A Question of Disruption

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Southern Africa Regional Dialogue On Internet Access
The internet has been growing rapidly in Africa in recent years, transforming the way we communicate, interact, conduct politics and business and even find love.

McKinsey & Co project that, if built on the right foundations, the internet could contribute as much as $300 billion a year to Africa’s GDP by 2025 transforming sectors as diverse as agriculture, retail, and health care. (Manyika J. et al Lions go digital: The Internet’s transformative potential in Africa. McKinsey and Company, 2013)
The spread of mobile internet has also offered many Africans an opportunity to achieve key development aims, and access education, health services, insurance, and employment opportunities.
Internet Stoppages in Africa

• Across the African continent, internet stoppages are getting longer, more sophisticated, and targeted.
• As the digital economy expands, it will become even more expensive for nations to shut down the internet.
• Without coordinated action by civil society, this damage is likely to accelerate in the future and further weaken much needed economic development in Africa.
Defining Internet Disruptions

- An Internet disruption, often referred to as an internet shutdown, is the intentional blockage of access to the internet or sections of the internet such as social media platforms.
- It is important to note that connectivity disruptions can also be caused by massive power outage, severe weather, and fiber/cable issues.
In recent years, a number of countries have blocked particular applications, shut down specific services (e.g. instant messaging and voice over internet protocol calling), turned off mobile telecommunications services, or disrupted the entire internet.

Those actions separate people from their family, friends, and livelihoods, undermine economic growth, interfere with the startup ecosystem, and threaten social stability by interrupting economic activity.
Many nations increasingly use internet and social media disruptions as a way to quell political dissent.

Some countries have shut down social media after violent incidents, purportedly to curb people’s ability to incite further violence, such as in Sri Lanka after the Easter suicide bombing there. Ethiopia also limited internet access in 2017 after activists leaked copies of the national school exams online.

Whatever a country’s motivation, the frequency of shutdowns worldwide is rising dramatically, according to Statista, which notes a 6,000% increase between 2011 and 2018.
Impact of Shutdowns

As the internet becomes central to our lives and livelihoods, the impact and cost of network blockages is detrimental to human progress.

The growing scope of internet disruptions is creating significant detrimental impacts on economic activity in a number of nations around the world, but more so in Africa, where hope has been that technology can be leveraged to overcome development challenges.
Impact of Shutdowns

The Brookings Institution released a study in October 2016 examining 81 short-term shutdowns in 19 countries and their impact on GDP. Between July 1, 2015, and June 30, 2016, the study found that the economic consequences of internet shutdowns cost at least $2.4 billion in GDP globally. The report notes that this is a conservative figure and does not account for tax losses or drops in investor, business, and consumer confidence.
Impact of Shutdowns

Despite the costly nature of temporary disruptions, it has been hard to fully approximate or accurately estimate the impact they have on not only citizens but also on the economy in general. The Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) has now developed a measurement that assesses both the immediate and long-term structural effects of internet shutdowns.
An analysis of internet shutdowns in 10 countries using the CIPESA methodology revealed that when connectivity is throttled, slowed or severed, the impact can be systemic, disrupting the delivery of critical services and undermining economic growth. The disruptions which lasted a combined 236 days since 2015 cost the countries over $235 million.

According to Wakabi, W., CIPESA’s Executive Director, those ordering internet shutdowns are unaware of the full magnitude and consequences of these actions on their economies and citizens.
CIPESA’s method calculates the direct loss of earnings not only in the digital economy and government revenues but also how shutdowns affect informal economies, worker productivity, supply chains, manufacturers and service providers, investor confidence and foreign direct investment. The framework can be used to estimate either total shutdowns that affect fixed, wireless, and mobile internet connectivity, or partial disruptions targeting social media networks.
Countries with an internet penetration rate of less than 20 per cent are more likely to disrupt the internet during protests than those with higher rates – but also that, as of early 2018, in all countries where an internet disruption was ordered, the ruling party had been in power for 18.9 years on average.
It appears that African governments with democracy deficits, regardless of the numbers of their citizens that use the internet, recognise - and fear - the power of the internet in strengthening citizen organising and empowering ordinary people to speak truth to power. (CIPESA, 2019)

Many African governments are bent on prosecuting citizen activity on the internet as opposed to facilitate uptake and innovation.
Impact of Shutdowns

Access to internet is essential for businesses, public institutions, and households to flourish in the modern economy. In the private and public sector, internet access can help spur productivity gains and deliver services more efficiently. For households, internet access can increase opportunities, build human capital, connect households to other parts of the country, and contribute to personal well-being.
Citizen Response to Shutdowns

It is important to mention that citizens have not been simply accepting internet shutdowns without fighting back. Civil society across the continent has been working hard to advocate for a free and open internet.
The African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms, launched in 2014 as a response to the clear need for the articulation of a rights-based approach to internet policy in the region, is a pan-African initiative to promote human rights online in Africa.
In conclusion, African governments should desist from ordering disruptions because they have a high economic impact at micro and macro levels, adversely affecting the livelihoods of citizens, undermining the profitability of business enterprises, and reducing the GDP and competitiveness of countries that implement them.
Conclusion

The economic costs of an internet disruption persist far beyond the days on which the disruption occurs. Indeed, the negative effects of a disruption on the economy may extend for months, because network disruptions unsettle supply chains and have systemic effects harming efficiency throughout the economy. These longer-term effects are not limited to the immediate ICT ecosystem: factors such as investor confidence and risk premiums can affect a country’s broader economy long after the disruption has been lifted.
The centrality of the internet to social and economic life recently led the United Nations to enact a resolution supporting the “promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet.” The resolution specifically “[c]ondemns 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.”
All in all, governments should recognize the serious consequences of disrupting network access and see shutdowns through a human rights and development lens, not solely through a political or security lens.
Developments in the Internet and the services it supports have created an ecosystem around which people and businesses’ daily lives revolve. From connecting with friends and businesses, to obtaining information or making sales, the Internet has made carrying out different tasks much easier and efficient.

For businesses, the Internet has made day to day activities such as selling or purchasing less stressful and costly. Disrupting the Internet ecosystem therefore limits the opportunities for people and businesses, and hampers the economy. On a personal level, Internet disruptions can inhibit social interactions.
Internet disruptions have widespread impacts on people and the economy with even partial disturbances affecting productivity, souring business confidence, and leading to lost opportunities. The impacts of a temporary shutdown of the Internet grow larger as a country develops and as a more mature online ecosystem emerges.