Internet blackouts in Africa

A critical examination, with reference to Cameroon and Nigeria

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Abstract

Internet blackouts in Africa have largely been examined through the prisms of human rights and economic development. This has resulted in highly negative assessments; Internet shutdowns have widely been branded as violations of the rights of African citizens, and the bane of economic development. However, while unarguably extreme, Internet blackouts are not necessarily unjustified or unwarranted. Even influential bodies such as the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) recognise the need to shut down the Internet under certain circumstances. Governments often justify Internet shutdowns by citing principles or values that are valid in principle. These include protecting their sovereignty, combating 'rascality' among telecom operators, and maintaining peace and security. Given this, it is important to examine the extent to which Internet shutdowns in Africa have been justified, or whether they have been used to advance authoritarian rule. To this end, this study uses documentary analysis and critical observations to explore the morality of Internet blackouts in sub-Saharan Africa, and specifically whether or not the recent shutdowns in Cameroon and Nigeria have been justified.

Keywords: Internet censorship, Internet blackout, cyber sovereignty, human rights, online movement, authoritarianism, social responsibility.

Introduction

The emergence of Internet blackouts in Africa has largely been examined through the prisms of human rights and economic development. This has resulted in highly negative assessments, with scholars typically branding internet shutdown as violations of the rights of African citizens, and the bane of economic progress (Allen & Van Zyl 2020; Marchant & Stremlau 2019). Essentially, human right activists and researchers argue that Internet shutdowns are inherently illegitimate and unwarranted. Thus Stauffer (2020) argues that even when Internet blackouts are justified in principle, they end up being more of a collective punishment than a tactical response. To him, these shutdowns are sweeping measures that end up paralysing industries and even entire cities and countries. Similarly, Nyokabi et al (2019) observe that Internet blackouts are clear violations that impede people's right to development, and pose threats to democratic development in African countries. While some authors attack Internet shutdowns on the grounds of human rights, others anchor their negative arguments on the economic consequences (CIPESA 2021; Taye 2019; Kathuria et al 2018).

In a study published in 2016, Darell West critically analysed 81 short-term Internet shutdowns in 19 countries, and found that, between 1 July 2015 and 30 June 2016, these shutdowns came at a cost at least US$2.4 billion in Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

According to a more recent report by the Top10VPN (cited by Lamensch 2021), the cost of Internet shutdowns in 2020 was $4 billion, a huge increase since 2016. The report also revealed that even countries with low levels of Internet connectivity can lose as much as $3 million a day (Lamensch 2021). Thus, there has been a sustained trend among scholars and human right activists to emphasise the negative aspects of Internet blackouts, and present them as exclusively negative strategies.

However, while undeniably extreme, Internet blackouts are not inherently illegitimate or unwarranted. Even influential bodies like the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) recognise the need for Internet shutdowns in certain specific situations (ITU 2017). Also, many governments that have ordered Internet shutdowns have justified them in terms of principles or values which, in theory at least, are valid or pertinent. Three such values are the protection of their sovereignty, the suppression of 'rascality' by telecom operators, and the need to counter social instability. While De Gregorio and Stremlau (2020) note that governments often do not provide employ legally valid frameworks for shutting down the Internet, or provide valid reasons, they recognise that, in some cases, blocking access to the Internet can be justified. They write: 'States cannot control the circulation of online content without regulating it, because only social media govern the digital spaces where information flows online [...] The only way states can intervene to face protests or the spread of hate and violence online in the absence of concerted cooperation from social media companies is by shutting down the entire network or specific websites' (p 4229).

In view of the foregoing, it is important to examine the extent to which Internet shutdowns in Africa have been warranted, or misused for political purposes. This is timely, as this issue has not been adequately researched. This paper uses documentary analysis and critical observations to explore the morality of Internet blackouts in sub-Saharan Africa, and to examine the extent to which the recent shutdowns in Cameroon and Nigeria have been justified. It thus attempts answer the following research questions: What are Internet blackouts? When are they legitimate? How have African governments used Internet shutdowns over the past five years? And to what extent can the recent shutdowns in Cameroon and Nigeria be regarded as justified?

