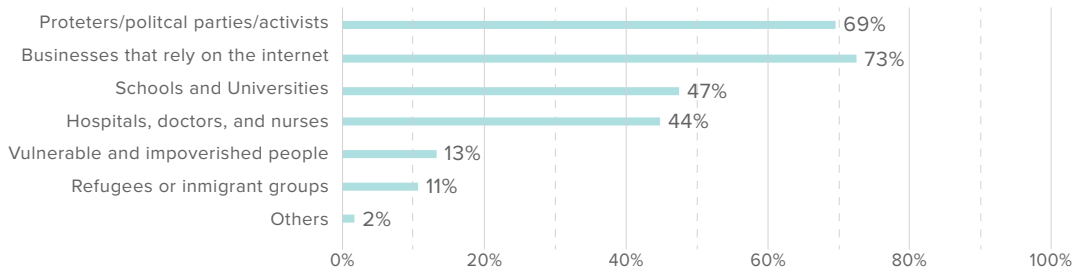
Respondents were also asked about the impact of internet shutdowns, both in terms of the impact on society and on them as individuals. When asked which sectors or parts of society are most negatively impacted by internet shutdowns, respondents reported the groups most negatively impacted were businesses that rely on the internet (73%) and protesters, political parties, and activists (total of 69%). Respondents also described health and educational stakeholders as significantly impacted (at 47% and 44% respectively). The groups that the fewest respondents described as impacted were “vulnerable and impoverished people” and “refugee or other migrant groups,” at 13% and 11%, respectively.

The 37 respondents who indicated they had experienced a previous shutdown were also asked about the ways past shutdowns impacted them personally. The most common

disruptions to daily life included negative impacts on individual’s professional activities and employment (89%), on receiving the news (70%), and on communicating with friends and family (66%). Other disruptions included participating in classes and receiving an education (48%), conducting business and making money online (41%), receiving health information and support (34%), organizing for elections or activism (23%), and entertainment (20%). Only 2% said a shutdown had no impact on their daily life.

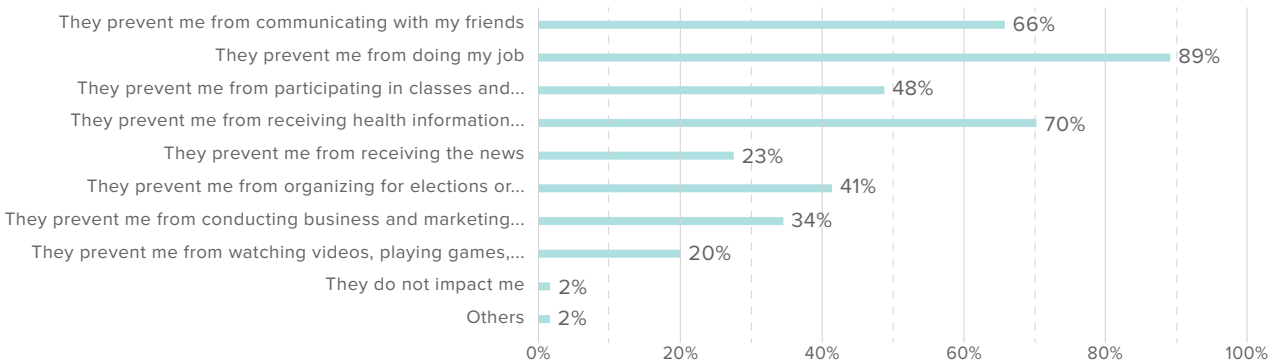
During focus groups, participants described the importance of documenting impacts from shutdowns in both Senegal and in neighboring countries so that people understand the importance of the issue in the leadup to future elections. As one participant described, “We should be looking for ways to track the consequences of shutdowns on people, so it becomes a political issue people can fight on.”

In your opinion, which groups are most impacted by an internet shutdown? (Check all that apply)



6

How do internet shutdowns impact your everyday life? (Choose all that apply)



7

⁶ N=55

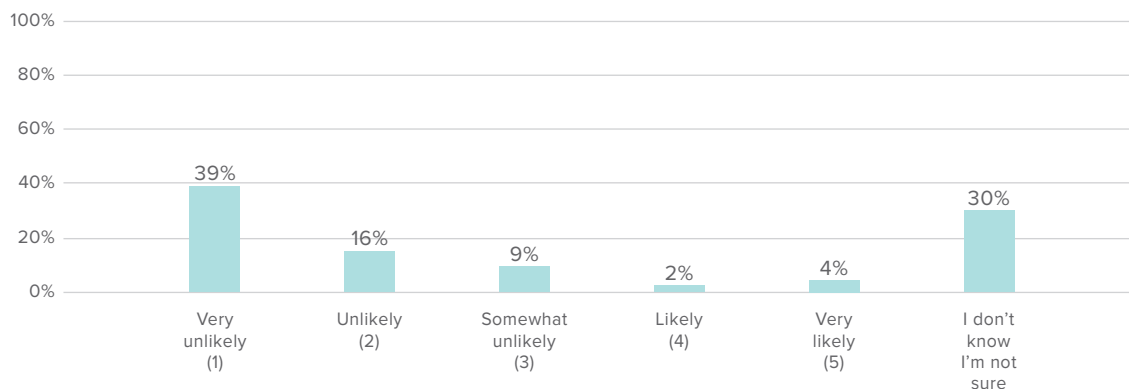
⁷ N=56

Risks of Future Shutdowns and Censorship

Following questions about past experiences of internet shutdowns and their impacts, respondents were asked questions about their perceptions of the risks of future shutdowns. A majority (65%) of respondents said they believed an internet shutdown in the next year is “very unlikely” (56%) or “less likely” (9%). Another 44% of the respondents answered that they were not sure and could not predict whether a shutdown would occur in the next year. Only 5% believed a shutdown was very likely in the next year.

