



optima

# Internet Shutdowns in Bangladesh: A Needs and Capacity Assessment to Prepare, Prevent, Resist



## About the Report

Since 2019, 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. In 2022, Internews worked closely with two organizations, Digitally Right and Voices for Interactive Choices and Empowerment (VOICE), to engage in a comprehensive needs assessment process to understand Bangladeshi civil society's capacity to engage in internet shutdown advocacy.

Through a survey of civil society stakeholders as well as a series of focus groups and co-design workshops, this report examines how Bangladeshi civil society views advocacy challenges related to internet shutdowns, perceptions on future internet shutdown risks, and the resources required to better prepare for and prevent shutdowns.

The full report, available at [preparepreventresist.org](http://preparepreventresist.org), provides a detailed legal analysis as well as an extensive review of the survey findings, and focus group discussions. The report ends with recommendations for civil society actors, policymakers, and international organizations to support Bangladeshi actors' capabilities to build sustainable long-term advocacy to prevent shutdowns.



## 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).

## Executive Summary

Users in Bangladesh have experienced internet shutdowns in various forms almost every year since 2009. Past shutdowns have included wholesale network blackouts, blocking of communication apps and social media sites, and deliberate slowing (“throttling”) of mobile internet speeds.

It is extremely difficult to estimate the cost and negative impact of an internet shutdown. One day of an internet shutdown is estimated to cost Bangladesh more than US \$78 million.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the wide-reaching impact on the country’s economy, marginalized communities are disproportionately impacted, depriving already vulnerable people of income, safe and secure communications, and opportunities to participate in civic discourse and political processes. Internet shutdowns also make it difficult for journalists and activists, who already face significant challenges in the country, to gather and share factual and well-sourced information.

Civil society plays a critical role, not only to push for transparency and accountability in decision-making about network disruptions, but also to make citizens and key groups more aware of shutdowns and provide resources so they can prepare and respond. Thus far in the country, there have been few advocacy efforts focused on shutdowns, mainly due to a lack of knowledge and technical skills to advocate for digital rights and the absence of strong organizations in this space. The advocacy that does take place is often limited to reactive responses during shutdowns rather than proactive advocacy to prevent and prepare for such incidents.

Bangladesh is undergoing a digital transformation and there is a strong political will to foster digital growth. Internet shutdowns undermine the government’s plan for a “Digital Bangladesh”, but the social, economic, and political consequences are not well-discussed, well-researched, nor debated within the country. This study attempts to assess what Bangladeshi civil society and other stakeholders can do to prepare for and prevent internet censorship, determine what skills and capacities they might need, and make suggestions for nurturing more sustainable and long-term coalition building practices.

## Key Findings from the Bangladesh Internet Shutdown Needs Assessment

- **Shutdowns are common.** Bangladesh has experienced at least 17 shutdowns since 2012 under various circumstances, including communal riots, civic and political protests, and elections. A large majority (88%) of respondents said they had experienced an internet shutdown in the past three years and half of them had had such an experience within one year.
- **Blanket internet shutdowns are rare.** It is unusual for the government to cut off access to the entire network. Almost half (45%) of the respondents said a complete blackout of the internet

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/internet-shutdowns-v-3.pdf>

rarely occurs, and 37% said it sometimes occurs. Such instances were mainly observed in 2015 and 2016; one was cited as a mistake, and another was a shutdown drill implemented locally.

- **Shutdowns are likely to continue to occur in the future and are supported by the law.** A majority (58%) of the civil society, digital-rights, and other community leaders surveyed for this report believe that shutdowns are somewhat or very likely to happen in the next three years, and that laws enable the authorities to disrupt the internet whenever they determine such measures are necessary.
- **Shutdowns are economically and socially costly.** When asked about the main impacts of internet shutdowns, survey participants report significant economic losses, with 82% of the respondents reporting that the greatest effect is on private enterprises that do business online. Respondents also reported that internet shutdowns result in the spread of rumors and speculation and create an environment of “darkness,” in which respondents are unable to communicate with friends, family, and others, and thus quickly feel isolated from the rest of the world. Protesters, election observers, and journalists report that shutdowns significantly impact their abilities to organize, monitor elections, and report on major events.
- **VPN awareness and usage among Bangladeshi civil society is high.** People in Bangladesh are generally aware of internet shutdowns, and a large majority (74%) of the survey respondents were quite familiar with and reported using VPN services when major communications sites are blocked. In the case of low bandwidth or no internet at all, respondents reported that they resort to using traditional mobile SMS and telephony.
- **However, civil society capacity for anti-shutdown advocacy is low.** Bangladeshi civil society is neither prepared to respond to shutdowns nor equipped with the skills to prevent them through effective advocacy. Only 6% of the respondents said civil society was prepared to confront a shutdown in the past, and 63% said they were unprepared for such moves in the future. Even in the major cases of blocking social media sites and throttling bandwidth, workshop participants report that responses from rights organizations and coverage in the media has been limited.
- **Bangladesh has a dearth of digital-rights expertise, especially in legal and technical fields related to internet shutdowns.** Participants say Bangladesh lacks an active digital-rights community as well as research on the impact of internet shutdowns to support advocacy. Nor is there any community at the local or national level that does network measurement to document disruptions and inform advocacy initiatives. Respondents report that advocates do not measure network disruptions because they do not have the necessary technical skills. A majority (62.5%) of survey respondents reported that organisations have little to no capacity to collect technical data to measure and document such restrictions.

