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Internet Shutdowns, Sovereignty, and the Postcolonial State in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Despite strong international condemnation, there is growing acceptance of internet shutdowns as a legitimate response to online content that governments—particularly in Africa—find concerning. This article explores government decision-making around internet shutdowns during contentious periods such as elections and in situations of violent conflict. In arguing for a reading of shutdowns that goes beyond simply seeing them as a blunt tool of censorship, it discusses the underlying issues, including the vast inequalities between Big Tech companies based in the United States or China and resource-poor countries in the Global South. Building on this, the article probes the intensifying disputes around who writes the rules governing how social media companies address harmful content, how such rules are implemented, and, finally, what this means for the postcolonial state in Africa. In some contexts, a government's use of shutdowns represents an effort to reassert sovereignty amid a longstanding context of contestation around borders, power, and national identity.

1 | Uncovering the Motivations and Justifications Behind Internet Shutdowns

There has been a steady increase in the use of internet shutdowns as a response to the failures of online content moderation and the proliferation of harmful content, particularly in Africa. While “shutdowns” generally refers to the total or partial closing of the internet (also known as the “internet kill switch”), it can also include efforts to slow down the internet in order to render it essentially unusable and/or restricting access through heavy taxation or other financial restrictions. Shutdowns are most frequently justified on the basis of addressing disinformation around elections or mitigating the impacts of online hate speech on violent conflict, often in the name of “national security” (Marchant and Stremlau 2020). Recent trends point to the scope of the challenge: in 2023, there were at least 124 shutdowns used by 18 governments, the longest of which has been the ongoing

shutdown in northern Ethiopia since November 2020 (Access Now 2023). In short, shutdowns are becoming longer in duration, more frequent, and more acceptable as a government response.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, internet shutdowns are broadly condemned by those who do not use them, particularly in the West, where they are usually discussed as violating freedom of expression and restricting access to information rights. This is particularly the case for international networks and civil society groups that focus on digital rights or the freedom to connect (Access Now 2023; Freedom House 2023). Within this framing, internet connectivity is seen as a human right (Brookings Institution 2016; United Nations Human Rights Office 2023)—a theme many academics have also adopted, especially when exalting the liberating potential of the internet (Reglitz 2020, Metzl 1996, 705). But responding to the enthusiasm around

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the perceived role of the internet in the Arab Spring more than a decade ago (2011–12), Vinton Cerf—often referred to as the founder of the internet—argued that “internet access is not a human right.” Instead, he stressed that “technology is an enabler of rights, not a right itself,” and that conflating the two is dangerous. Elevating a particular piece of technology will, over time, mean that we “end up valuing the wrong things” (Cerf 2012, 25–26).

Nevertheless, the discourse of internet connectivity as a human right has persisted and also has strong commercial and political dimensions. US-headquartered social media companies, including Google, Meta, and until recently, Twitter/X (hereafter referred to as “Big Tech”), have created aggressive policy programs, frequently attempting to steer government policy in the direction of liberal values and freedom of expression (Chinese social media companies such as TikTok do not take the same approach.) This often takes the form of support for advocacy groups campaigning against internet shutdowns, such as Access Now (Access Now 2023), or funding large convenings such as the Forum on Internet Freedom in Africa. For U.S. social media companies, internet shutdowns pose a massive interruption to their services, with the consequent reduction in users eating into profits. It also goes against the libertarian philosophies popular in Silicon Valley, which champion an open internet free from government regulation and interference. But given that data ownership is so profitable, and Big Tech holds such significant monopolies, these ideals are often muddled in practice and subsumed by commercial priorities.

Western governments have also become particularly outspoken against the use of internet shutdowns. At US President Biden’s annual Summit for Democracy (U.S. Department of State 2023), digital rights feature prominently. One recent outcome was the “Declaration for the Future of the Internet” (2022), which is ambitious in attempting to do what the title suggests. In just two-and-a-half pages, “human rights” was mentioned no less than 21 times reflecting just how closely internet freedom is being ideologically tied to the broader human rights agenda (White House 2022). Media freedoms, including media development, have long been a central plank of the strategies employed by both the EU and the United States when it comes to democracy assistance and foreign aid. Media freedom has also been a litmus test for assessing how democratic a country is, with indexes such as Freedom House, the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, and the Global Democracy Index all providing measures in this regard.