Rationalising Internet blackouts

Internet blackouts – also called Internet shutdowns, digital curfews or 'kill' switches – refer to situations when the Internet, mobile networks and electronic communications are intentionally disrupted by either government or non-state actors, usually for the sake of suppressing or controlling the free flow of information (De Gregorio & Stremlau 2020; Nyokabi et al 2019). The Internet then becomes inaccessible to by the population of a specific locality or country. Technically, the term 'Internet shutdown' is an exaggeration, since it is impossible to shut the Internet down entirely. As Nyokabi et al (2019) explain, the Internet has a complex architecture that makes it difficult for any agent or entity to shut it down completely. It is a loose medium. In view of this complexity, some analysts prefer the term 'network disruption'.

There are various types of Internet blackout, depending on their duration, geographical coverage, and the specific communications networks affected. As explained by IFLA (2020), a shutdown may be limited to a specific area and a specific period, while another may last indefinitely. Also, an Internet blackout may be limited to the mobile Internet used on smartphones, the wired broadband that usually connects a desktop, or both. Moreover, an Internet shutdown may be deployed for legal reasons, while another may be caused by technical factors. The reasons commonly advanced by governments for shutting down the Internet include the following:

- Dealing with social unrest in their areas under their jurisdiction. This reason is often advanced when government are faced with social protests that are spiralling out of control.
- Blocking avenues for foreign propaganda.
- Checking perceived social media 'rascality'. This happens when governments seek to punish messaging services for not agreeing to block online content deemed harmful and a threat to national security.
- Achieving a particular policy goal. This happened in Ethiopia in when the government shut down the Internet to 'relieve stress' and stop students from cheating in exams (IFLA 2020, Kaye 2016).
- Maintaining law and order.

As noted earlier, the dominant tendency among researchers and rights organisations has been to present Internet shutdowns as violations of various human rights, notably the rights to freedom of expression and access to information. However, there are specific reasons why digital curfews are sometimes warranted or justifiable. The first has to do with the fact that Internet or digital communication networks should not be used in an irresponsible way. While recognising freedom of expression and opinion as a fundamental human right, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) clearly states that this right is associated with duties and responsibilities which, when not satisfied, may justified censorship. The ICCPR states that:

> The exercise of the rights provided [...] carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions but these shall only be as provided by law and are necessary: (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others, (b) For the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals (IFLA 2020: 5).

In the same vein, the constitution of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) states: 'Member states also reserve the right to cut off, in accordance with their national law, any other private telecommunications which may appear dangerous to the security of the State or contrary to its laws, public order or decency.' However, it does not clearly define key terms such as 'appear dangerous' and 'decency'.

Various authors recognise that digital curfews may be necessary in certain circumstances, but lament the fact that, in most situations, governments do not adopt formal and credible legal

frameworks for defining and managing Internet shutdowns. This tends to detract from the legitimacy of their actions. For example, De Gregorio and Stremlau (2020: 4228) argue that:

> There is a clear lack of transparency and accountability of states when shutting down the Internet, including justification of the reasons or the procedures on which these restrictive measures are implemented […] Despite the differences in various narratives for justifying shutdowns, one goal appears to be the 'sabotaging of accountability' by relying on general justifications without a strong legal basis and proportionality assessment on which shutdown orders could be based.

De Gregorio and Stremlau also underline the fact that even when a shutdown has become necessary, it is the government and not an independent body that is generally saddled with the responsibility to establish this necessity. Meanwhile, governmental approaches to establishing this necessity are rarely transparent. They write:

> Although democratic states are usually inclined to provide a higher degree of transparency and accountability about the reasons behind Internet shutdowns, the general absence of government transparency makes the entire situation extremely opaque because information about Internet shutdowns comes primarily from the same officials who have been responsible for the shutdown. As a result, understanding the true reasons and consequences of Internet shutdowns, and, in particular, how and to what extent human rights are affected, is not usually an easy task. (p.4228-4229)

The culture of 'sabotaging accountability' seems more pronounced in Africa. This will be addressed in greater detail below.

Internet shutdowns in Africa

Internet shutdowns have become increasingly prevalent in today's world, probably because of the growing digitalisation of industries. According to KeepItOn, an international organisation that tracks global Internet shutdowns, there were 213 incidents of Internet blackouts in 2019, and the number of countries that shut down the Internet increased from 25 in 2018 to 33 in 2019 (Tayo 2019). This confirms previous findings by Access Now that, from 2016 to 2017, the number of global Internet blackouts rose from 75 to 188.