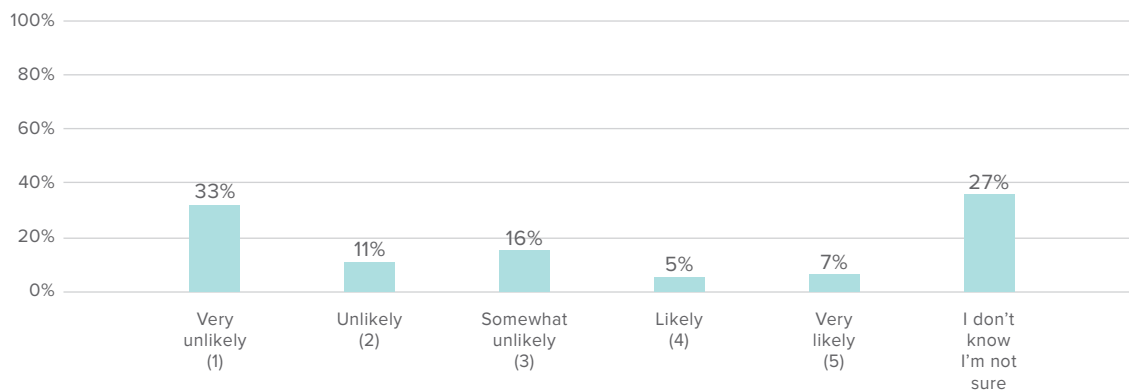
When asked to discuss the risk of future shutdowns in the focus groups, participants said the public perceives the risk to be relatively low, which may be due in part to the fact that most Senegalese citizens have never experienced a large-scale shutdown. Additionally, many participants in the workshop noted that the March 2021 shutdown occurred in the early morning, when many of the main users of the internet were likely to be journalists, and thus it seemed targeted at preventing journalists from reporting on protests and the contentious arrest.

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



8

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



9

⁸ N=56

⁹ N=55



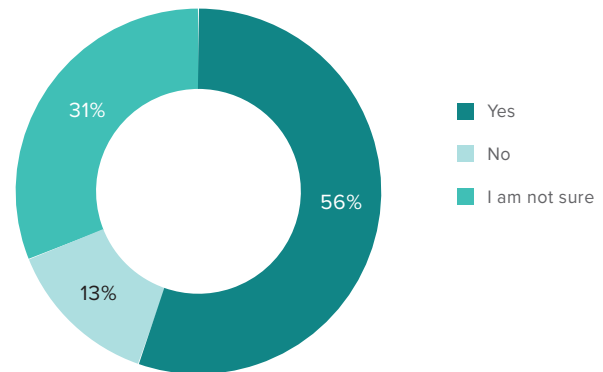
Shutdown/Censorship Concern During Upcoming Elections

Survey respondents were asked about the likelihood of an internet shutdown during the upcoming elections referenced above (in “Background”). In part because they recall the internet disruptions during past elections (as noted above) and the tensions surrounding Senegal’s political climate currently, survey respondents and focus group participants believed there is more risk of an internet shutdown in the coming years.

As compared with the 79% of respondents who said they believe a shutdown is very unlikely or unlikely in the next year, only 44% believed a shutdown is very unlikely or unlikely in the next three years. An additional 12% believed a shutdown is likely or very likely in the next three years. Respondents were also specifically asked about the risk of censorship during upcoming elections. Several participants argued that the risk of internet shutdowns in Senegal is inherently tied to longer-term democratic developments in the country and expressed worries about political trends and the potential for future shutdowns in the longer term if civil society is not prepared to push back. As one participant articulated, “considering the state of political affairs in Senegal right now, and the fact that the current president is trying to remain in power for several mandates in a row despite constitutional laws forbidding it, I am worried that we’re going to witness internet shutdowns in the coming years, especially during upcoming elections periods.” In response to this conversation, participants repeated the urgency to be prepared despite uncertainty, with one participant saying, “Civil society cannot afford to sit back and hope the government will do the right thing.”

In response to the question “Do you fear online censorship or internet shutdowns during the coming elections,” about half (56%) indicated that they did, while 31% said they didn’t know or were unsure. Only 13% reported that they were not afraid of online censorship or internet shutdowns. In the workshop, participants discussed general fears that the upcoming elections would be contentious and that the government might accelerate the use of censorship. A few

Are you worried about online censorship or shutdowns during the next election?



10

participants described the government’s recent discussion of regulating social media as indications of plans for future censorship and potential blocking of major platforms. As described by one participant, “The probability is high to the extent that the government expresses a will to regulate online social medias by proposing a law to do that. That law, still being drafted, indicates the government’s desire to meddle in people’s private affairs and control what happens online... These are indicators that the government will use every tools at its disposal – including shutdowns.”

“I think the probability of shutdowns in the coming years is very high. The civil society cannot afford to sit back and hope the government will do the right thing. They never do that, especially when they can get away with it. The civil society needs to be prepared to hold the government accountable, as well as engage the international community on it. We should make a stable, open, and working internet as one of the development criteria, as it is now the main tool for people to inform themselves and communicate.”

-Workshop participant, 2022

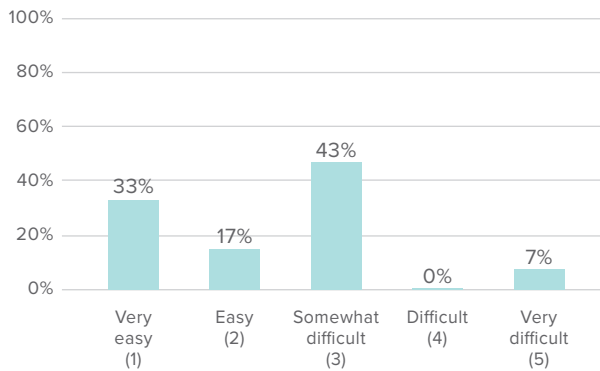
¹⁰ N=54

Operating Environment for Advocacy

Civil society organizations play a major role in empowering democracy, respect for human rights online and offline, and freedom of expression in Senegal. Respondents were asked a set of questions to better understand the operating environment for digital rights advocacy.

When asked how easy it is for civil society organizations to safely operate and engage in advocacy in Senegal, respondents were somewhat divided. Half (50%) reported that it is very easy (33%) or easy (17%) for civil society to operate safely and effectively. A plurality (43%) rated civil society’s abilities to operate as somewhat constrained. Only 7% of all respondents reported that it is difficult or very difficult for civil society organizations to operate safely and effectively in Senegal.