This dominant overarching human rights narrative of shutdowns has the potential of obfuscating *why* shutdowns occur. It follows in a long trajectory of framing African countries, as Achille Mbembe has argued, as “a pathological case, as a figure of lack,” falling short of standards that are expected and often relying on statistical indices [such as Freedom House] to “measure the gap between what Africa was and what we were told it ought to be” (Shipley, Comaroff, and Mbembe 2010, 656). Similarly, nearly forty years ago, Issa Shivji (1989) argued that, despite the claimed neutrality of much of the Western-led human rights discourse, human rights in Africa must also be understood through the lens of imperialism and colonialism.

In the 1950s and 1960s, with the continent’s countries on the cusp of independence, much of the debate around rights centered on individual property rights, reflecting the soon-to-be former colonizers perceived need to protect their businesses, investments, and property under the authority of new state institutions (Shivji 1989, 19). This focus on the state vs. individuals, reflected in current debates around digital authoritarianism (state) and digital rights (users), marginalizes Shivji’s call to understand the historical, cultural, political, and economic context—particularly how corporate interests are often prioritized at the expense of Africans. This latter argument is particularly relevant given the role played by extremely wealthy Big Tech companies on the continent. In short, the prevailing approach to analyzing and countering shutdowns does not allow space for uncovering alternate ways of identifying the rules, regularities, logics, and actual—rather than assumed—motivations driving shutdowns.

1.1 | Big Tech and African States

With the above in mind, this article offers a counter reading of internet shutdowns, including from the perspective of government decision-making, and it explores why governments are choosing this relatively blunt tool of censorship rather than other information control instruments. One commonly understood reason explaining the recent rise in shutdowns is technical: by offering end-to-end encryption in their messaging products, social media companies such as Meta have made government surveillance more challenging. Certainly, there are well-documented cases of shutdowns being used by governments to assert power over opposition parties, deflect attention from protests, or hide violence/atrocities. Nevertheless, our findings from dozens of interviews with governments, policymakers, activists, and social media and telecoms companies, primarily in Uganda, Ethiopia, and Cameroon (conducted from 2021 to 23), suggest a wider range of factors motivating shutdowns.¹

Here, the internet shutdown in Uganda offers a case in point. Six days before Uganda’s highly contested January 2021 elections, Facebook took down 32 pages, 220 user accounts, 59 groups, and 139 Instagram profiles linked to the Ugandan government and the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) (Knight 2021), arguing these accounts were “engaged in Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior to target public debate ahead of the election” (France 24 2021). This included using “fake and duplicate accounts to manage pages, comment on other people’s content, impersonate users, re-share posts in groups to make them appear more popular than they were” (ibid.). The accounts included that of President Museveni’s senior press secretary, Don Wanyama, as well as accounts linked to the Citizens Interaction Centre at the Ministry of Information.

From the perspective of the ruling NRM, they were simply employing political tactics already seen elsewhere in Africa (Bradshaw et al. 2021). Moreover, according to the NRM, the opposition National Unity Platform party—led by the popular singer and actor, Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentam (known by his stage name Bobi Wine)—was using similar tactics in its

aggressive social media campaign. The government put these concerns in a letter to social media companies (including YouTube and Facebook), but little or no action was taken regarding the opposition content.

On the eve of the election period, there was an internet shutdown. When services were restored several days later, a ban was imposed on Facebook that remained in place for more than six months. As Museveni argued:

If it's [Facebook] operating in Uganda, it should be used equitably by everybody who wants to use it. If you want to take sides against the NRM, then that group will not operate in Uganda. Uganda is ours, it is not anybody's ... there is no way anybody can come [here] and play around with our country I'm therefore very sorry about the inconvenience to those who have been using this channel. We cannot tolerate the arrogance of anybody coming here to decide who is good and who is bad.

(Monitor [2021](#))

Museveni raises two key issues that this article highlights as overlooked drivers of internet shutdowns. First, the issue of who gets to write the rules—"terms of service" or "community standards"—setting the limits of what is allowed on social media, particularly regarding hate speech and mis/disinformation. And second, the degree which these rules are implemented evenly—or otherwise—across the globe.