Digital curfews aimed at controlling the Internet have been utilised by countries in the developed and developing world. But Africa seems to have become a major breeding ground for the Internet 'kill switch' phenomenon. According to KeepItOn, Internet shutdowns in Africa increased by 47 per cent from 2018 to 2019 (Tayo 2019). In tandem with this, Nyokabi et al (2019) argue that the growing number of Internet blackouts in Africa is connected to the rise and dominance of undemocratic cultures in various African countries. As they put it, the peculiarities of Internet shutdowns in Africa 'have been linked to countries with records of human right violations and protracted authoritarian practices in the region' (2019: 151). These include Chad, which on 28 March 2018 started a digital curfew that lasted more than a year. They also cite the case of Cameroon, which since 2017, has sought to repress secessionist agitation by enforcing a series of Internet blackouts in its Anglophone regions. Similarly, on the eve of its 14 January 2021 elections, the Ugandan government blacked out

the Internet, with the clear purpose of allowing the incumbent president, Yoweri Museveni, to control the political discourse and influence voters (Lamensch 2021).

An additional case is Ethiopia, where the government of Abiy Ahmed has been using regular Internet disruptions to silence opposition movements and undermine peaceful assembly. The Abiy government's resort to Internet blackouts has also been aimed at preventing the international community from gaining information about the insurrection in Tigray where, according to many observers, government forces have been committing human rights crimes (Lamensch 2021; Stauffer 2020). Other African countries that have recently resorted to Internet disruptions include Gabon, Benin, Liberia, Eritrea, Mauritania and Zimbabwe. Nyokabi et al (2019) note that most of these governments are struggling to repress or neutralise politically hostile social movements. As they put it, 'the connection has been a leader who will not relinquish power and who has therefore grown more powerful and later fearful of the rallying power of the Internet for citizens' organisation against their rule' (p 151). Similarly, the Media Foundation for West Africa (2018) has observed that although most African governments justify their recourse to Internet shutdowns by the need to maintain ensure national peace and security, their real motives are usually political, aimed at muzzling opposition voices and letting various forms of authoritarianism prevail. It adds: 'Such excuses are, at best, a convenient subterfuge, as the real reason for the disruptions and shutdowns has often been the desire by incumbent governments to mute dissenting voices and maintain power' (ibid: 3).

However, not only traditionally undemocratic countries are resorting to shutting down the internet – they also include supposed model democracies, such as Ghana. Ahead of the 2016 presidential and parliamentary elections, the Ghanaian government threatened to shut down social media. This provoked a storm of protest from pressure groups, civil society organisations, the media and other stakeholders, which forced the government to abandon the idea. The threat had been averted, but the fact that the Ghanaian government contemplated such an undemocratic strategy showed that even models of democracy in Africa are not immune from the 'Internet shutdown mania'.

Moreover, the number of states adopting this practice is growing. According to KeepItOn, of the 14 African countries that shut down the Internet in 2019, at least seven –– Benin, Gabon, Eritrea, Liberia, Malawi, Mauritania and Zimbabwe –– had never done so before, or had not done so in 2018. This is another indicator that Internet shutdowns on the continent are proliferating rapidly. Besides the number of countries resorting to shutdowns, they have also grown in terms of magnitude. According to KeepItOn:

> In contrast to Asia, the majority of the shutdowns in Africa were not targeted to a specific location or minority groups, instead impacting entire countries. Out of the 25 shutdowns recorded in Africa in 2019, 21 affected either an entire country or at minimum multiple regions and provinces. It is only in three cases that a shutdown targeted a specific region, city, or province. One example is a targeted shutdown that was carried out in Ethiopia. This indicates that shutdowns are not only growing in number but are also expanding in scope and affecting more and more people in Africa (quoted in Taye 2019: 6.)

Reasons advanced by African governments for shutting down the Internet usually centre on the need to maintain peace and protect national security. But most observers claim that this rhetoric is a pretext, concealing a desire to entrench authoritarian rule. For instance, Nyokabi et al (2019) argue that most African governments are unable to provide legitimate

reasons for resorting to Internet blackouts, and the initiatives are therefore mostly illegal. De Gregorio and Stremlau (2020) similarly argue that Internet shutdowns in African countries are differentiated from those in western democracies by their gross illegality. While western democracies provide reasons for their actions, and adopt them as temporary measures to deal with specific emergencies, authoritarian African states address Internet shutdowns in ad hoc ways, and rarely base their actions on evidence or data. 'As a result, they cannot justify their rationale' (De Gregorio and Stremlau 2020: 4228).