- **There is little to no capacity to protect vulnerable communities during a shutdown.** Two-thirds of the respondents - and almost all the respondents who identified as belonging to a marginalised or minority community - said that civil society has no or low capacity to support vulnerable communities during a shutdown. Workshop participants suggested that for the highland and lowland indigenous groups (who are disproportionately poor and underserved the key problem is access to internet services. Internet shutdowns are often perceived as a security measure directly impacting religious minorities.
- **Participants agree that strategies to combat shutdowns should also confront the challenges of disinformation and hate speech online.** The government often uses shutdowns as a mechanism to attempt to control hate speech, incitements to violence, and disinformation circulating online. There is a need, according to our research participants, to make it clear that shutdowns are not necessary or proportionate responses, and to provide evidence that shutdowns can, in fact, exacerbate crises and lead to increased fear, uncertainty and distribution of false information.

## Prepare, Prevent, Resist Bangladesh: Recommendations for Supporting Advocacy Against Shutdowns

As part of the workshops conducted for these assessments, participants discussed internet shutdown needs and capacities and worked to determine collective goals and objectives for future internet shutdown advocacy. These goals include:

- **Create an informal working group or network of individuals and organizations interested in digital-rights issues, and provide training, connections to experts, and other support.** This grouping should connect young and mid-career researchers, journalists, academics, lawyers, and civil society representative to build their understanding of the legal and rights aspects of network disruptions, their impact on the economy and society, and how to run effective advocacy campaigns on preparedness and prevention. This should include ensuring reliable and secure technical platforms – such as a Telegram channel (to the extent they are available and reliable to all members) -- to share information, learn from each other’s experiences, and engage other stakeholders in these discussions. Training should also cover negotiation and strategic-communications skills required to engage government officials and institutions, tech companies, and business associations that are crucial contacts in any advocacy program.
- **Support technical skill-building and provide support for ongoing measurement.** There is a clear need to train a cohort of experts on network measurement to begin building out Bangladesh’s expertise in this field, to bolster the credibility of any advocacy on internet shutdown issues. The cohort should be spread across geographic regions and supported by experienced international experts and built through collective learning and growth. This expert group should provide evidence of network interruptions and performance information for advocacy with key

stakeholders such as government and international advocacy organizations. These experts should also be a part of the broader network, able to communicate technical topics to journalists, lawyers, and the general public.

- **Conduct extensive research on diverse impact (social, economic, political) of internet shutdowns on different stakeholders and communities.** This should include industry- and issue-specific research that could help engage these communities and bring their voices to policymakers, thereby strengthening advocacy. Research should also explore the non-economic socio-political effects of internet cut-offs, such as the spread of disinformation and the inability to communicate with family and friends within Bangladesh and beyond, especially in times of emergencies. This could focus also on such effects on vulnerable communities as migrants and the poor, as well as on youth and those who rely on digital platforms for work.
- **Ensure vulnerable communities are key participants in advocacy.** To ensure the involvement of marginalized communities, efforts should be made to include civil society organizations that already have trust and credibility in these communities in trainings and coalition-building activities. Guides, applications, and other resources in the Bangla language could be particularly helpful in this regard. Efforts to understand digital literacies and usages within these groups should be incorporated into wider engagement strategies to better understand how to provide contextualized support. Additionally, any advocacy in those communities should start with discussion, where relevant, of affordable and equitable access to internet services as some communities have no online options at all.
- **Raise public awareness by engaging youth.** This research has identified youth as key stakeholders who are invested in reliable digital infrastructure and are more digitally savvy, able to build on existing technical skills and creative multimedia content. Efforts to bring youth into digital rights work should include public education and social media information campaigns, as well as offline programs that can better reach marginalized and rural segments of society. Additionally, youth groups could be core partners to promote the use of safer and more secure circumvention tools.
- **Develop advocacy narratives and engagement strategies that contend with the challenges of confronting hate speech and misinformation and the inadequacy of shutdowns as a solution.** This research suggested that, even amongst civil society groups, there is support for control mechanisms to respond to communal violence and to stop the spread of hate speech. Disinformation and hate campaigns on social media are often blamed for igniting and escalating communal violence and are the cited reason for many shutdowns in the country. Workshop participants discussed the need to push for alternative solutions to these real challenges that are necessary, proportionate, and effective at countering misinformation and online hate. As one participant described, “[the] Bangladesh [government] already has a [social media] monitoring system in place, and there are ways to track sources of disinformation; we just need to make it more efficient,” rather than resorting to the blunt instrument of a “kill-switch.” Longer-term

programs also should be developed on digital and media literacy, including in secondary education curricula so that people can identify mis/disinformation. Additional research should be considered to understand the negative impacts of shutdowns on the spread of rumors and mis/disinformation.

- **Identify opportunities to engage policymakers, telecommunications companies, ISPs, and businesses, as well as law enforcement agencies and related ministries, such as the BTRC.** This could be done in whatever order would be most immediately fruitful. Key persuasive arguments would include the potential economic losses and reputational risks of internet shutdowns. The aim should be regular dialogues informed by research and evidence to help build trust between different stakeholders. Accountable internet governance, in a Bangladeshi context, requires a multistakeholder approach. More frequent dialogue is needed among parties to better understand best practices around control of hate speech and disinformation, as well as necessary and proportionate policies that don't infringe on human rights and potentially contribute to greater fear and uncertainty. Additionally, there is a need to engage different actors to build transparency into existing shutdown order protocols. Civil society and trade associations can play important roles in developing more research on the economic impact of shutdowns in the country. There are opportunities to build spaces for collaboration within existing multi-stakeholder forums such as the Bangladesh Internet Governance Forum and the Bangladesh chapter of the international public policy organization Internet Society.

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.

Please reach out to us ([miraj@digitallyright.org](mailto:miraj@digitallyright.org) & [lhenderson@internews.org](mailto:lhenderson@internews.org)) for more information on this and other OPTIMA internet shutdown advocacy needs reports, our methodology, and our Prepare & Prevent networks and resources.