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



11



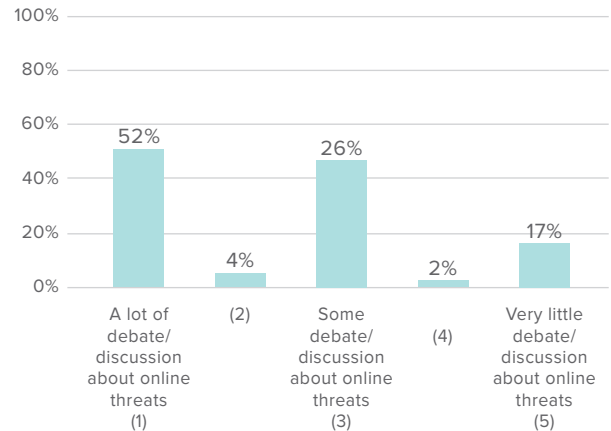
¹¹ N=54

Political Statements About Social Media

We additionally sought to assess respondents’ perceptions about how much political leaders appear to hype the risks of social media and potential harms of online discourse. When political leaders decry the harms of social media, such rhetoric can sometimes be followed by online censorship, with those alleged harms cited as the rationale. As described in the Background section, the government has been pushing for a bill to regulate social media usage and content.

Respondents were asked the degree to which politicians and policymakers were publicly describing social media and the internet as a destabilizing force in relation to hate speech, “fake news,” and so forth. A majority of respondents (56%) said they had heard “a lot” of such rhetoric, while 19% reported little or very little such discussion. Many participants in the focus groups noted increased political rhetoric related to the dangers of social media and lack of control in social media spaces, especially as social media is heavily used during elections. Some participants noted that, considering the 2021 shutdown incident focused on social-media platforms, advocacy against legislation to censor social media should be connected with protections against total blocking of these platforms.

Do politicians and policymakers in Senegal make statements about social media and the internet as a threatening and destabilizing force (related to hate speech, fake news, etc.)?



12

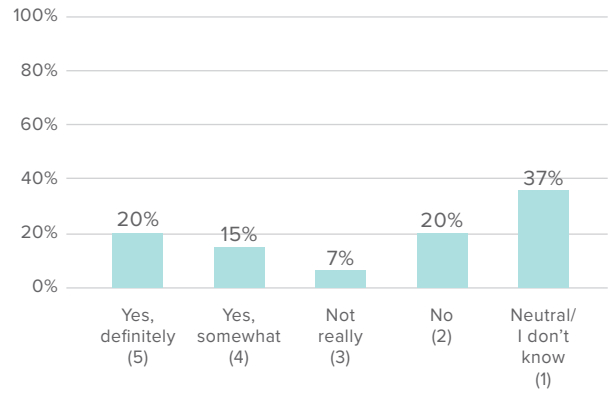
¹² N=54

Laws Enabling Internet Shutdowns

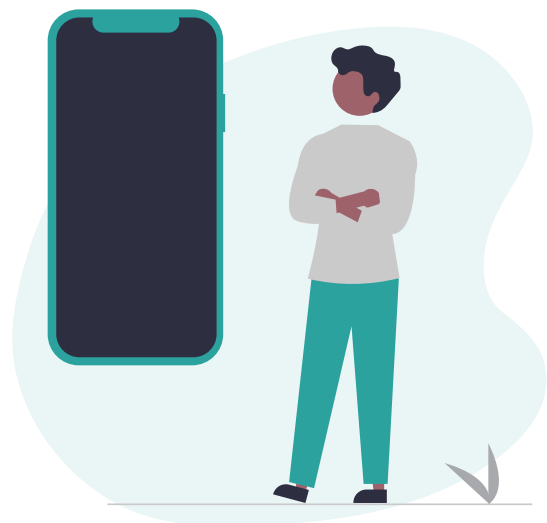
As discussed in the Background section, some provisions of the 2018 Electronic Communications Code provide regulatory authority over internet service provision and suspension. In addition, Article 181 of the Press Code allows for interpretation by the government when it comes to intermediary liability.

Respondents to the survey were asked whether they think laws make it easy for the government to censor or shut down the internet in Senegal. Respondents were divided. A plurality (37%) reported that they were not sure or neutral, a quarter (27%) rated the laws as not enabling of internet shutdowns, and 35% reported that the laws are either somewhat or definitely enabling of censorship and shutdowns. Workshop participants discussed the 2014 law on intelligence, the 2020 internal security bill, and the 2021 modification of the penal code as also potentially allowing for internet shutdowns and violations of freedom of expression and access to information. As described by one participant, “There is no specific law that allows the shutdown of the internet, but the government hides behind existing security laws to shut down the internet.”

Do you think laws in Senegal make it easier for the government to suspend the internet or censor online content?



13



¹³ N=54

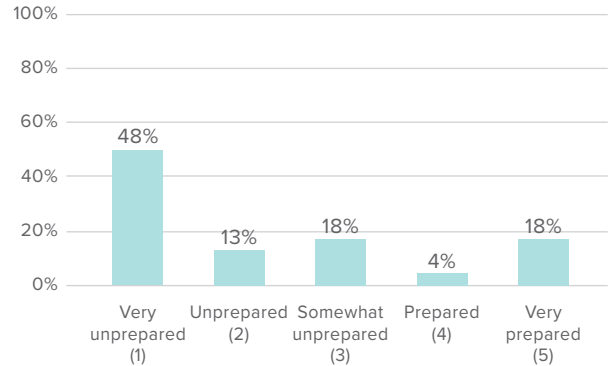
Civil Society Preparedness and Capacity

An Unprepared Civil Society?

Respondents were additionally asked a series of questions to assess civil society’s capacity to both prepare for and confront potential internet shutdowns. When asked how prepared civil society would be if there were an internet shutdown in the next year, a majority (63%) suggested that civil society would be very unprepared (40%) or unprepared (23%). Only 6% of respondents selected prepared or very prepared. In workshop focus groups, participants discussed the main capacity challenges facing civil society in being prepared for shutdowns. First, participants noted that most people do not have firsthand experience or knowledge about internet shutdowns, and that this issue and the risk of future shutdowns are not currently prominent in civil society debates. Participants said there are few organizations directly interested in internet policies and their implications for human rights. As one participant articulated, “Very few CSOs in Senegal are interested in digital rights, which is why we need to enlarge the discussion around internet shutdowns and raise awareness about the implications of shutdowns for civil society as a whole.”

