TechTank

BROOKINGS
Shutting down the internet

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In 2016, I wrote a Brookings research paper about a worrisome trend that was emerging in many countries around the world. In order to keep political opponents from organizing, governments were shutting down mobile networks and/or the internet to impede public communications. They understood that technology can be a democratizing influence and a way to help critics find like-minded individuals. Occurring mainly in authoritarian regimes or illiberal democracies, public officials saw internet shutdowns as a way to limit the opposition and keep themselves in power.

For that research, I identified 81 cases of internet shutdowns that took place in 19 countries between July 1, 2015 and June 30, 2016. I compiled data on scope, duration, and the size of the population affected by the shutdowns and using data on the country's Gross Domestic Product, the number of days of the shutdown, the size of the internet economy, and the percentage of the population affected by the shutdown, I estimated the financial costs of these shutdowns as at least $2.4 billion. Most of the shutdowns I found were short-term in nature and took place at local rather than national levels.

At that time, I argued shutdowns were a dangerous development because they harmed economic development, were undemocratic in nature, undermined civil liberties, and threatened human values. In a number of places, leaders clearly were using internet shutdowns to stifle criticism, maintain their own political control, and use selective digital disruptions to harm particular geographic areas or stymie political opponents.

Since then, the global situation has gotten far worse. Research by Netblocks, a nonprofit devoted to tracking internet disruptions, has found dozens of shutdowns and documented how they last longer and take place at the national level, thereby disrupting networks on a far grander scale.

Witness these examples of recent internet shutdowns. As soon as it seized power, Myanmar's new military junta enacted a nationwide ban on the use of Facebook and other messaging services that were popular communications tools for opposition forces. In a letter, the country's Ministry of Communications and Information explained the blockage this way: "Currently the people who are troubling the country's stability... are spreading fake news and misinformation and causing misunderstanding among people by using Facebook." As a result of the communications suspension, coup opponents were forced to resort to the old-fashioned technique of banging on pots and pans as a way to express their anger with the military takeover.

At the same time, Myanmar ended one of the world's longest internet shutdown. Starting in June, 2019, it lasted for 19 months in its states of Rakhine and Chin. The regime had suspended telecommunications services under "'emergency' orders issued by the telecoms department under Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government."

Another case of internet shutdown took place in Uganda. On Election Day, January 14, its leaders disconnected the internet in order to help the presidential campaign of incumbent Yoweri Museveni over challenger Bobi Wine. The move disrupted voting in key areas because polling places were using "biometric voter identification", which the shutdown made impossible. The result, according to opposition forces was "massive failure of biometric voter identification kits due to [the] internet blockade." President Musevini also blocked Facebook in the days leading up to the election due to what he called the company's "arrogance".

The Ethiopian government shut down its internet nationwide in 2020. Government officials cited public unrest following the murder of a popular local singer. Its prime minister complained that "those who participate 'in the destruction of the nation cannot be considered guardians of the nation."

These actions are not just limited to illiberal regimes. Over the past four years, India has shutdown the internet 400 times, mostly in local areas. In some cases, the blockages were justified by leaders "in order to maintain law and order", while in other cases, "it is believed to be a tactic to stifle dissent."

Ironically, in a number of places, these closures are perfectly legal because the country in question allows the government to shut down the internet for public safety reasons. In India, for example, "the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) provides 'Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services [due to] (Public Emergency or Public Safety)."

Along with shutdowns, restrictions, and blockages in places such as China, Iran, North Korea, Russia, and Venezuela, among others, these are just a few of the examples of digital disruptions that have taken place in the last few years. As noted earlier, many of the stoppages occurred on a larger scale than before, affected many people and businesses, and thereby inflicted tremendous political, economic, and humanitarian harm.

National leaders need to understand the harmful costs of this maneuver. Not only do shutdowns and restrictions harm democratic expression and public communications, they hurt the business community, limit small and medium-sized enterprises, and weaken social and economic activity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these shutdowns also have costly consequences. With more people using the internet for online education, telemedicine, e-commerce, and remote work, internet closures limit the ability of individuals to learn, work, and purchase goods and services. Shutting down the internet is counter-productive at virtually every level.