Understanding the Material Impact of Social Media during Public Criticism and Dissent in African Countries: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract: Globally, governments are imposing national blackouts on digital communication, particularly the internet and subsequently the social media space during public criticism and dissent. To understand the material impact of this digital blackout, a literature review is conducted, focusing on African countries. The objective of this study was to examine the impact of social media during public criticism and dissent from an African perspective. To achieve this, an extensive review of the literature was conducted on African countries. The United Nations (UN) classifies 54 countries as African. All these countries had a known chance of being selected as part of the sample (probability sampling). In total, 29 countries were chosen based on relevance and the availability of data on internet shutdowns. Furthermore, the study looks into a 5-year trend from 2018 to 2022. Consequently, the results suggest that internet shutdowns in Africa are currently on the rise and remain disruptive, oppressive, expensive, and cost countries dearly. Additionally, the study also found that internet shutdowns often result in violent and/or fatal protests. It was further found that the responses by governments and companies during public criticism and dissent have been challenging, insufficient, and detrimental to human rights. At a country level, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Chad - respectively remain the regional leaders in terms of shutting down the Internet. This research recommends more scientific research to be conducted under the topic to enrich the existing body of knowledge, and possibly refine the findings of the current study. It further recommends country-specific policies that should openly condemn government-imposed internet shutdowns. Moreover, this research also recommends that global Human Rights Organisations should stand firm and strongly condemn government-imposed internet shutdowns by imposing sanctions and repercussions for oppressive governments. Finally, this research concludes that social media has unique capabilities to convey messages to larger groups of people, mobilizing or immobilizing them with only a few clicks. Among others, social media can also spread fake information or news by posting old material and linking it to current situations.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past years, billions of people all over the world have used the internet to keep in touch with family and friends, keep abreast with the latest information, study online, and share information among other fantastic things (Duggal, 2021). Historically, the number of Internet users in the mid-1990s was less than 1% of the global population (Internet Live Stats, 2014). Today, more than 60% (67%) of the global population is connected to the internet, some 5.4 billion people according to the International Telecommunications Unit (ITU, 2023). Similarly, We Are Social (2023:10) is also reporting a 5.2 billion online population so far in 2023, reflecting 64.4% internet penetration globally. It is beyond any doubt that the use of the internet has transformed many lives in its forms, including mass communication through social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Using these platforms, we can easily catch up with the 2023 Rugby/Cricket World Cup, and follow developments on Russia-Ukraine War,

and Niger Coup - to name a few. However, as governments continue to shut down the internet for certain unconstitutional reasons - all the catching up becomes impossible.

Globally, communication shutdown has become fashionable among governments in recent years. The internet as we all know it, has become the sole target in restricting mass communication and spreading information, particularly on social media networks during public criticism and dissent. The past years have seen a significant rise in the number of governments imposing internet restrictions on citizens and robbing them of their rights. In Africa, this is becoming more alarming and frequent, mostly around election times and during national exams as authorities try to proclaim or keep control of populations (Dawa, 2020; Keep It On (KIO), 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mass communication is a method of distributing information to a large audience (Volle, 2023). Therefore, mass communication is a way of reaching large audiences using various communication channels. The Internet is one perfect example of those

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channels, with the ability to reach large audiences worldwide through online forums, blogs, emails, social media etc. However, with the growing number of internet shutdowns globally, the ability to reach a large audience becomes inoperable.

In Africa alone, internet shutdowns have become a new norm (Garbe, 2020). The first internet shutdown in Africa was recorded in Guinea in 2007 during protests against former President Lansana Conté (Parker, 2021; Salau, 2021). This trend has seen a significant increase over the years, with many authoritarian governments following suit and restricting internet access, thereby constituting a growing trend of digital tyranny, especially in less democratic regimes (Garbe, 2020). Between 2018 and mid-2023, more than 30 African countries were reported to have shut down the internet at least once, with the total number of shutdowns reaching 102 during the period under review (Table **1**). According to Keep It On (KIO, 2019:6) most of these shutdowns were not targeted to a specific location or minority groups, instead impacting entire countries. In their 2019 annual report, KIO reports that out of the 25 shutdowns that they have recorded during the year, 21 affected either an entire country or at minimum - multiple regions and provinces.

Definition of Key Terms

Public criticism and dissent - usually pertaining to a larger group of people, sharing the same interest by publicly expressing their disapproval of someone or something or disagreeing with an official opinion, decision, or set of rules.

Throttling - means deliberately slowing an internet service by an internet service provider (KIO, 2019:32). Throttling makes it appear as though internet access or a platform or service is available, but the level of interference is enough to render the service or resource effectively useless (KIO, 2021:16).