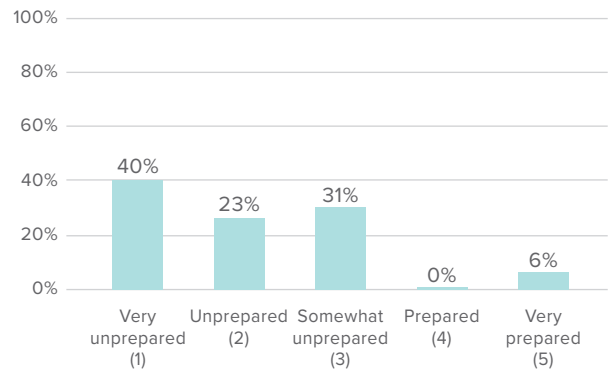
Another challenge debated by participants related to this lack of specialization was civil society’s limited capacity to understand technical issues such as the technical mechanisms through which the government can censor and shut down the internet, and how to track these forms of censorship. Finally, participants observed that, even though Senegal has a relatively vibrant and diverse civil society, coordination remains a challenge. This is especially true, according to several participants, of digital rights groups, which often have “weak connections to a wider advocacy network.”

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



14

You indicated that the government has previously shutdown the internet. In your opinion, how prepared was Senegalese civil society to confront the shutdown



15

¹⁴ N=56

¹⁵ N=35

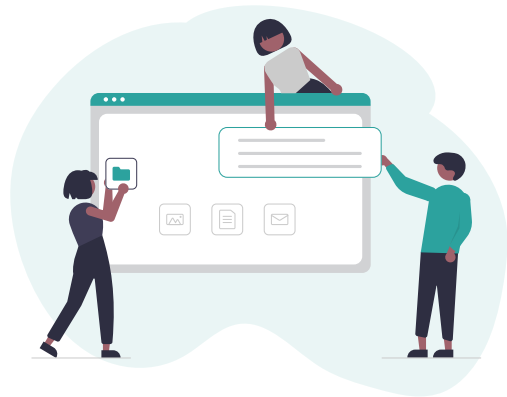
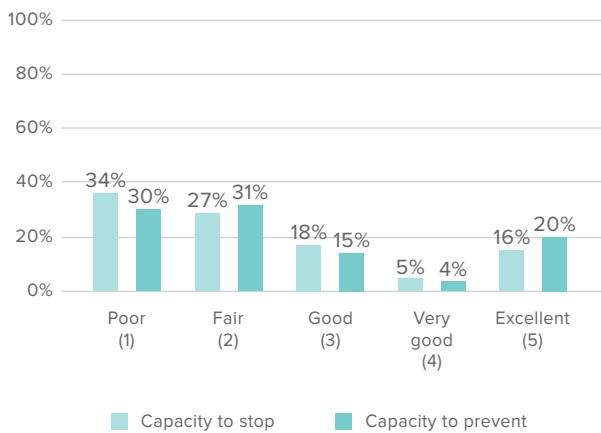
In addition to the question about general capacity, respondents were asked specifically to assess civil society’s capacity to stop an ongoing shutdown or prevent a future shutdown. To a large extent, these capacities were assessed similarly, with a majority (61%) reporting capacity as low or nonexistent and nearly a quarter (24%) reporting capacity to prevent or stop a shutdown as high or very high.

Following general questions about civil society advocacy capacity, we asked survey respondents to answer questions related to capacity and need for specific internet shutdown advocacy skills, including expertise with the tools and methods to circumvent different kinds of internet shutdowns, how to collect and analyze network data to document these incidents, how to build legal strategies and engage in strategic litigation, and how to build advocacy strategies and outreach to specific key stakeholders.

“Very few CSOs in Senegal are interested in digital rights, which is why we need to enlarge the discussion around internet shutdowns and raise awareness about the implications of shutdowns for civil society as a whole.”

-Workshop participant, 2022

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



¹⁶ Capacity to stop (N=56); Capacity to prevent (N=54)

VPN Knowledge, Beliefs, and Circumvention Strategies

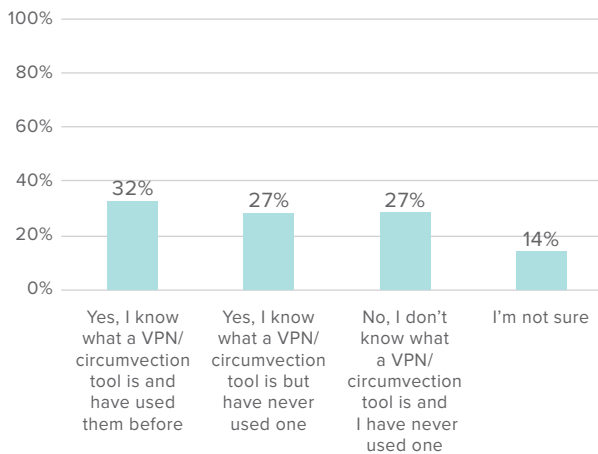
Virtual private networks (VPNs) and circumvention tools are used to circumvent various kinds of online censorship. A VPN works by encrypting a user’s internet connection and changing their IP address, allowing users to access sites and apps blocked using IP and DNS filtering. These tools can be useful in some (but not all) internet shutdown scenarios. Respondents were asked about their levels of knowledge and familiarity with these kinds of tools. In the responses, 32% reported that they know what a VPN/circumvention tool is and have used one before. An additional 27% reported that they know what VPN/circumvention tools are but have never used them. Another 41% reported that they don’t know what a VPN is (27%) or are unsure (14%).

“The first fight to lead is to raise awareness within the populations to the use of circumvention tools, as many people in Senegal still ignore their existence and relevance to bypass the effects of shutdowns.”

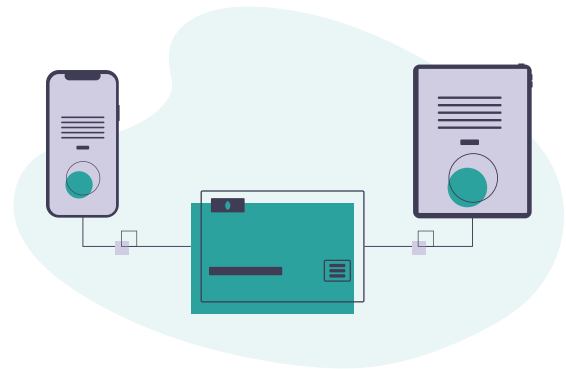
-Workshop participant, 2022

Respondents were provided a list of 13 common tools and strategies used to circumvent censorship and asked specifically about which of those were familiar to them. The only strategy that the majority were fully or partially familiar with was “using SMS instead of the internet when the internet is blocked” (63%). Respondents were most familiar with “other VPNs” not listed (30%), Tor Browser (23%), and using international SIM cards (16%).

Do you know what a VPN or circumvention tool is used for and have you personally used any VPNs or circumvention tools before?