Popular advocacy campaigns against internet shutdowns place the blame for shutdowns squarely on autocratic governments. Much of this framing emerges from the discourse of 'digital authoritarianism' and 'internet freedom' which has often spawned out of an intense focus, particularly on the part of the United States, as to the actions of Russia, Iran, and China and the extent to which they stifle online liberties (Freedom House [2023](#)) or use information and communication technologies to "surveil, repress, and manipulate domestic and foreign populations" (Big Brother [2020](#)). This reflects a broader and longstanding U.S. foreign policy tendency to categorize the world along this dichotomy of free/unfree. But the political situation and technical capacity of a country like Russia is significantly different from that of Chad or Zimbabwe. At the same time, little regard is given to the agency of Global South governments, the challenging decisions they may be faced with, or the responsibility (or potential failure) of Big Tech to effectively moderate platforms that may have a role in exacerbating conflict or destabilizing elections (Stremlau and Dobson [2022](#)). Thus, underlying these two key issues—who writes the rules and how the rules are implemented—is a broader question: what do shutdowns tell us about speech, law, and governance in the African postcolonial state? At the core of this latter question is the issue of sovereignty in the post-colony.

At independence, African governments faced demands to combine their sovereign rights with the ability to exercise a monopoly on authority and justice. All this was shaped around the ideal

of the Westphalian state—a process that took shape in Europe over eight centuries. As Navnita Behera describes, when writing about international relations from the Global South, accepting the territorial state as the organizing principle of authority meant overlooking how this:

was an end product of a long and bloody struggle by state builders [in Europe] to extract coercive capabilities from other individuals, groups and organizations with their territories ... The newly sovereign states in the wake of the decolonization period were expected to master and exercise such monopoly almost immediately after the transfer of power from the erstwhile colonial powers to the local ruling elites.

(Behera [2020](#), 147)

Many of Africa's postcolonial leaders, from Julius Nyerere in Tanzania to Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, had very definite ideas about leveraging the media—print, radio, television—as tools for state- and nation-building, thereby asserting a type of authority that could not be achieved during "long and bloody struggles." Until recently, it seemed possible for African governments to control or contain the most influential media via coercion, cooptation, or negotiation (with the possible exception of international broadcasters such as BBC World Service, Voice of America, and more recently Aljazeera). Social media platforms, which combine tremendous popularity with a powerful imagery of being tools for activism and contestation, have broken this hegemonic mechanism of influence by remaining largely inaccessible to national authority control. Thus, rather than rely on idealized notions of internet freedom, we need to see shutdowns within a broader context of contemporary state realities.

As explained below, recognizing the complexities faced by postcolonial states in asserting their sovereign rights does not mean siding with or justifying the actions of autocratic leaders. Many internet shutdowns amount to yet another form of extraversion, turning one's weaknesses—the inability to sustain inclusive processes of state- and nation-building—into strengths: the right to denounce any external interference in state matters. Shutdowns also reflect a broader trend of leaders opportunistically hiding behind legitimate concerns, such as the deep inequalities between wealthy, powerful Big Tech companies and poorer Global South countries, or the failures of online content moderation, to support self-serving projects, such as minimizing opposition parties' social media influence or hindering domestic and international coverage of human rights abuses.

2 | Who Writes the Rules?

Despite what the internet freedom agenda might suggest, social media platforms—along with the technologies, philosophies, cultures, and rules that accompany them—are not autonomous and independent communities. Rather, they are rooted in, and sustained by, giant corporations such as Tencent, Meta, and

Google and the accompanying national interests of the countries in which they are headquartered—namely China and the U.S. As many have argued, the structures and design of technology reflects embedded laws, power, and rules (Mowshowitz 1984; Lessig 2006).

When it comes to the large U.S. platforms (such as Meta, Twitter/X, and YouTube), discussions around rules and content moderation are dominated by lawyers and technologists in the Global North, and California more specifically. It is there that what a community is, how it should behave, and how it should be regulated is largely defined. While some efforts may be made to engage or portray a more global perspective, actual impacts on rule-making and implementation are at best marginal.²

The rules or community standards on Big Tech platforms are not translated into many African languages, algorithms are insufficiently trained in such languages (and struggle with low-resource languages due to limited data availability), and systems flagging potential instances of mis/disinformation to factcheckers have little or no capacity in most African languages (De Gregorio and Stremlau 2023).

