



No Development Without Access to Information: We Need Alternatives to Internet Shut-Downs

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The library profession is strongly committed to protecting and delivering not only access to information, but also the benefits it can bring.

Multiple human rights depend on it: freedom of expression and access to information, education, health, economic opportunity, civic engagement, enjoyment of the benefits of science, association, and participation in cultural life. Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, to which all governments have committed, for the benefit of all their citizens, will be impossible without it¹.

With the Internet well-established as an essential tool for accessing information, libraries are working hard to help realise its potential. IFLA's own Internet Manifesto² underlines that *'the provision of unhindered access to the Internet by library and information services forms a vital element of the right to freedom of access to information and freedom of expression, and supports communities and individuals to attain freedom, prosperity and development'*.

The beneficiaries are children and families, scientists and researchers, farmers and health workers, citizens and creators. Internet connectivity is growing, and with it the positive impacts it brings across the range of policies driving development³. We are closer than ever before to the ideal of a society where everyone is empowered by information.

It is therefore with great disappointment that we see governments increasingly choosing to use Internet shutdowns or slowdowns for a range of reasons⁴. These shutdowns see all or part of a country denied access to all or part of the Internet, through deliberate government intervention⁵.

In the immediate term, such shutdowns put economic, social and cultural development on hold, and badly damage the rights of individuals to access information. Libraries are unable to do their jobs

¹ See the Development and Access to Information Report 2017, <https://da2i.ifla.org/>

² See the IFLA Internet Manifesto (2014), <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/224>

³ As the Development and Access to Information Report underlines, access contributes to all fields and forms of development (ibid)

⁴ These can go from security, to preventing cheating in school exams. For example, 2016 and 2017, there were a reported 30 instances of intentional Internet shutdowns during school exams in the Middle East and North Africa region, specifically in Iraq, Syria, and Algeria. Additional exam-related shutdowns were reported in countries as diverse as India, Congo Brazzaville, Ethiopia, and Tunisia. Purportedly aimed at stopping cheating, many exam-related shutdowns are nationwide Internet blackouts, preventing entire populations from getting online. Such shutdowns are particularly concerning, given their impact on education.

⁵ Access Now and the #KeepItOn Coalition offer the following technical definition: 'An internet shutdown is an intentional disruption of internet or electronic communications, rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, often to exert control over the flow of information.' In its 2016 Resolution 32/13, the UN Human Rights Council condemned "measures to intentionally prevent or disrupt access to or dissemination of information online in violation of international human rights law."

fully, and so their users are denied opportunities to improve their lives. Individuals relying on Internet-based services to communicate with their friends and family are unable to do so.

In the longer term, the lack of certainty as to whether Internet access is possible will discourage investments and innovation, putting countries on a slower development path than otherwise. When acting in a discriminatory manner, barriers to Internet access will create development gaps and restrict rights.

Freedom of expression online is not absolute right. However, any restrictions on freedom of expression, including access the internet, must be necessary, proportionate, and pursuant to a legitimate aim. As the UN and a number of human rights experts have recognised, internet shutdowns are a violation of international human rights law⁶. A long term solution will come from giving individuals the skills and attitudes necessary to navigate the Internet effectively, critically and responsibly⁷. Internet shutdowns carry too high a price now and in the future, to be an acceptable tool. We must keep the Internet on.

IFLA therefore calls on governments to:

- Refrain from using Internet shutdowns as a means of achieving policy objectives except in exceptional conditions, i.e. where there are legitimate grounds, and then only when shutdowns are based on law, limited in their scope and duration, and communicated and explained transparently. Governments should commit maintaining this stance in future.
- Strengthen investment in Internet infrastructure (including in power networks) in order to ensure more reliable Internet access.
- Invest in education and training, at all levels and for people of all ages, in order to promote the skills and attitudes necessary to navigate the Internet critically and responsibly.

IFLA encourages its members to:

- Underline the importance of preventing Internet shutdowns, given their impact on education, access and broader development, and promote the broader values of freedom of access to information. In this, working with partner organisations in civil society would help strengthen our advocacy impact⁸.
- Share information about shutdowns with civil society partner organisations and other stakeholders, as well as IFLA headquarters.
- Continue to support users in making effective, critical and responsible use of the Internet and the resources it provides.

Agreed by the IFLA Executive Committee, 10 August 2017

⁶ UN Human Rights Council Resolution A/HRC/32/L.20 (July 2016) states: “Condemns unequivocally measures to intentionally prevent or disrupt access to or dissemination of information online in violation of international human rights law”. See also Article 19 (2015) *When can freedom of speech be limited* <https://www.article19.org/join-the-debate.php/200/view/> (accessed on 2 August 2017)

⁷ See, for reference, the 2011 [IFLA Principles on Media and Information Literacy](#), and the 2015 [Principles on Public Access](#)

⁸ For example, Access Now has relevant resources on its website (<https://www.accessnow.org/keepiton/#resources>), as does the Internet Society <https://www.internetsociety.org/lets-keep-internet-everyone>