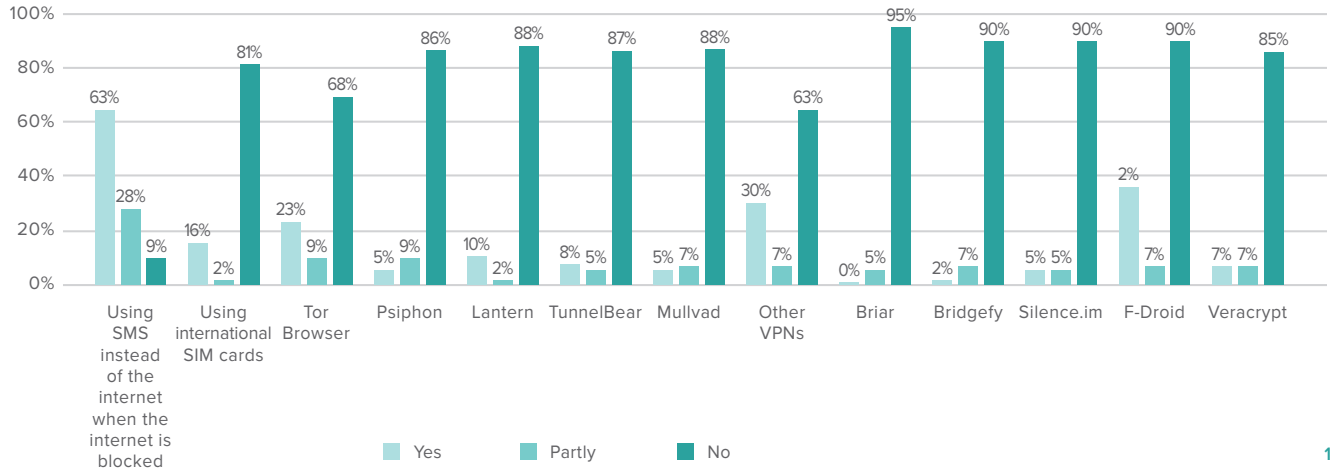


17



¹⁷ N=56

Are you familiar with using these circumvention tools?

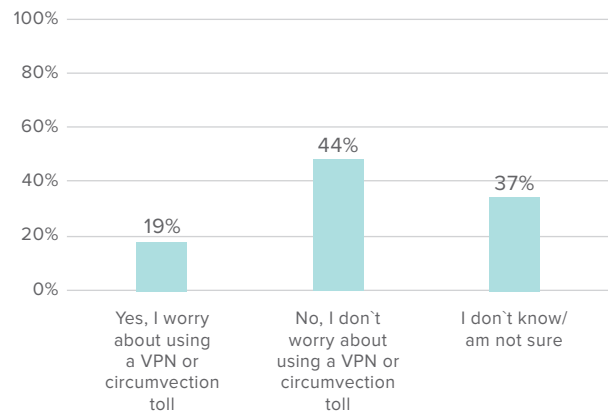


18

In focus group discussions, participants discussed low general awareness of circumvention tools and attributed this low awareness in part to relatively low levels of online censorship (as compared to neighboring countries). Participants described a need to “popularize circumvention tools” not only to prepare for future censorship events but also to protect individuals’ privacy online. A few individuals stressed the potential to bring in youth groups to build awareness among a more tech-savvy population. As described, “We need to integrate young people on these questions so that they can efficiently spearhead and manage these issues.” Participants also noted that, to their knowledge, there are no resources on circumvention tools in Wolof.

Respondents were also asked about whether they had any fears about using a VPN or circumvention tool. A plurality (44%) reported that they had no such fears, while 19% said they worry about using these tools. An additional 37% said they don’t know/are not sure. In focus group discussions, a few participants described feelings of fear and risk related to using TOR and “being perceived by government officials as a hacker.”

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



19

¹⁸ Using SMS instead of the internet when the internet is blocked (N=54); Using international SIM cards (N=43); Tor Browser (N=47); Psiphon (N=43); Lantern (N=41); TunnelBear (N=39); Mullvad (N=41); Other VPNs (N=46); Briar (N=40); Bridgefy (N=41); Silence.im (N=41); F-Droid (N=41); Veracrypt (N=42)

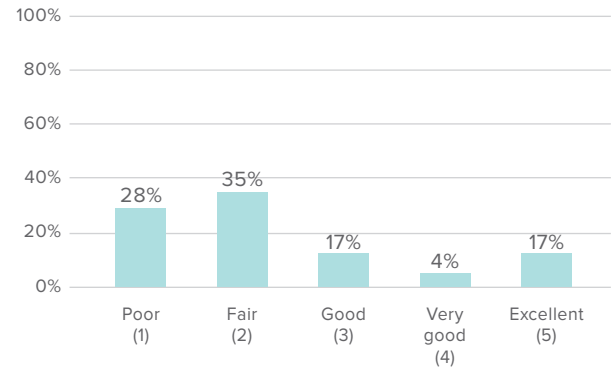
¹⁹ N=52

Capacity for Research and Network Measurement

Respondents were asked to assess civil society's capacity to collect technical data related to network disruptions and network performance to document internet shutdowns. This kind of technical data collection is extremely important for advocacy work: it provides evidence advocates can use to hold the government accountable even if shutdown orders are not published, it supplies journalists with empirical and quantitative information to better report on internet shutdowns, and it is used by lawyers in efforts to fight shutdowns in courts. International advocacy coalitions also use this data for global advocacy against internet shutdowns. There are many ways to measure internet performance, with various datasets and metrics to understand different kinds of internet disruptions. Expertise is needed to both collect this data and understand how to analyze it.

Respondents were asked to rate civil society's general capacity for network-measurement data collection and analysis. A majority (63%) rated such capacity as poor or fair (1 or 2 out of 5 on the Likert scale) as compared with 21% who rated it as very good or excellent (4 or 5). In the focus groups, participants described a general lack of expertise to connect performance and connectivity tests. Some noted that there are experts, but that they are largely not engaged in advocacy and are less aware about the threats of internet shutdowns. Participants described a need to recruit those who have technical skills, such as network engineers and programmers, to provide resources that could incentivize individuals with the capability to ect measurements, and to engage in more regular testing in different parts of the country to "improve decision-making related to these issues, as well as build elements of proof to publicly denounce the arbitrariness of government-induced shutdowns."

How would you rate civil society's capacity in Senegal to collect technical data to measure and document internet shutdowns?