Despite the social media company discourse of ensuring a focus on “communities,” there is an overwhelming emphasis on “the state.” At a basic level, this can again be seen in relation to language. In Ethiopia, Facebook has dramatically upscaled its resources in response to concerns around the role of social media in widespread violence. This has included increasing its capacity to monitor and take down Amharic content, as well as training its AI systems to detect misinformation in Amharic. Amharic, however, is the language of the state, and only spoken by around a quarter of the country’s citizens. There is little indication that similar efforts have been made in relation to Oromifa, the most popular language of the historically marginalized but equally conflict-affected Oromo group, or any of the other seventy or more languages used in Ethiopia.

The emphasis on “the state” is also evident in the large social media platforms’ approach to factchecking, which features as one of their main responses to mis/disinformation in Africa (Poynter Institute 2023). At present, politicians are not subject to being fact-checked or having their content restricted on Facebook, as the company argues limiting political speech by elected officials would leave people less informed and politicians less accountable. This exception is very much based on Western assumptions about electoral politics and the role of the state, which differs in many African contexts, and fails to take into consideration, for example, the research exploring formal and informal modes of governance, or the roles played by different authorities, not least around elections.

Another significant challenge is accounting for the role of ideology in how rules are written or understood at a local level, including how media communication has been regulated in the past in post-liberation states and nation-building projects. Uganda, for example—as with many countries—has undergone a long process of defining the kinds of speech that should be allowed. The NRM’s ambitious media apparatus was integral to its struggle.

After coming to power, the media was significantly liberalized and the government even started a newspaper, *The New Vision*, that was permitted to be somewhat critical of the NRM as part of what it termed “single-party democracy.” Much of the communications policy was centered around what a media system should look like for a country emerging from decades of violent conflict and embarking on a new political and nation-building experiment. The rules the government came up with were not ahistorical, having been negotiated with the courts, opposition actors, and other public authorities.

Similar discussions, or processes of negotiation, have not taken place when it comes to the rules and rulers governing social media. Thus, unlike, say, Germany or the EU, poorer countries such as Uganda have little power to negotiate or influence the rules set by Big Tech, which are thrust upon them with little consultation or regard to a particular nation or state-building project.

3 | How Are the Rules Governing Social Media Platforms Implemented?

Community standards and terms of service are implemented unevenly and unequally across communities and countries. The depth and scale of inequalities, along with the evidence held by social media companies about the issue—both from real-world events and their own research—was confirmed by the vast trove of company data released by Meta whistleblower Frances Haugen.³ Meta, like other U.S.-headquartered social media companies, is affected by U.S. foreign policy (and to a lesser degree the policies of other rich countries and large markets). When it comes to investing in content moderation, Meta has priority countries and markets. In this regard, the majority of African contexts and events—unless they make headlines, as in the cases of the conflict in Ethiopia or elections in Kenya—are low priority. There has been far less research, however, on the consistency and evenhandedness with which rules are implemented at a national level. The case of Uganda points to some of these challenges.

The 2021 election-related Facebook shutdown raises the question of whether the opposition was treated in the same manner as the government regarding the taking down of “inauthentic behavior.” Here, the evidence suggests it was not: Facebook took down the government pages but did little to address the opposition’s alleged inauthentic behavior. This is partly the consequence of who Facebook is inclined to listen to concerning information brought to its attention (and, similarly, its assumptions about authoritarian governments). Action was taken on the NRM’s pages after they were brought to Facebook by a fact-checking and research organization that has only a handful of employees focused on Africa, meaning its capacity for extensive research was limited. One of employees involved in the Uganda investigation described in an interview how they came across the NRM’s material only a few days before the election. They sent the material off to Facebook and Twitter/X, which both acted quickly because the report had come from a trusted institution with strong connections to people within the company. The same employee admitted they did not have time to investigate the opposition as well.

The NRM, perhaps unsurprisingly, argued that Facebook had favored the opposition by allowing them to create numerous accounts and post online while blocking their own attempts to do the same. As government spokesman Ofwono Opondo observed, the process followed was not transparent:

[Facebook] have not told us the nature of the complaint. They have not written even to say we are going to switch you off. And so, it's a double standard. And that ties very well with what our intelligence is telling us that some of the opposition is working with foreign interests.

