



optima

## Internet Shutdowns in Senegal: 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 Dakar-based organizations, Jonction and Computech Institute, to engage in a comprehensive needs assessment process to understand Senegalese 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 as part of a co-design workshop, this report examines how Senegalese 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](https://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 Senegalese 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

“The cancer of the modern world”

This is how Senegal’s President Macky Sall described social media – after protests erupted over the arrests of a main opposition leader and Senegal’s ruling party lost key local elections early in 2022.<sup>1</sup> In Senegal, a country where 70% of the population is below 40, people have taken to social media to discuss politics, to express their anger, and to organize. In French, Wolof and English the hashtag #freeSenegal became a rallying cry on twitter and Instagram to mobilize protests.<sup>2</sup> Senegal’s civil society is one of the most notably vibrant and diverse free civil societies in Africa. However, in 2021, as protests and online dissent grew, the government did what so many other governments have started to do: they shut it down.

On March 4, 2021, following a day of protests and cases of violence, the government allegedly restricted access to Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Telegram, and suspended two private television channels that had heavily covered the protests.<sup>3</sup> There is limited evidence available about this internet shutdown incident, in part because the shutdowns reportedly occurred early in the morning and only for a few hours. Additionally, as reported by local actors, civil society was not prepared for such a shutdown, with few people equipped to technically measure incidents of network disruption and little capacity on the part of journalists to adequately cite technical evidence and report on the shutdown. Without clear evidence, it remains extremely difficult to verify internet shutdowns and to hold governments accountable.

For a country that has long been seen as one of the most stable democracies in Africa, there are worrying signs of democratic backsliding under President Macky Sall. The Press Code passed in 2017 as well as the use of national security laws to arrest journalists exemplify significant attacks on media freedom in the country.<sup>4</sup> The government has repeatedly called for social media regulations.<sup>5</sup> In July of this year, the main opposition party’s candidates for legislative election were disqualified over a minor issue.<sup>6</sup> Many worry President Sall and his BKK coalition of parties will pursue an unconstitutional third term.

Senegal will hold presidential elections in 2024. Considering escalating tensions in the country and increased repression by the ruling government, there is a need to pay attention now to bolster Senegal’s democracy and support Senegalese civil society to organize and prepare for possible election and post-election scenarios. The narrative of ‘Senegalese exceptionalism’, that Senegal’s democracy is impervious to authoritarian trends and economic/political turmoil, inhibits Senegalese civil society from making the case for preparations and protections both at home and abroad. There is too much at stake to take Senegalese democracy for granted.

With internet shutdowns occurring with increasing frequency around protests and elections in Africa, this report seeks to provide an in-depth examination of a civil society uncertain about its future and the potential for increased censorship of the media and digital spaces. Through a survey of civil society stakeholders as well as a co-design workshop, this report outlines how civil society perceives the threat

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.africanews.com/2022/05/04/senegal-plans-law-on-social-media-reports/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fastcompany.com/90615398/free-senegal-internet-shutdown-democracy>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/05/africa/senegal-protests-rape-charge-intl/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/17009-senegalese-journalist-charged-with-endangering-national-security>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theafricareport.com/99491/senegals-president-joins-the-chorus-against-twitter-and-facebook/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/protests-erupt-in-senegal-as-government-stymies-opposition/6622944.html>

of internet shutdowns in Senegal, the gaps that exist when it comes to digital policy expertise and technical data collection, and the resources needed to prepare for possible shutdowns.

## Key Findings from the Senegal Internet Shutdown Needs Assessment

- **There is uncertainty about the history of past internet shutdowns and very little awareness amongst civil society leaders about internet shutdowns.** Almost half (47%) of survey respondents reported that there has been an internet shutdown where they live in the past year, 15% in the past two years, and 8% in the past three years. An additional 20% said they were uncertain or didn't know whether the disruption they experienced was a shutdown, and 9% said they have never experienced a shutdown. In focus group discussions with key civil society stakeholders, participants explained that few incidents and little evidence/reporting on the subject has led to low levels of awareness on the subject.
- **This confusion and lack of understanding is related to low levels of expertise on how internet shutdowns and online censorship occur technically and legally.** Most respondents (90%) said they don't know how internet shutdowns occur technically or legally. More than half (59%) said they are unable to or are not sure how to tell the difference between technical connectivity issues and a government-ordered shutdown. During workshop discussions, most participants expressed uncertainty about defining a shutdown and knowing the difference between forms of censorship and shutdowns.
- **Civil society actors largely believe Senegal will not experience internet shutdowns in the next year, but there is a great deal of uncertainty.** A majority of those surveyed (64%) reported that an internet shutdown is very unlikely next year, while a plurality (30%) said they were uncertain whether a shutdown would occur. Despite political turmoil that can be a harbinger of an internet shutdown, only 5% of those surveyed indicated they believed such an occurrence was "very likely" in the next year.
- **There are significant worries about social media censorship and shutdowns around the period of the next presidential election in 2024.** When asked specifically about the risk of internet shutdowns and censorship during the upcoming presidential elections in 2024, a majority of survey respondents (56%) report that they fear censorship or shutdowns, and an additional 31% report that they didn't know or were unsure. In the focus group setting, participants discussed concerns about proposed social media regulations and the potential for blocking around the contentious election.
- **Advocates report they are unprepared for future shutdowns.** Only 20% of the respondents assessed the capacity to stop or prevent future shutdowns as high, and only a few organizations are working on these issues, with varying levels of engagement. A large majority (77%) reported that they do not have any contingency measures in place in case of an internet shutdown. Focus group participants noted that there is a need to make Senegalese civil society aware of the experiences of neighboring countries, the

