

Navigating workflows amidst internet disruptions in a newsroom



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Introduction to Northeast India: Setting the context

The region of Northeast is not only remote in India, it is also perhaps the most complex when it comes to executing media-related assignments. The region, which has eight states, a combined population of 45 million people and over 100 indigenous tribes, remains behind the rest of the country when it comes to internet speed and even connectivity; in many regions, especially Hills, internet remains inaccessible even during days.

According to Internet Shutdowns, [46 of the 714](#) shutdowns recorded in India were in the Northeast, with most in Meghalaya.

Since its inception in 2018, [EastMojo](#) has witnessed several internet shutdowns that have threatened media freedom and left our journalists struggling to effectively conduct their jobs. EastMojo is not the only publication that has suffered during these periods; several regional media, especially those who work only in digital media have suffered equally if not more.

In the Northeast, the internet has brought about a media revolution that seemed unlikely until a decade ago. Tired of the apathy of mainland media, the northeast finally has voices that finally speak for the people who live here. Simply put, sans the internet, the Northeast would have remained an afterthought for the mainstream media. So, it is also paramount that the internet revolution continues and flourishes here. The reliance of all local media houses on the internet also explains why the government first ‘attacks’ the internet during times of conflict; given the absence of large, extensive and traditional media publications like newspapers, the internet is often the only way for locals to know what is happening in other parts of the nation. In short, the internet is ‘our’ gateway to the world.

Internet shutdown has a direct impact on press freedom. A [CPI report](#) points out that Internet shutdowns leave journalists struggling to do their job effectively. We are unable to contact sources, fact-check data or file stories until after an event has happened. In the northeast, almost all shutdowns are during and about conflicts. Implemented in the name of maintaining peace and order, the governments' steps tend to limit the public's access to information.

One of the biggest consequences of internet shutdowns in our region is that without mobile internet, it becomes impossible to share verifiable information. The region's geography makes it difficult to access the region and without internet, information gets delayed. This was visible during the recent shutdown in Meghalaya following the controversial death of [five civilians in a village called Mukroh](#). Our correspondent, along with at least seven other reporters from various publications, had to drive almost 150 kilometres outside the region just to be able to send the detailed reports and videos. During this period, rumours ensured the region remained on the edge and checking increased at the Assam Meghalaya to avoid any untoward incident. In fact, for nearly half a day, one of the lifelines of the region: the Guwahati-Shillong Highway, witnessed police advising Assam residents not to travel to Shillong. Because someone spread rumours that Assamese drivers were being attacked in Meghalaya and without the internet, journalists were mostly unable to relay the correct information that no such thing had happened.

It is important to note that while mobile internet shutdown is the most common form of internet shutdown, as observed in Manipur the government does not hesitate in clamping down on broadband internet .¹

¹<https://www.eastmojo.com/manipur/2023/05/03/internet-suspended-in-manipur-for-five-days-see-details-here/>

Given the context we have put together the following information, in the hopes it can be useful for journalists concerned about internet shutdowns to report during shutdowns.

In our region, two types of incidents cause the most number of internet shutdowns:

- Death at the hands of security agencies: Mukroh November 2022, Oting December 2021, Shillong August 2021 are recent examples.
- Inter-state border tensions, like the one between Assam and Mizoram in July 2021.

Apart from this any controversial legislation. could lead to law and order situations in the region that can surely cause internet shutdowns.

Sharing Information during Internet shutdowns

Download and use encrypted apps

To be best prepared and continue reporting during internet shutdowns. One of the best ways to do that in our region, especially while reporting breaking news, is to ensure that they only use encrypted messaging apps to contact others. End-to-end encryption means that content sent via the app, including calls, is encrypted and cannot be intercepted in transit. Examples include Signal or WhatsApp.

Using peer-to-peer messaging tools

Download and familiarise with peer to peer messaging tools like Briar or Bridgefy as an alternative. Briar is an end-to-end encrypted messaging app that works via internet, WiFi Direct, and Bluetooth. Bridgefy has fewer security features than Briar, but will work over longer distances. All reporters are encouraged to install the same to prepare for any eventuality. Reporters are also encouraged to check with the technical team on the best apps to use during a particular period

In case of either of these methods do not work Long SMS can be used for communication.

USB and other Memory Devices :

If you are carrying memory sticks, remember to ALWAYS keep the time stamp on during recording video, especially when recording survivor testimonies.

Remember that the devices you are carrying are not encrypted. In case you anticipate these devices being seized its good to plan for scenario.