Internet shutdown - means deliberately disrupting internet connection and/or mobile apps that allow two-way communication (KIO, 2019:32). Similarly, internet shutdown is a deliberate disruption of internet or digital communications, making them inaccessible or unusable for a certain group of people or within a location often to exercise control over the flow of information (Mavenjina, 2018:5).

Digital communication - this study defines digital communication as any form of communication that takes place electronically using the Internet.

Mass communication - is a method of distributing information to a large audience (Volle, 2023).

Social media - social media is a tool that is used to engage and connect with many audiences (University of South Florida, n.d). It includes applications and internet sites that enable people to connect with other users, including governments and businesses (McKenzie and Company, 2023).

Protest - a protest is an event or action where people gather with others to publicly demonstrate their feelings about something that is happening in society (Anti-Defamation League, 2020).

Conflict - according to Doss and Pisano (2018), a conflict is the consequence of differing thoughts, actions or ideologies disrupting or challenging the current state of affairs. Similarly, the Oxford Learners Dictionaries (OLD, n.d) defines conflict as a state in which people, groups or countries disagree strongly on certain issues or are engaged in a serious dispute.

Countries Shutting Down the Internet in 2018 – 2022

As can be seen in Table **1** below, there were fewer internet shutdowns in Africa in 2022 compared to 2021. In the first five months of 2023, internet shutdowns in Africa were almost the same as those registered in 2022, totalling 10 over 11 that were registered in 2022.

In Africa, Sudan and Ethiopia remain the highest-ranking countries in terms of internet shutdowns during the period under review. In Ethiopia alone, the ongoing Tigray shutdown reached 787 days at the end of 2022 (KIO, 2022:12). Another country worth mentioning is Uganda which reached 719 days of Facebook blockage at the end of 2022 (KIO, 2022:12).

So far in 2023 (Jan-May), only eight countries shut down the internet, namely, Sudan, Ethiopia, Guinea, Mauritiana, Senegal, Gabon, Uganda as well as Somaliland.

As can be seen in Table **2** below, during the year 2019 - 2022, Africa remained the second region with the highest number of internet shutdowns after Asia, with a global share of 38.1% on average for the period 2018 - 2022.

As can be seen in Table **3**, more than 70 countries have blocked various social media platforms during 2021 and 2022, with Facebook reporting the most

Table 1:   Countries Shutting Down the Internet in Africa (2018 – 2022)

No.	Country	Number of shutdowns per year					Jan-May 2023	Some reasons/Triggers	Some aftermaths
		2018	2019	2020	2021	2022			
1.	Sudan	1	3	2	5	2	1	After the 2018 military coup; to preserve national unity and security;	Financial losses; loss of life (killing of protesters)
2.	Ethiopia	6	4	4	3	1	3	After a failed military coup; Ethnic unrest; clashes between Ethiopian forces and rebel groups; domestic political tensions	Displacement of people; financial losses; loss of life
3.	Guinea			2			1	To maintain order during anti-government protests; during the 2020 elections	
4.	Mauritiana		1				1	Disputing of election results; after four prisoners described as 'terrorists' escaped jail	
5.	Senegal						1	Spread of hateful and subversive messages on social media	
6.	Tanzania			1				Before elections	Financial losses
7.	Burkina Faso					2		National security; public safety and national defence	
8.	Chad	2	1	2	2			Curb violence (domestic tensions); before elections; restrict dissemination of violent videos	
9	Republic of the Congo				1			Election period	
10.	Eswatini			2				Pro-democracy protests which intensified and resulted in police brutality	
11.	Gabon	1	1		1		1	After elections to avoid the risk of violence and the spreading of disinformation; after a failed military coup	
12.	Niger				1				
13.	Nigeria	1			2	1			Significant financial losses
14.	South Sudan				1			Protests against President Salva Kiir's government	
15.	Uganda			1	3	1	1	Days before elections to avoid outside interference;	
16.	Zambia				1			During elections	
17.	Sierra Leone	1				2		To curb protests against harsh economic conditions	Loss of life
18.	Somaliland					1	1	To stop protests against postponing the presidential election; shut down TikTok, Telegram and an online betting site claiming that these platforms were being used by "terrorists" for propaganda purposes	
19.	Zimbabwe		1			1		To quell citizens' protests against rising fuel prices; opposition rallies or protests	
20.	Cameroon		1					To curb protests	Loss of life, collapse of businesses, protests escalated into clashes with police

(Table 1). Continued.