socioeconomic impact of these shutdowns, and the need to engage in preventative advocacy against the possibility of future shutdowns in Senegal.

- **Civil society reports very little capacity to measure internet performance and technically document internet shutdowns.** Network measurement tools and datasets are not widely used or understood. They also need more knowledge about essential tools and datasets such as OONI, IODA, and Censored Planet.
- **There is a need to better understand the laws that might enable or allow for future censorship and to build legal expertise.** According to focus group participants, lawyers and judges have little understanding of the human rights implications of internet policies. There is a need to better understand existing and proposed laws and the ways in which they could enable or prevent internet shutdowns in the future.
- **Participants report low levels of use and awareness of circumvention tools.** Only 32% of civil society respondents report having ever used a VPN/circumvention tool. Focus groups attributed these low levels of general awareness in part to relatively low levels of online censorship, as compared to neighboring countries. Participants described a need to “popularize circumvention tools,” especially among youth, not only to prepare for future censorship incidents but also to protect individuals’ privacy online. Participants also noted that, to their knowledge, there are no resources on circumvention tools in the Wolof language.
- **Civil society is unaccustomed to engaging with certain stakeholders that are key to internet issues.** The research found civic activists need more and stronger relationships with others in this field, and little expertise on digital issues across Senegalese civil society. There is also little capacity and understanding about how to engage internet or telecommunications service providers or other sectors of society in advocacy.

## Prepare, Prevent, Resist Senegal 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 advocacy in this area. These goals include:

- **Considering the lack of awareness about internet shutdowns and the threats they pose, there is a need to build awareness among the general public and key stakeholders about the threat of internet shutdowns.** Journalists need to understand how to report on the issue and tell stories of internet shutdown harms in Senegal and in neighboring countries. Human rights groups should

know what circumvention tools to promote within their communities and how to build campaigns against future shutdowns. Lawyers need training in digital policy in order to understand legal threats and the most effective form of recourse. Efforts to work closer with youth groups and important sectors reliant on the internet can promote the use of circumvention tools, build digital literacy, and help build a stronger case to keep the internet on.

- **As there is a great deal of uncertainty related to the upcoming elections in February 2024, civil society should bring together diverse coalitions to engage in scenario-planning based on the possibility of internet shutdowns before, during and after the election.** In this way, advocates can prepare for different forms of shutdowns that might occur, develop legal strategies, and build infrastructure to promote circumvention tools and ensure technical data is collected.
- **There is an acute need to build network-measurement capacity and incentivize more regular testing, drawing on a diverse range of connectivity and performance datasets.** Drawing on the few individuals and organizations equipped with the technical skills to conduct these measurements, the coalition can train others on how to collect network-measurement data, how to analyze this data, and how to collaborate with international groups, journalists, and activists to ensure this data is used in advocacy.
- **Civil society needs to work to better understand the digital literacies, uses, and needs of marginalized and vulnerable communities, and then customize and localize resources for these communities.** Efforts to build or translate existing resources in Wolof should be scaled.
- **As Senegalese civil society is able to operate openly and engage in direct advocacy with policymakers and government bodies, digital rights organizations can take the lead on crafting anti-shutdown strategies and messages that can resonate with these power brokers.** Additionally, digital rights organizations can determine the potential to engage more directly with ISPs and Telcos to push for more transparency on network interference and potentially engage these entities as allies in censorship prevention.

These recommendations are currently being implemented through Internews' OPTIMA project and with the Prepare, Prevent, Resist Network in Senegal, led by Jonction and Computech Institute. We encourage interested parties to contact the authors to participate in coalition activities and to support this work.

Please reach out to us ([computechnos@gmail.com](mailto:computechnos@gmail.com) & [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.