(Athumani 2021)

Furthermore, as an interviewee from the Uganda Media Centre explained, from the NRM's perspective, the actions seemed intended to hand the opposition an advantage:

Facebook de-activated the accounts of people who were pro-government/pro-NRM. The opposition were playing dirty ... In terms of content, but also incitement and insults, opposition activists were ahead. The NRM crowd decided to fight back. When we squared up with them on bad language, our team was targeted. There was a lot of debate before this dirty-tricks team was set up. When Facebook targeted pro-NRM accounts, the government felt attacked, so they decided to shut down Facebook. The measure was "hit back." Facebook was seen to play dirty.⁴

Thus, the government's shutting down of the internet was partly intended to equalize social media influence, cutting off both government and opposition access. One senior intelligence official argued that, as with the 2016 election, the NRM had been:

up against a much younger opposition with activists who are much more social media-savvy than its own activists. Their capacity to spread anti-NRM propaganda that made it look bad was high. It left the NRM damaged. That had to be stopped. Shutting down the internet was the easy option. And Museveni does not like social media. So it was an easy decision for him to make.⁵

When it comes to the process of taking down content, there is also the challenge of whose rules should be followed. In December 2020, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) wrote a letter to Google requesting the removal of 17 YouTube accounts mostly focused on videos from Wine's campaign. The UCC argued these channels were inciting violence, compromising national security, and causing economic sabotage, thus violating Ugandan laws. Google declined the government's request, citing the lack of a court order.

Nicholas Opiyo, a human rights lawyer, argues that the way the government approached Google reflects a gap in

understanding, or "an action in great ignorance", regarding how large social media companies actually operate and how content is assessed according to the company's community standards:

digital companies do not enforce Ugandan laws, you cannot cite the UCC Act and claim that these digital companies are in violation of those laws. Digital companies work on the basis of legitimate court orders. In other words, there has to be due process to make the point of breach of the law. UCC has neither subjected managers of these accounts to due process, they have condemned them without hearing. So no digital company is going to take such a letter seriously. It will be put in the dustbin immediately.

(URN 2020)

In other words, the NRM didn't understand the rules of YouTube's game nor how to engage or negotiate with the company.

Historically, the rules governing speech and media in Uganda have often been negotiated both in and outside court. Nearly 20 years ago, this was discussed during an interview with Charles Onyango-Obbo, a Ugandan journalist working for the independent, critically minded *Monitor* newspaper. He had recently returned from Ethiopia and was drawing a contrast between the legal culture there and the culture that prevailed in Uganda. Even if the process was flawed in Uganda, he argued, journalists felt able to challenge legal charges and viewed court appearances as a public platform to express their views:

He [Museveni] sees our [*Monitor's*] attitude as hostility. He realizes that he cannot escape from it so he says to us that it is important to understand the nature of the state and the recourses that the state has. The state basically has the laws and the power of coercion. So therefore it is natural that the state would resort to the laws. You might think it is undemocratic repression but that is the law and he says that the state will use those laws to dominate and shape the public space and dialogue ... By the same token, the journalists must also fight their corner. You must protect your side of this bargain. Therefore you shouldn't expect the state to make your job easier ... the state's job is not to make it easier for people that are contesting its power to function: no, it's your job if you are journalist or a civil society activist. Don't expect that your opponent will help you win the game.⁶

The ability to challenge the system and "fight your corner" requires a certain confidence in institutions. Moreover, your opponent must actually be present in order to take the fight to them—the Big Tech companies, however, have few offices in Africa and none in Uganda, leaving a void when it comes to

negotiating, challenging, or engaging with how the rules are implemented.