No.	Country	Number of shutdowns per year					Jan-May 2023	Some reasons/Triggers	Some aftermaths
		2018	2019	2020	2021	2022			
21.	Algeria	1	6					To stop cheating during high school diploma exams; to curb public demonstrations; to quell protests calling on President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to vacate his office	
22.	Liberia		1					State order to restrict the Save The State protests against high rates of inflation and corruption in the country	
23.	Eritrea		1					To curb an impending demonstration ahead of the country's Independence Day commemorations	
24.	DRC	3	1					To prevent election results chaos; to stop the spread of fictitious results and safeguard national security in the aftermath of national elections; to stifle a call for protest by activist groups	
25.	Benin		2					During elections	
26.	Malawi		1					During elections	
27.	Mali	2		1				During elections, to quell mass protests seeking political reforms, and some calling for President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's resignation	
28.	Togo	1		2				To stifle dissent and enforce law and order during protests; to quell plans by Togo's opposition coalition to hold protests.	
29.	Burundi			1				Fear of violence during and after the national elections	
	Total	**19**	**24**	**16**	**22**	**11**	**10**		

Source: Developed for this study with sources from KIO (2018-2023); Access Now (2023a); Dawa (2020).

Table 2: Number of Internet Shutdowns by Region (2018-2022 Estimates)

Region	Number of countries where shutdowns occurred vs (total number of shutdowns)					
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Jan-May 2023
Africa	10(19)	14(25)	12(19)	14(25)	9(11)	8(10)
Europe	1(2)	2(4)	2(3)	1(1)	2(3)	
Americas	1(1)	2(14)	3(4)	1(4)	2(3)	
Asia	9(166)	16(171)	13(128)	18(152)	15(102)	
Global	25(196)	33(213)	29(159)	34(184)	35(187)	21(80)
% Share of Africa	40.0	42.4	41.4	41.2	25.7	
India	134	121	109	106	84	
% Share of Asia	80.7	70.8	85.2	69.7	82.4	
% Share of World	68.4	56.8	68.6	57.6	44.9	

Source: Developed for this study with sources from KIO (2018-2022); Access Now (2023a).

Table 3: Affected Communication Platforms (Global)

Communication platforms blocked	Number of countries where communication was blocked vs (number of times the shutdown occurred)				
	2018	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**
Facebook				17(21)	13(12)
Twitter				11(13)	11(13)
WhatsApp				14(16)	9(10)
Instagram				11(12)	9(10)
Telegram				8(8)	6(8)
Google services				5(5)	8(9)
VoIP	Data not available			1(3)	-
VPNs				2(2)	-
Signal				3(3)	4(5)
Clubhouse				2(2)	2(2)
TikTok				-	4(4)
WeChat				-	2(2)
IMO Messenger				-	2(2)
Global				74(85)	70(77)

Source: Developed for this study with sources from KIO (2018-2022).

Table 4: Affected Networks (Global)

Network	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Mobile	Data not available	4.78%	72.9%	Data not available	
Broadband		31.58%	-		
Mobile & broadband		63.64%	26.5%		
Unknown			0.7%		

Source: Developed for this study with sources from KIO (2018-2022).

incidents, followed by Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram.

Table **4** reveals a rather sketchy picture as the types of networks affected during the years remained highly volatile between 2019 and 2020, therefore making it difficult to make conclusive inferences about the trend thereof. For instance, both mobile and broadband networks were highly affected in 2019 but less affected in 2020.

Internet restrictions occur in different forms, whether throttling or shutdown, or both. In 2019, there were 14 incidents of throttling. This went down to 10 in 2021 according to reports by KIO. In 2022, shutdowns alone were 154, and both shutdowns and throttle were reported to be 27 in 2022.

Some Regional Resolutions Condemning Internet Shutdowns in Africa

• **The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR)** - In 2016, the ACHPR adopted 'Resolution ACHPR/Res.362 (LIX) 2016' on the Right to Freedom of Information and Expression on the Internet in Africa. The resolution was adopted during the 59th Ordinary Session, where:

➢ The African Commission stressed that the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, and

➢ The Special Rapporteur called on African states to take all measures to guarantee, respect and protect the right to freedom of

expression and access to information by ensuring access to internet and social media services (ACHPR, 2019).

- **United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC)** - In 2016, the UNHRC, guided by the Charter of the United Nations - passed a resolution that condemns internet shutdowns, particularly:

  ➢ *Condemns unequivocally* measures to intentionally prevent or disrupt access to or dissemination of information online in violation of international human rights law and calls on all States to refrain from and cease such measures (Access Now, 2023b).

The Material Impact of Social Media during Public Criticism and Dissent

- **Mass communication** - access to social media platforms during public criticism and dissent enables people to communicate widely, reaching larger audiences with just a few clicks.