The Cameroonian and Nigerian experiences

Since 2000, Nigeria and Cameroon have witnessed growing Internet and social media penetration. According to Internet World Stats (2020), Nigeria and Cameroon have respectively enjoyed an Internet growth of 62.93% and 39.29% from 2000 to 2020. According to NoiPolls (2020), 61 per cent of Nigerians and 29 per cent or Cameroonians have access to the Internet. As could be expected, this is concentrated in the urban areas. The most used social media in these two countries are Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp (Statistica 2020). According to Statcounter (2022), social media use in Cameroon is as follows: Facebook: 89.31 percent; Pinterest, 5.18 percent; YouTube, 2.57 percent; Twitter, 19 per cent; Instagram, 0.46 percent; and LinkedIn, 0.12 percent. Trends in Nigeria are similar, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Use of social media in Cameroon and Nigeria, December 2020 to December 2021 (% of total)

No	Name of Social Media	Country	
		Cameroon	Nigeria
1	Facebook	89.31	83.29
2	Pinterest	5.18	3.22
3	YouTube	2.57	2.72
4	Twitter	2.19	5.65
5	Instagram	0.46	4.57
6	LinkedIn	0.12	0.31

Source: Statcounter 2022.

As elsewhere, the proliferation of the Internet and social media in these two countries has revolutionised human industries, from commerce through education to administration. It has also triggered the emergence of various digital cultures, including hash tagging, online protests, cyber terrorism, and adversarial citizen journalism, which the Cameroonian and Nigerian governments have sought to control. Since 2011, online protests in particular have been leveraged by political activists in the two countries to agitate for the recognition of specific human rights as well as democratisation. In Nigeria, popular online-based campaigns such as the 2011 Occupy Nigeria, the 2014 #BringBackOurGirls and the 2019 #EndSars have been mounted for democratisation purposes. These online protests are similar to the #BringBackOurInternet, the #FreeMiniMefo and the #FreeAllArrested movements in Cameroon. Separatist groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IOPB) of Nigeria and the Ambazonia Defence Force (ADF) of Cameroon have capitalised on the loose nature of the Internet to initiate various forms of online anti-government campaigns which have seriously tested the nerves of the Nigerian and Cameroonian governments.

The aggressive and disruptive nature of this digital activism has in provoked the ire of the Cameroonian and Nigerian governments. This has led to sweeping censorships, including the partial or widespread Internet blackouts. Thus the disruption of the Internet has become the method par excellence for taming activist and politically disruptive movements.

The case of Cameroon

Internet shutdowns in Cameroon dates back to 2011 when the Cameroonian government blocked the 'Twitter via SMS' service provided by a local telecommunication operator. Enforced on 8 March of that year, this came while the country was preparing for general elections and amid suspicions that the opposition was planning 'Egypt-like' mass protests against the Biya regime.

In effect, the government banned the service on the basis that it could trigger a serious threat to national security on the eve of the elections (Kaye 2016). This action fuelled heated debates within Cameroon, and was condemned by international observers such as Reporters Without Borders, Internet Without Borders and Access Now. Reporters without Borders lamented that the measure was too extreme to 'correct' acts that qualified more as 'peaceful expressions of opinion' (cited in Miles 2011, Access Now 2018). Other international observers quickly interpreted the social media shutdown as the harbinger of more extreme actions aimed at intimidating and repressing opposition.

Despite all this, the Cameroonian government embarked on another Internet shutdown which lasted from 17 January to 20 April 2017. This was in response to the vitriolic online propaganda of a secessionist and separatist movement led by armed groups based in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon. The shutdown, which lasted for 94 days, only affected the English-speaking parts of the country. These include the North West and South West regions where various separatist groups – notably the Ambazonia Defence Forces, the Red Dragons and the Ambazonia United Front – had taken up arms against government security forces and destroyed public institutions in what became known as the Anglophone Crisis, or the Ambazonia War. The separatists have since 2016 sought to create a breakaway state by force of arms, and have supplemented their guerrilla/military activities with online propaganda campaigns. These campaigns, together with the usual anti-government discourse of political activists, prompted the Cameroonian government to shutting down the Internet and to embark on various other forms of Internet censorship.