4 | Borders and Sovereignty

This article has not sought to justify internet shutdowns but it has rather aimed to identify and recognize them as forms of contestation rather than simply dismissing them as abuses by despotic leaders. Social media has provoked a sense of moral panic in some governments: Big Tech companies seem out of reach, exerting excessive influence on a country's internal politics without regard to local rules and ideologies. This is particularly the case in countries where the state possesses limited technological expertise, limited capacity to fully implement policies, and limited influence beyond national borders—especially when it comes to engaging with the United States, where many social media companies are based. As a former Ugandan military intelligence leader pointed out:

The acts of non-state actors are difficult to police. Some of the servers being used by social media activists are in foreign countries. We have a double problem of weak regulatory regimes and state capacity. The state has to act to defend its interests. Otherwise, sovereignty can be compromised. There is a huge political angle to all this, of course. However, the threats are real. The influence of the internet is borderless. This causes fear within the state. The threat is real.⁷

Viewing shutdowns as a form of contestation potentially opens alternative avenues for responding to them. As Achille Mbembe provocatively argues, in some ways, it is absurd that postcolonial states are so obsessed with sovereignty given that it was foisted upon them. The enthusiastic adoption of the “nation-state” concept inherited from the former colonial powers has led African governments to borrow “terms like ‘national interest’, ‘risks’, ‘threats’ or ‘national security’ ...[Which] refer to a philosophy of movement and a philosophy of space entirely predicated on the existence of an enemy in a world of hostility... [disregarding] our own long held traditions of flexible, networked sovereignty and collective security” (Mbembe 2017). No African institution has internalized the doctrine of sovereignty and noninterference as much as the African Union (AU). Despite the efforts of some African independence leaders—such as Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, Guinea's Sekou Toure, and Mali's Modibo Keita—who pressed for full continental integration and the blurring of national borders during the 1963 founding of the AU's predecessor, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), sovereignty and territorial integrity were reinforced in the OAU's charter and have retained their influence ever since.

This reflects the reality into which the OAU was born: following difficult liberation struggles, few states wanted to cede power to another authority. Moreover, the “world of hostility” mindset referred to by Mbembe represents a key element in how leaders have come to legitimate internet shutdowns. At the core of government justifications lie claims of national security, which supposedly trumps all other priorities. Historically, such claims

have not only proved difficult to evaluate, but have widely been seen as justifying an authoritarian turn. More recently, discourses around terrorism have been used to rationalize and reduce the reputational costs of repression (both internally and externally) and create legitimacy for those in power (Edel and Josua 2018).

External advocacy groups have attempted to displace the national security argument by appealing to other priorities—for example, highlighting the economic implications of a shutdown in order to dissuade those in power and emphasize the tradeoffs. There has been a steady stream of reports produced toward these ends (Tay 2019; West 2016) and more recently a Cost of Internet Shutdown Tool (COST) by the organization Netblocks that calculates the direct and indirect effects of having businesses offline for varying time periods, as well as the extent to which services are restricted. In the case of Uganda, for example, the Netblocks COST estimates a 10-day shutdown would have a total cost impact of over USD 38 million.⁸ This emphasis on economic costs aligns with the long-term framing of the internet in Africa as helping economies “leapfrog” developmental stages or accelerate growth. While internet shutdowns undoubtedly have economic costs—and certainly psychological and social costs that are even more difficult to account for—such arguments are generally deployed for advocacy purposes by those already opposed to shutdowns rather than having any significant impact in convincing those in power that the economic costs outweigh national security concerns. As several interviewees in government suggested, the potential costs arising from violent conflict, insecurity, and the destruction of public and private property due to protests, may have a higher economic cost than the business impediments caused by internet shutdowns.

At the same time, in the face of unprecedented challenges posed by social media (and AI), along with the overwhelming and unique power of Big Tech where such corporations are as powerful as states, networked sovereignty or having the AU come forward as a solid power block to engage with Big Tech offers a distinct opportunity. A single African government acting on its own is unlikely to secure concessions—it is only by forming a coalition or acting as group that African countries will be able to achieve the size and influence required to demand greater accountability.

5 | Conclusion

As part of the effort to reframe internet shutdowns as expressions of sovereignty by countries overlooked and marginalized by powerful Big Tech corporations based half a world away, and with a value more than 200 times that of the GDP of many African states, this article has not sought to justify or depoliticize them. There is clearly a strong political dimension to shutdowns, particularly around elections. This is in line with the more typical advocacy discourse around shutdowns: that authorities can more easily rig the electoral process due to reduced oversight; that shutdowns restrict the opposition's use of electronic media as a campaign and mobilization tool; and that they limit the ability of opposition parties to raise funds with mobile money close to voting day. In the context of the NRM, which was up against a much younger opposition

with social media-savvy activists highly capable of spreading anti-NRM propaganda, shutting down the internet represented the easy option. This was backed up by Museveni's historically tense, distrustful relationship with social media. While Museveni is clearly no democrat, having held to power for more than 37 years, this should not distract us from developing a more nuanced argument that recognizes the multiple causes of internet shutdowns.