- **Mass Mobilisation or immobilisation** - with access to these networks, it is much easier for the organisers/activists to mobilise or immobilise people by sharing live videos and meeting points.

- **Spreading of fake news** - again, with access to social media networks, comes an overflow of fake information. Whether it is intentional or not, you find people sharing old messages and videos and linking them to current situations/events, thereby spreading fake information across the platforms.

Some Consequences of Shutting Down the Internet

- **It costs countries dearly -** according to West (2016) internet disruptions slow growth, cost governments tax revenue, weaken innovation, and undermine consumer and business confidence in a country's economy.

- **May spark protests which ultimately turn into violent/fatal protests** - from the literature, most of the shutdowns resulted in violent and/or fatal protests where civilians and security members lost their lives.

- **Widespread misinformation** - with the internet shutdown, access to information becomes

impossible. With the advent of social media, the majority of people rely on these platforms to keep abreast with the latest information and news, more particularly the current generation which spends more hours on their phones than watching television or listening to radio stations.

All of the mentioned benefits of social media during public criticism and dissent are completely shuttered by at least 29 oppressive governments across Africa.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

Objectives

The objective of this study is to examine the material impact of social media during public criticism and dissent in Africa.

Questions

- What role does social media play during public criticism and dissent? **(RQ1)**

- By law, is internet restriction allowed? **(RQ2)**

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Internet and social media shutdowns have become an increasingly popular method used by African leaders to halt the flow of information and suppress political views (Parker, 2021; Dawa, 2020). Commonly used during periods of school examinations, elections, and public unrest - the shutdowns do not deliver the desired outcomes, instead, they lead to higher levels of unrest (with protesters coming in greater numbers after the shutdown), human rights violations, lack of election credibility, and great economic loss among others (Parker, 2021; Garbe, 2020). If rights are denied, needs are unfulfilled which can result in violent conflict as people search for ways to address their needs and violated rights (Dawa, 2020). Nonetheless, the advent of technology and/or the internet brought many challenges on the net, including cybercrime and disinformation. While acknowledging the difficulties and challenges posed by disinformation in the digital age, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights found that the responses by governments and companies have been challenging, insufficient, and detrimental to human rights (United Nations Human Rights, 2021).

Furthermore, internet shutdowns are costing countries dearly, thereby slowing economic growth,
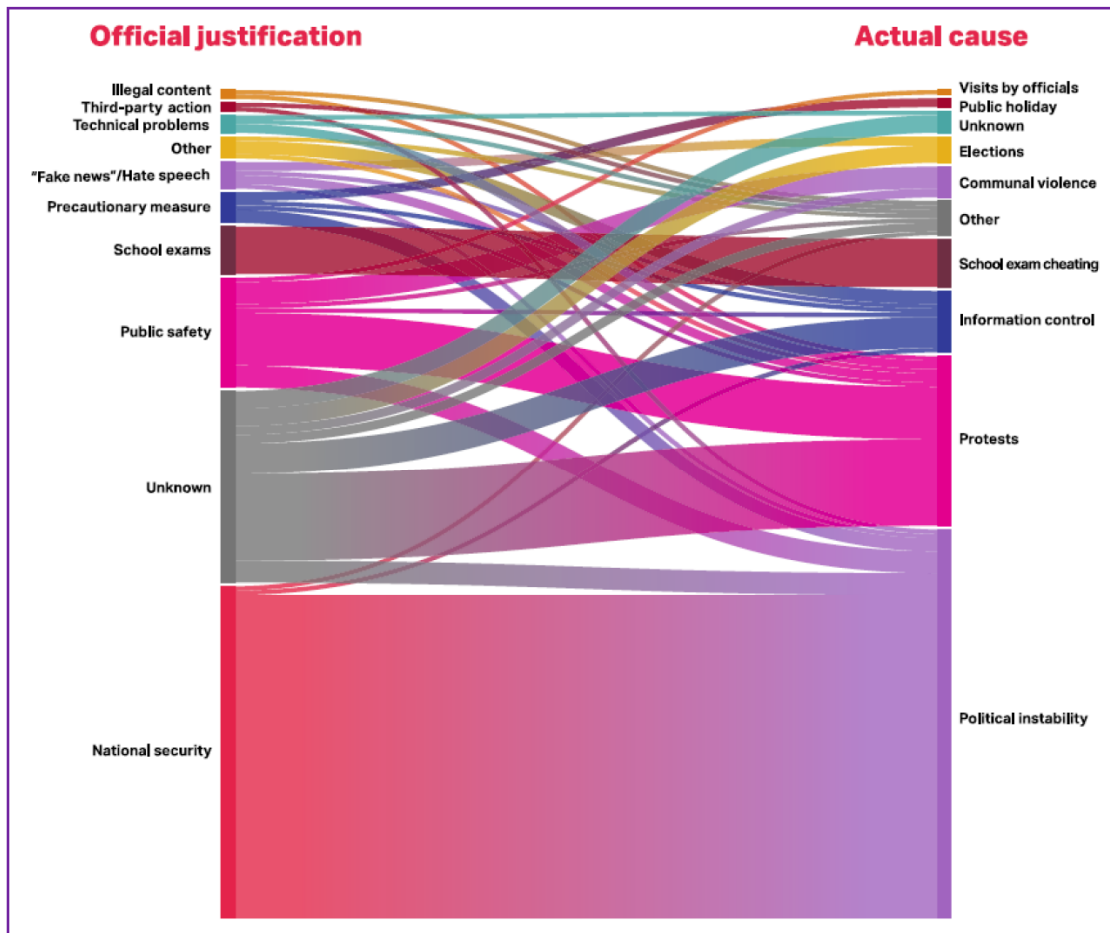
Figure 1: Official justifications vs. actual causes of internet shutdowns worldwide in 2021.