Only accept files from people you trust Meetings, Conversations and Contact:

In the Northeast, communications shutdowns occur almost always during civil unrest and protests. As a result, it is always important to keep an eye on changes to legislation that allow governments to cut access to the internet and other forms of communication. Speaking with your colleagues about planning for a complete shutdown and creating a plan detailing where and when to meet in person, and how, will help a lot. Consider sharing landline contact details, but be aware that landline calls should not be used for sensitive conversations as they can be tapped. Also, given that several regions within the northeast have restrictions/specific rules on public movement (Inner Line Permit, restrictions on foreigners, etc), it is best to keep copies of Identity proofs at all times. Newsrooms must also ensure that reporters and correspondents are provided with extra USBs, hard disks/storage options to make sure they do not run out of memory and also keep backups as and where needed.

Reporting during Shutdowns

Here are some of the steps that the journalists must take during Shutdowns while reporting . Please note that the journalists must follow these guidelines and instructions during all times. Please also note that this methodology is in place only when ALL forms of internet are shut down.

Share only verified information:

Stick to short, concise information:

Since it is no longer possible to send long, text-based stories, ensure that you break your story into bullet points, focusing on important things like the [five Ws and the Hs](#). Since most internet shutdowns are during times of conflict, bullet points should focus on disseminating public-safety-related information and updates regarding steps taken by the government. This will also ensure that reporters do not share/distribute information that is fake or untrustworthy because, as we have witnessed, fake news can do a lot of damage, especially when locals may not have access to complete and unbiased information. All participating entities will also be required to alert us in case they are flagged for any fake news.

Photographs are an important tool to share information. And at such times, learning the critical skill of redacting photographs on the go becomes very important. There are numerous videos on YouTube to learn more about this. Alternatively, you can also read [this article](#) on Freedom Press which clearly shows how to redact photos easily.

Use of Google Drive for storage: Apps like Google Docs and Google Drive can be used offline and given that they allow expanded storage capabilities, they should be used to save pictures and videos. These apps must be protected with additional security features like passwords, face ID/fingerprint scanners to ensure they are not misused.

Familiarity with government agencies: Even during internet shutdowns, the government allows internet facilities in some government offices (Senior Police officers, administrative officers), journalists must familiarise themselves with these officers and inform them about their work so that during shutdown they have access to the internet as and when possible.

The law permits newspapers [with a registered RNI](#) to access the internet. Since such establishments will have access to the internet, we can speak with them to help allow journalists from other publications, especially digital media platforms, to access the internet. This has been particularly useful in Manipur (at least in Imphal city, the capital) where this has allowed us not only to get stories but also videos and photos.

In case of sensitive information, it must be withheld until the reporter is out of the internet shutdown zones. This is because when only certain places have the internet, releasing of sensitive information/stories can put the reporters in danger as the authorities might be able to easily zero in on who sent it and at what time. The editorial of publications must not, under any circumstance, release stories that could put their reporters' lives at risk.

VPNs

One way to bypass IP-based and content-based blocking is to use a virtual private network or VPN. It is important to use a trustworthy VPN provider, and preferably one that does not store data or logs, since the provider will be able to see your internet activity.

If you are working in a region where internet shutdowns are common, obtain a premium VPN from the company. However, we also need to remember that some governments ban VPN usage or may try to detect and block VPN connections.

It is important to remember that sharing content from areas where there is no internet access or connection might raise suspicion among authorities so practice caution and discretion while doing this.

Methodology and Reflection

To prepare this Document We worked in 3 cities in the Northeast to test out our theory - Jorhat, Shillong and Dimapur.

We placed a Journalist in the 3 places for a limited time to test the hypothesis. They worked on establishing relations with the Broadband service provider and striking an agreement to use their service during an internet shutdown.

We simulated an internet shutdown (controlled, in a very small part of the places) in these 3 places, secured news through our Journalists who used the providers' internet to share news with us. Please note that actual shutdowns will be much different than the simulation because this would be controlled chaos.

Apart from this, during this period of simulation we also experience an internet shutdown where east mojo was actively reporting. Here are our reflections from the reporting.

In our work during Manipur shutdown our reporters have had to resort to sending long SMSes to relay information. Since the internet connectivity was not available and other applications were not usable. It is not ideal, but sometimes, it is the only option. The stories are then filed by our Central team in Guwahati.

We are aware that data on USB sticks and other memory devices is not encrypted, but for now, we have not had any issues with the authorities and learning how to encrypt is not easy for non-technical users. Hence we don't suggest used of encryption

In case of sensitive information, it must be withheld until the reporter is out of the internet shutdown zones. We followed this while reporting in Manipur: in a story where civilians were shot on camera and while we could have released it that night using the hotel

internet, which could have endangered our reporters' securities. We waited to release this after we secured our reporters.

Conclusion

Even though it is very difficult to predict when shutdowns would happen it is very important to stay prepared at all times.

In such times, it is extremely important to understand that journalism, and journalists, cannot function efficiently and effectively unless we have access to the internet. Alternatively, we must also be in a position to ensure that during lockdowns, a clear set of SOPs and guidelines help us navigate through troubled waters. We hope this document will help local journalists and even those visiting from outside work to the best of their abilities without compromising on quality or their ethics.

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