The imbalanced power relationship between poorer countries in the Global South and Big Tech is only set to intensify with AI. Internet shutdowns as resistance to this overwhelming power—equal to that of a powerful state—are likely to continue despite the increasing array of surveillance tools and more precise tactics on offer. As highlighted by a senior government communications expert in Uganda:

The issue whether to shut down the internet or not was a serious security issue. In 2016, there was a photo of a policeman stuffing ballots. It was photo-shopped. The incident had not happened. Others were subsequently produced. The government feared that it could cause an uprising. In 2021, there were claims that pre-ticketed ballots were being distributed ... It was at that point that a decision was made to shut down the internet. This could disrupt the presidential polls and subsequent ones. It is far more difficult to deny a story than to simply shut down social media. When Bobi Wine was arrested [in November 2021], more than 50 people lost their lives.⁹ Our security forces are overstretched during election campaigns. The easy option is to shut down the internet, to prevent the spreading of propaganda. This forces security officials to say that whatever the international community think, ensuring stabilization is paramount. Ensuring that stability is not jeopardized is better than ensuring rights.¹⁰

In the absence of levers that can put pressure on Big Tech around transparency, responsibility, and responsiveness, those in government will continue to see few other options when forced to respond to security concerns.

Currently, one of the greatest challenges is a lack of leaders on the continent capable of speaking out against Big Tech or offering a credible argument as to why their governments are adopting measures as extreme as internet shutdowns. When leaders such as Uganda's Museveni or Cameroon's Paul Biya argue they need suppressive measures to guarantee peaceful elections or stem the threat of external interference, we see aging despotic men clinging to power. Unfortunately, even those leaders with technological expertise, such as Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed—co-founder of the Ethiopian Information Network Security Agency and advocate of investments in AI—have demonstrated poor leadership in other areas, including overseeing widespread human rights abuses and the proliferation of violent conflicts. If, however, a leader with the stature of, say, Thomas Sankara—the revolutionary and pan-Africanist who led Burkina Faso from

1983 until his assassination in 1987—were to suggest internet shutdowns as a form of resistance, they may be taken more seriously.¹¹ Sankara, revered for his integrity and passionate resistance to imperialism, would likely have framed Big Tech's for-profit model, which enables unprecedented interference in national politics without any corresponding acceptance of responsibility, as a struggle against a new form of imperialism.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

¹ More than thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with elites, including members of the government, policy actors, representatives from Big Tech, and people affected by the violence (the latter of which was solely conducted in Ethiopia). The majority of the interviews were in Ethiopia and Uganda in 2021–2. Due to space limitations and a focus on elections, this article will primarily draw on the Uganda data. The research received ethical clearance from the University of Oxford's Central University Ethics Committee reference R69596/RE001.

² The Facebook Oversight Board offers one example (see: www.oversightboard.com). Despite claims it is global and independent, there is an overwhelming focus on members who were educated in Europe or North America, and who share similar ideas regarding freedom of expression. Moreover, membership is dominated by lawyers, rather than, say, election or conflict specialists.

³ These documents, The Facebook Files, are available for review: <https://fbarchive.org>.

⁴ Interview: Anonymous 2021.

⁵ Interview: Anonymous 2021.

⁶ Interview: Charles Onyango-Obbo, 2006.

⁷ Interview: Anonymous 2021.

⁸ See: "The Economic Impact of Internet Disruptions." <http://netblocks.org/cost>.

⁹ This was a result of riots and demonstrations that broke out across the country in response to the arrest.

¹⁰ Interview: Anonymous 2021.

¹¹ This argument about leadership was elaborated in the following online post: Gagliardone, Iginio and Nicole Stremlau. "It's Time to Revisit the Framing of Internet Shutdowns in Africa," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 21, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/11/21/its-time-to-revisit-framing-of-internet-shutdowns-in-africa-pub-88406>.

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