Therefore, the Cameroonian government shut down the Internet in a bid to contain the online spread of harmful propaganda by the separatists and their allies. The Minister of Posts and Telecommunications provided the following justification: 'Social media have become an important communications instrument, which unfortunately is used by people with evil intention to propagate false information [in order] to threaten the public and create panic' (cited in Caldwell 2017).

The shutdown triggered the formation of counter-movements aimed at condemning the shutdown and challenging the Cameroonian government on its approaches to Internet censorship. Access Now and Internet Sans Frontières launched legal actions against the Cameroonian government, and the #BringBackOurInternet movement disseminated various narratives about the destructive effects of the shutdown in Anglophone Cameroon. After intense pressure from both local pressure groups and the international community, the Cameroonian government lifted the shutdown, but stated that it would be reinstated if

online anti-government and separatist movements were reactivated. The Minster of Posts and Telecommunications, Libom Li Likeng, warned: 'Our security forces have platforms to track and control people just as in all other countries of the world' (cited in Caldwell 2017).

Despite international condemnation of the January–April 2017 digital curfew, the Cameroonian government enforced a renewed Internet blackout six month later. This shutdown, from October 2017 to March 2018, exacerbated the damage done by the first. Technically, it realised the government's previous threat that the blackout would be reimposed if the inhabitants of the English-speaking regions continued to use the Internet to spread fake news, anti-government discourses and separatist propaganda. The new shutdown triggered a new wave of indigenous and exogenous pressure aimed at compelling the Cameroonian government to lift the shutdown.

The case of Nigeria

Nigeria has had its own dose of shutdowns. The first came in 2015, prior to the general elections. In February, the Nigerian telecommunication regulatory organ, the NCC, shut down an SMS short code used by the opposition political party, the All Progressives Congress, for the purposes of fund-raising. This happened during the electoral campaign, and the Nigerian public widely viewed the initiative as being politically motivated (Freedom House 2016; Media Foundation for West Arica 2015). The Nigerian government also placed temporary restrictions on connectivity in a bid to combat the Boko Haram insurgency in a number of northern Nigerian states. From 2013 to 2014, it instituted a series of telecommunications blackouts in the north eastern states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe, as a war strategy against the Islamist insurgents. The blackouts lasted from May to December 2013, and were repeated in March 2014. Though the reason provided by the government – that of combating terrorism -- might have been genuine, the shutdown disadvantaged the general public more than the targeted insurgents. Among others, Freedom House (2015) noted that the shutdowns placed many civilians in harm's way, with citizens travelling to neighbouring states in search of mobile phone or Internet connectivity became easy prey for the insurgents. They were often ambushed and killed.

The Nigerian government imposed another Internet blackout in northern Nigeria in February and March 2021. This shutdown, which only affected the state of Zamfara, was aimed at assisting a military operation against bandits and ransom-seeking kidnappers that had become rampant. It came a few days after 73 students had been abducted from a government school in the state. This abduction was just one in a long string of kidnappings that had plagued the state. Thus the Nigeria Communication Commission stated that the shutdown was aimed at 'enabling the relevant security agencies to carry out required activities towards addressing the security challenge in the state' (cited in Nimi 2021). Contrary to classical scenarios, the local population welcomed the shutdown. Many endorsed the government's action, viewing it as a tactical move that could help to reduce insecurity in their state. Nimi (2021) cites numerous cases of Zamfara residents who, in spite of their predicament, openly expressed support for the shutdown.

The most recent social media blackout in Nigeria was the Twitter ban that lasted from 4 June 2021 to 13 January 2022. It followed the deletion of an aggressive message posted by President Mohammadu Buhari, Nigeria's head of state, on Twitter three days earlier. Following a growing wave of violent activities speculatively attributed to an Igbo-based separatist group called the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Buhari posted a series of

aggressive tweets on 1 June 2021. In one of these he threatened to treat Nigerians who misbehaved 'in the language they understand'. Verbatim, the presidential tweet read:

> Many of those misbehaving today are too young to be aware of the destruction and loss of lives that occurred during the Nigerian Civil War. Those of us in the fields for 30 months, who went through the war, will treat them in the language they understand. (cited in Sahara Reporters 2021).