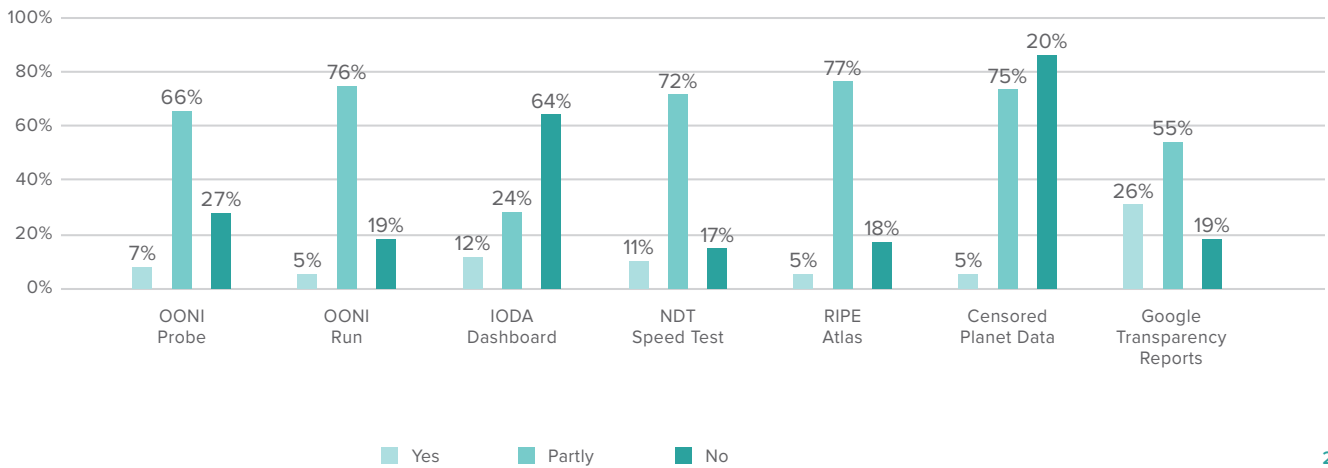
20



²⁰ N=54

The survey provided options to rate the seven most-used network-measurement and data-analysis tools and asked respondents their level of comfort in using these resources. Most respondents were unfamiliar with these resources, with 26% reporting that they were familiar with Google Transparency Reports, followed by IODA Dashboard (12%), NDT Speed Test (11%), and OONI Probe (7%). In the focus group setting, participants noted that there is some familiarity with organizations such as Netblocks and that many individuals know how to use Speedtest. However, they described a need to “diversify tools (have 4-5 standard tools to use) in order to improve the reliability of our results.”

Are you familiar with using these circumvention tools?



²¹ OONI Probe (N=49); OONI Run (N=42); IODA Dashboard (N=41); NDT Speed Test (N=46); RIPE Atlas (N=44); Censored Planet Data (N=44); Google Transparency Reports (N=47)

Legal Capacity and Strategic Litigation

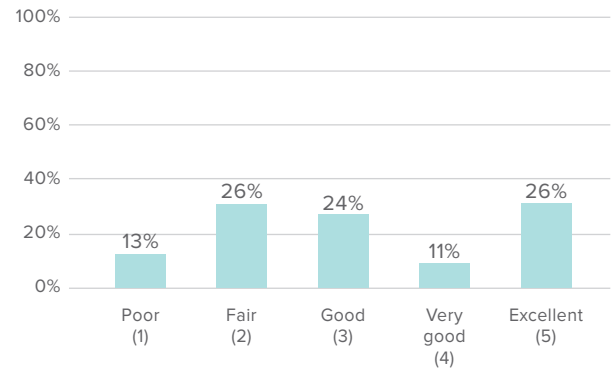
Respondents were asked about civil society’s capacity to work with lawyers on these issues, to understand the legality of shutdowns and legal recourse, as well as to use strategic litigation to fight internet shutdowns in court. On this question, 37% of respondents reported capacity is high (11%) or very high (26%). A near equal number of respondents (39%) reported legal capacity as low or nonexistent.

In the focus groups, participants noted that many lawyers and other legal actors such as judges are not aware of digital issues or the human rights implications of internet policies. Participants also noted the clear link between proposed social media regulation and potential to block internet platforms, but said there is very little discussion about legal reform and advocacy in these areas. Debates about existing laws also made it clear that there is a pressing need to understand existing laws, such as the Electronic Communications Code, the Press Code, and security-related laws, and the ways in which they could allow the government to justify future shutdowns and censorship.

“The defense for digital rights in Senegal needs to start first and foremost with a better training of legal professionals on digital issues”

-Workshop participant, 2022

How would you rate civil society's capacity in Senegal to fight shutdowns in court and engage in strategic litigation?



22



²² N=54



Supporting and Engaging Vulnerable Communities

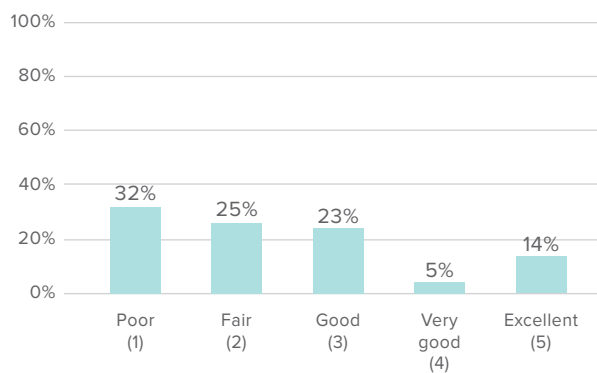
When the internet and key online services and platforms are suddenly shut down, marginalized and vulnerable communities can be inordinately or diversely impacted by internet shutdowns and the loss of access to such communications. These communities vary depending on the context, but can include targeted racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, refugee and migrant communities, low-income women, and others. Advocates who want to support and engage these communities will benefit from understanding the specific ways they rely on the internet and online platforms and the specific impact of internet shutdowns on these groups. When asked about the capacity of civil society to support vulnerable communities to prepare for or prevent internet shutdowns, only 19% reported that capability as high (5%) or very high (14%). More than half (57%) reported this capacity as low (25%) or nonexistent (32%).