Source: Adopted from KIO (2021:8).

limiting federal tax collections, weakening innovation, and undermining both consumer and business confidences (West, 2016). In 2021 alone, Nigeria, which experienced only 2 incidents of shutdowns, lost USD1.5 billion according to data by Statista, by far the highest economic impact caused by internet disruptions in Africa. In the same year, Ethiopia and Sudan lost USD165 million and USD157 million respectively. Overall, internet shutdowns in Africa resulted in a loss of ~USD2.2 billion in 2019 (Parker, 2021). While there are various justifications by governments to initiate internet shutdowns, the most popular justification put by governments is that internet shutdowns are necessary to protests and protect national security (Garbe, 2020). Interestingly, work by KIO focusing on global internet shutdowns, compares official justifications put by governments against what has happened (actual cause):

From Figure **1** above, it is apparent that oppressors often distort the reasons why they impose internet shutdowns to suit their interests. In fact, Garbe (2020)

commends the work by Anita Gohdes which suggests that "oppressive governments even impose internet shutdowns strategically to weaken their oppositions". While there is some evidence of research on the impact of internet shutdowns on public criticism and dissent, the impact of shutdowns during elections is, however, not clear (Garbe, 2020). Between 2015 and 2018, one-third of all national elections in Africa were accompanied by an internet shutdown (Garbe, 2020), therefore, provoking more scientific research on the aspect.

In terms of the objective of the study '*examining the material impact of social media during public criticism and dissent in Africa*' - from the literature, various impacts were discovered but the fact that social media can convey messages to larger audiences, mobilizing or immobilizing them, as well as having the ability to spread fake information - stood out.

In terms of the research questions, this is how they were addressed:

- **RQ1: What role does social media play during public criticism and dissent?**

  ➢ the role of social media during public criticism and dissent is significant and incomparable, whether positive or not. It can mobilize and immobilize larger audiences countrywide.

- **RQ2: By law, is internet restriction allowed?**

  ➢ No, internet restrictions are not permitted as they violate human rights. From a global perspective, both the United Nations and the African Union have passed resolutions in 2016 condemning internet shutdowns as a violation of human rights (Financial Times, 2019).

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Policy:** generally, there are no express laws that allow governments to shut down the internet. For policymakers, this is an area that needs urgent attention as governments continue to violate human rights by depriving them of access to the net.

- **Research:** Generally, there is a lack of academic research relating to internet shutdowns in Africa, therefore, more research is needed to enrich the existing body of knowledge. By doing so, the findings of the current study could also be refined, adopting different methodological approaches. There is also a need to investigate the impact of internet shutdowns on elections.

- **Global Human Rights Organisations** - as a collective, global organisations such as the United Nations Human Rights Council and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights should stand firm, and strongly condemn government-imposed internet shutdowns by imposing sanctions and repercussions for oppressors.

CONCLUSION

Internet shutdown is gaining momentum in Africa, despite having detrimental effects on economic activity. One such effect is costing countries dearly. In 2021, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Sudan suffered significant financial losses due to internet shutdowns. While there are various impacts of social media during public

criticism and dissent, the fact that they can convey messages to larger audiences with just a few clicks, as well as having the ability to spread fake information - stood out. Internet shutdowns may also spark violent and/or fatal protests and may also result in widespread misinformation due to a lack of information flow.

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