This tweet does not explicitly threaten the IPOB or the Igbo tribe. However, many national and international observers interpreted it as a message with tribalist and even genocidal intent. This interpretation hinged on the tweet's reference to the Nigerian civil war (Sahara Reporters 2021; Auwal 2021). Many suspected that the president was presaging a severe crackdown on Igbos who supported the IPOB and its military wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN). They believed this was reminiscent of the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 to 1970, in which thousands of Igbos died. Other observers called on Twitter to suspend the president's Twitter account on the basis that the tweet violated Twitter's prohibition of that 'expresses intention of self-harm or suicide' (Anyim 2021).

For its part, Twitter read Buhari's tweet as incendiary, and deleted it. It replaced the tweet with the message, 'This Tweet violated Twitter's policy, learn more'. This move triggered a series of reprisals from the Nigerian government. First, Nigeria's minister of information and culture, Lai Mohammed, accused Twitter of double standards, claiming that it had not acted against other individuals and groups whose tweets also incited violence. The Nigerian government stated that it regarded the removal of the tweet as 'disappointing'. It also lamented Twitter's tolerance of secessionists' tweets containing fake news and harmful information that could jeopardise national security and unity. As Lai Mohammed stated, 'there has been a litany of problems with the social media platform in Nigeria, where misinformation and fake news spread through it have had real world violent consequences' (cited in Anyim 2021: 5). On the basis of these irregularities, the Nigerian government decided to ban Twitter temporarily.

It also ordered mobile telephone networks to block access to Twitter, and warned the Nigerian population against trying to circumvent the ban. As expected, the ban provoked waves of condemnation in various national and international quarters. Many critics, political activists and human rights groups viewed the action as a clear subterfuge aimed at muzzling adversarial voices and free speech in Nigeria. Other critics associated the ban with the role Twitter had played during the #EndSARS protest that had shaken Nigeria few months earlier. Actually, the #EndSARS movement was a nationwide campaign against police brutality. Its adherents mobilized mainly through Twitter. Added to this, Twitter's CEO, Jack Dorsey, encouraged donations to some groups of protesters. According to some analysts, this provoked the anger of the Nigerian government, spurring it to ban Twitter in Nigeria (Auwel 2021).

The ban was lifted on 13 January 2022 after Twitter had undertaken to meet a number of conditions laid down by the Nigerian government. It required Twitter to 'create a legal entity in Nigeria during the first quarter of 2022', and to 'comply with applicable tax obligations on its operations under Nigerian law'. Twitter was also compelled to 'enrol Nigeria in its Partner Support and Law Enforcement Portals', and cooperate with the Nigerian government on regulating its contents and harmful tweets. The statement announcing the lifting of the ban was issued by Nigeria's technology agency, the National Information Technology Development. It stated:

> Twitter has agreed to act with a respectful acknowledgement of Nigerian laws and the national culture and history on which such legislation has been built and work with the FGN and the broader industry to develop Code of Conduct in line with global best practices, applicable in almost all developed countries (cited in Kene-Okafor 2022: 32).

A number of critics have viewed Twitter's return as predicated on tighter government control. For instance, James (2022) notes that some of the demands made by the Nigerian government – notably the enrolment of Nigeria in Twitter's Partner Support and Law Enforcement Portals – provides the Nigerian police with the means to request and retain data about users. Analysts also suspect that government might want to extend such control on Twitter to other social media companies present in Nigeria. If such a scenario happens, freedom on the net will naturally decrease the more and another evidence of authoritarianism will be established.

Examining the morality of recent internet shutdowns in Cameroon and Nigeria

The Cameroonian and Nigerian governments have mainly sought to justify their recourse to Internet shutdowns in terms of the need to check the spread of harmful/fake news, protect national interests, maintain peace and security, and protect national unity, arguing that their countries might otherwise descend into chaos. Taken at face value, these are noble motivations; however, many international observers and human right groups have argued that these are subterfuges, concealing the actual motives of intimidating oppositional voices and promoting authoritarian rule. To them, the 'national security' arguments are either fictive or negligible, and the belief has grown that these justifications are either irrelevant or less important than the need to protect human rights and encourage economic activities. In other words, the protection of human rights and economic development are paramount, and take precedence over the supposed 'security' rationales.