Participants in the workshop focus groups were asked to specify the groups in Senegal most vulnerable to loss of internet access and connectivity. Participants noted several key populations in need of support, including rural people, people with disabilities, isolated elderly people, and health workers and aids to vulnerable populations. Participants noted that there is little understanding of the digital literacies and needs of these groups, as well as few resources or trainings targeting these groups' connectivity needs. As one participant described, "The accessibility of vulnerable persons to digital services is directly linked to the actual literacy of those populations." Additionally, participants noted that these groups are largely unrepresented in policy conversations and there is a "need to do everything in our power to include marginalized people in the decision-making process, so that they can participate in the design of solutions that are intended for them."

"There is a need to do everything in our power to include marginalized people into the decision-making process, so that they can participate to the design of solutions that are destined to them"

-Workshop participant, 2022

How would you rate civil society's capacity in Senegal to support vulnerable communities during a shutdown?



23



²³ N=56

Capacity to Engage with Different Stakeholders

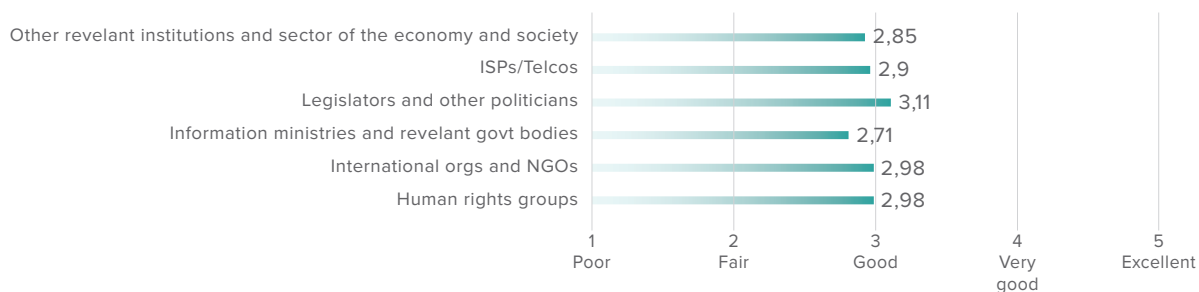
Successful advocacy is often the result of a group of organizations working together toward a common goal. Collaboration is valuable because it helps to reach and persuade more decision-makers and influencers, to increase available resources, build legitimacy with target audiences, and bring in specific skills and expertise. Adding organizations expands the breadth and diversity of support for the cause, especially if the partners come from a variety of sectors. Effective advocacy campaigns often involve several types of stakeholders that can be significant allies, including civil society, government bodies, private sector, education, legislators, ISPs, international NGOs, and human rights groups.

Respondents were asked to rate their perception of civil society’s capacity to engage with other key actors on digital rights issues, including ISPs and telecommunications companies, legislators, human rights groups, international NGOs, information ministries, and other relevant sectors such as healthcare providers and educational institutions. Respondents rated it easiest to engage with legislators and politicians (an average of 3.11 on a scale of 1-5) and international and national human rights groups (2.98).

Respondents rated it harder to engage with ISPs and Telcos (2.9), other sectors of the economy and society (2.85), and information ministries and government bodies (2.71).

In a country such as Senegal, where civil society can engage more directly, focus-group participants indicated a particular need to develop strategies to engage more with diverse actors. Participants noted difficulties in engaging with ISPs and Telcos, particularly due to their legal responsibilities and relationships with the government, but also a need for civil society to develop more ongoing dialogue with these companies (especially foreign owned entities). Participants stressed the need to engage with educational institutions, sectors enmeshed in the digital economy, and health institutions. Participants expressed skepticism about engaging with government bodies. However, several participants pointed out that the government is still responsive to civil society and that advocacy during the last presidential election may have contributed to the government’s decision not to shut down the internet.

Civil Society Capacity to Engage with Relevant Stakeholders



²⁴ Human rights groups (N=56); International orgs and NGOs (N=54); Information ministries and relevant govt bodies (N=56); Legislators and other politicians (N=54); ISPs/Telcos (N=55); Other relevant institutions and sectors of the economy and society (N=55)

Recommendations

Considering the lack of awareness about internet shutdowns and the threats they pose, there is a need to build awareness among the general public and key stakeholders about the threat of internet shutdowns. Journalists need to understand how to report on the issue and tell stories of internet shutdown harms in Senegal and in neighboring countries. Human rights groups should know what circumvention tools to promote within their communities and how to build campaigns against future shutdowns. Lawyers need training in digital policy in order to understand legal threats and the most effective form of recourse. Efforts to work closer with youth groups and important sectors reliant on the internet can promote the use of circumvention tools, build digital literacy, and help build a stronger case to keep the internet on.

As there is a great deal of uncertainty related to the upcoming elections in February 2024, civil society should bring together diverse coalitions to engage in scenario-planning based on the possibility of internet shutdowns before, during and after the election. In this way, advocates can prepare for different forms of shutdowns that might occur, develop legal strategies, and build infrastructure to promote circumvention tools and ensure technical data is collected.

There is an acute need to build network-measurement capacity and incentivize more regular testing, drawing on a diverse range of connectivity and performance datasets. Drawing on the few individuals and organizations equipped with the technical skills to conduct these measurements, the coalition can train others on how to collect network-measurement data, how to analyze this data, and how to collaborate with international groups, journalists, and activists to ensure this data is used in advocacy.

Civil society needs to work to better understand the digital literacies, uses, and needs of marginalized and vulnerable communities, and then customize and localize resources for these communities. Efforts to build or translate existing resources in Wolof should be scaled.

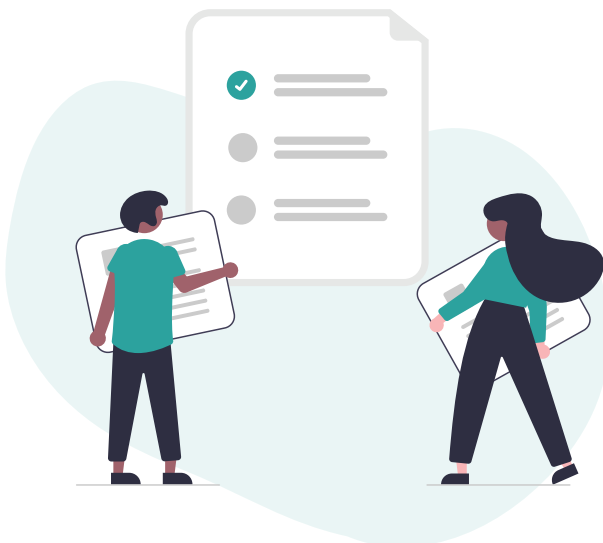
As Senegalese civil society is able to operate openly and engage in direct advocacy with policymakers and government bodies, digital rights organizations can take the lead on crafting anti-shutdown strategies and messages that can resonate with these power brokers. Additionally, digital rights organizations can determine the potential to engage more directly with ISPs and Telcos to push for more transparency on network interference and potentially engage these entities as allies in censorship prevention.

While Senegal remains a relatively vibrant democracy with robust and growing communications infrastructure, the political risks described above suggest the country may not be safe from the threat of internet shutdowns in the future. Civil society must prepare for such possibilities by strengthening its technical and advocacy capacity to increase the resilience of a range of communities, including the most vulnerable, to potential shutdowns. Moreover, the very process of building this capacity will itself raise awareness about the need for civic activism and responsibility, creating a virtuous circle in which advocacy on digital rights can strengthen civil society overall.

Conclusion

Civil society is vital in pushing back against internet shutdowns through advocacy efforts, documentation, awareness-raising domestically and internationally, and strategic litigation. Considering the evidence (although it is limited) of Senegal's past shutdowns, combined with its challenging legal, political, and technical environment, CSOs have an opportunity to engage in preventative advocacy to keep the government from using this increasingly popular, and severe, censorship technique.

But they must come together to craft clear strategic objectives and work together in a diverse coalition to engage in preventative advocacy. Unlike in many other countries that regularly experience internet shutdowns (and other countries involved in the OPTIMA network), Senegal's civil society is relatively unrestricted and able to engage openly on issues such as censorship without significant fear of reprisal. It is also deeply important that advocacy approaches and coalitions incorporate a diverse range of communities and perspectives, including not only human rights defenders and journalists, but also economically and digitally vulnerable communities, digitally reliant sectors of the economy, students, and internet users in general.



Appendix

Research Methods and Respondent Demographics

Methodology

This research was conducted with mixed methods, beginning with desk research and an initial survey to identify key issues, needs, and challenges. That survey then informed workshop discussions with key informants in a focus-group setting.

The research team designed and distributed a preliminary survey, with both closed and open-ended questions, to assess knowledge about internet shutdowns, experiences during past internet shutdowns, understanding of future shutdown risk, and the needs and challenges that different

stakeholders face in conducting internet shutdown advocacy. The survey was distributed using snowball sampling, targeting participant groups in Senegal from different fields, geographies, and perspectives to ensure a diversity of responses and a holistic understanding of civil society needs. The survey was distributed from March 1 to 31, 2022, and targeted a variety of stakeholders who are key participants in civil society or other significant players in Senegal's digital economy and thus could be important allies in advocacy. Outreach ensured participation from the following stakeholder groups: civil society organizations working on digital issues, journalists, entrepreneurs, students, higher education institutions, health providers, telecommunications operators, human rights organizations, women's rights organizations, and minorities and other marginalized groups.

The 49-question survey was divided into three sections (shutdown experiences, events and political activities, and comprehension and capacities) and was distributed online, with the aim of gleaning expert perspectives from key online groups. As such, the authors do not make claims that this survey is generalizable to the entire population of Senegal nor the online population of Senegal. Instead, this survey sought expert and insider perspectives on shutdowns, perceptions of risk related to internet shutdowns, society-wide impact, and the capacities and needs of key groups to respond to internet shutdowns, support communities, and participate in related advocacy.

The survey received 56 unique responses, within the research project’s target range. It is important to note that respondents were able to skip questions, and therefore some questions have fewer responses than n=56.

After initial analysis of the survey data, the research team compiled key findings to inform a series of focus-group discussions organized during a two-day workshop bringing together the survey respondents. During this workshop, researchers documented discussion to obtain nuanced information elaborating on the survey and points of disagreement. Participants were also split into six smaller groups based on experience and interest (network measurement, circumvention strategies, advocacy and litigation action, assistance to vulnerable communities, legal aspects, stakeholder/community engagement) to discuss the survey results and determine specific resource needs in these areas. Following these discussions, this group of participants met to collectively reflect on needs and to determine advocacy goals.

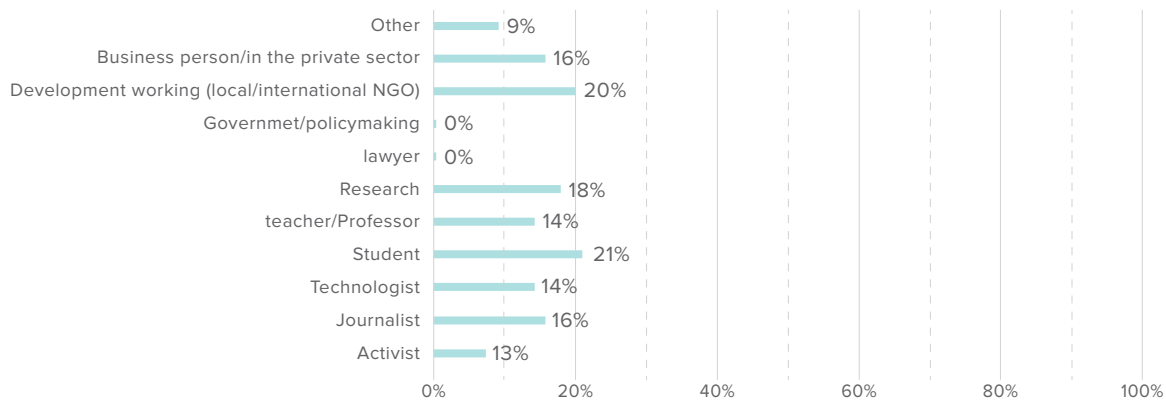
Demographics

The vast majority of respondents reside in the capital of Dakar, with only 11% of respondents replying from other parts of the country. This can be explained in part by the fact that most internet-related industries and institutions are located in the capital.

Respondents skewed male, with 65% identifying as male and 31% as female, with 2% choosing not to identify. Of the total respondents, 91% use mobile equipment and computers to access the internet.

As part of the survey and workshop outreach, there was a deliberate attempt to reach key stakeholders who work in sectors impacted by internet access or play a key role in advocacy. To better understand the professions and expertise of those surveyed, we asked respondents to choose the professional categories that best describe their work. Respondents were able to choose more than one profession from 10 options as well as “other.” They come from a variety of professional sectors, with diversity among education, development, research, journalism, and the private sector. Respondents identified as students (21%), development professionals (20%), researchers (18%), journalists (16%), the private sector (14%), technologists (14%), and activists (13%).

Profession



²⁵ N=56

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