However, this author believes it is unfair to overlook or downplay the national security rationale advanced by African – in this case the Cameroonian and Nigerian – governments for disrupting the Internet. Social media have become platforms for criminal activities and the diffusion of harmful contents that can mislead the masses and undermine fragile African democracies, including Cameroon and Nigeria. For example, the separatist online propaganda in Nigeria and Cameroon is characterised by fake news and incendiary messages that could fuel unrest and even civil wars. Through various Internet-assisted disinformation campaigns, IPOB, for instance, has created the spurious impression that Biafra may become independent within a matter of months. They have also promoted the belief that the separatists are supported by Israel, Russia, the Vatican, the United States and France (Okpi 2020; Africa Check 2020). A similar scenario is observed in respect of the online campaigns of Cameroonian separatist groups and other political activists.

In their study titled 'Understanding social media role in propagating falsehood in conflict situations', Ngange and Moki (2019) show how the online propaganda spread by Cameroonian separatists is characterised by fake and misleading information, and how it has the potential to create chaos in Cameroon. Along the same lines, Noukeu (2020) has conducted a content analysis of news propagated by separatists and pro-separatist bloggers in Cameroon, and demonstrated how disruptive the latter's online activities could be to Cameroon's unity efforts. He particularly observes that the news propagated by Cameroonian separatist bloggers

with regard to the Anglophone crisis in their country comprised 'stories [that] lacked basic elements of reliability and verifiability. As a matter of fact, the news stories hardly contained clear information about the sources, visual cues to corroborate the texts and factual details such as where and when the events covered happened' (pp.30-31). The stories also incited violence and chaos.

Without wanting to judge the pertinence/morality of the separatist orientation of Nigeria's IPOB and Cameroon's secessionist groups, this author believes that the use of fake news and misleading information can be serious enough to warrant Internet censorship. Checking the spread of misleading and seditious information, even with the help of Internet blackouts, could serve national purposes in Cameroon and Nigeria. AS noted earlier, we need to recall that Internet censorship is justifiable when the Internet is used to undermine the freedom of others or to engender public disorder and insecurity in a country (IFLA 2020; IUT 2017).

Thus, the Cameroonian and Nigerian governments' resort to Internet shutdowns, particularly in their fight against separatist movements, should not be viewed as inherently unjustifiable or unwarranted. However, they do require a formal and acceptable legal framework. As argued by Nyokabi et al (2019), most African governments fail to situation their activities in a formal legal framework, thereby providing a basis for legitimacy. As a result, their Internet shutdowns are mostly illegal. The Nigerian and Cameroon governments may have instituted internet shutdowns for noble reasons (the promotion of peace and national security), but the fact that these initiatives have not been situated in formal legal frameworks have lent credence to accusations of authoritarianism. A common argument used by human right groups to denounce Internet shutdowns in Cameroon and Nigeria is that the shutdowns are unconstitutional.

Besides the scenario presented above, there have been situations, particularly in Nigeria, in which Internet blackouts were applauded by the populace as well as endogenous and exogenous critics. For instance, in February 2021, the Nigerian government instituted an Internet shutdown in north western Zamfara to combat a spate of banditry and ransom-seeking kidnappings in the region. According to various sources (notably Nimi 2021), most residents welcomed the initiative, and cooperated with government security services to ensure its success. This bolsters the perspective that Internet shutdowns should not be regarded as inherently unjustified.

Conclusion

This study was triggered by the observation that scholars have tended to view Internet blackouts in African countries in a universally negative light, branding them as violations of human rights and inimical to economic development. However, while undoubtedly extreme and interventionist measures, Internet blackouts are not inherently unjust and universally inappropriate. This follows from the fact that even influential bodies such as the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) recognise the need to show down the Internet in certain situations. Also, governments that have utilised Internet shutdowns tend to advance reasons that are valid in principle. Three such reasons are to protect their sovereignty, counter 'rascality' among telecom operators, and improve national security.

Against this background, this study has examined the morality of Internet shutdowns in Africa, with specific reference to Cameroon and Nigeria. It concludes that the Internet shutdowns in those countries aimed at combating online separatist propaganda and

inflammatory material could be justified if they were situated in legitimate and appropriate legal frameworks. Without this, their actions remain illegal or unconstitutional.

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