



Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI)'s submission for the OHCHR report on internet shutdowns and human rights to the fiftieth session of the Human Rights Council in June 2022

10th February 2022

The Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) welcomes this opportunity to provide relevant information to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in response to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights's call for submissions in support of OHCHR report on internet shutdowns and human rights to the fiftieth session of the Human Rights Council in June 2022¹.

In particular, this submission provides information on the **occurrence of mandated disruptions of access to social media and messaging platforms over the past 5 years** based on empirical OONI network measurement data².

Introduction

The Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI)³ is a free software project that has been measuring internet censorship globally since 2012. OONI has built a free software app (OONI Probe⁴) that offers a variety of network measurement tests, including those designed to measure the blocking of instant messaging apps (WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Telegram, Signal) and websites. These tests are run from local network vantage points by volunteers worldwide, and the test results are automatically published by OONI as open data in real-time⁵. Over the past decade, OONI has openly published more than 600 million network measurements collected from 23,000 AS networks in 240 countries and territories, shedding light on the blocking of social media websites and apps around the world⁶.

¹ OHCHR Call for comments: Report on internet shutdowns and human rights to the fiftieth session of the Human Rights Council in June 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/CivicSpace/Pages/cfi-report-hrc-50.aspx>

² Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), OONI data, <https://ooni.org/data/>

³ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), <https://ooni.org/>

⁴ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), OONI Probe, <https://ooni.org/install/>

⁵ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), OONI data, <https://ooni.org/data/>

⁶ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), OONI Explorer, <https://explorer.ooni.org/>

Over the past 5 years, **OONI data has shown that social media websites and apps are commonly blocked in correlation with political events**, often occurring during elections and protests around the world⁷. This submission shares a few *examples* of such cases based on OONI data.

Social media blocks during elections

Over the past 5 years, OONI data has shown that access to online social media services has commonly been blocked during elections, particularly in African countries.

Uganda

Amid Uganda's 2016 general election, OONI data shows that access to social media platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter) was blocked in Uganda, as well as leading up to the (fifth) inauguration of President Yoweri Museveni⁸. Authorities argued that the blocking was ordered for "security purposes", but the move allegedly harmed political opposition, which relied on social media to organize protests⁹.

Starting from 1st July 2018, people in Uganda were required to pay the Over The Top (OTT) tax – commonly referred to as the "Social Media Tax" – to the Ugandan government in order to access major online social media platforms (access to which was blocked for those who did not pay the tax)¹⁰. Civil society groups expressed concern that these taxes would negatively affect internet access and affordability, as well as financial inclusion for low income and marginalized groups such as women, youth and rural communities¹¹. As of July 2021, the OTT tax has been replaced by a fixed tax on internet data packages¹².

In the days leading up to Uganda's 2021 general election, OONI data shows that ISPs in Uganda blocked access to the Google Play Store (hampering people's ability to download apps), as well as to a number of social media apps (including WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Telegram) and websites (such as facebook.com) – regardless of OTT tax payment. Starting from the eve of Uganda's 2021 general election (13th January 2021), Uganda was disconnected from the internet entirely, and the country experienced a 4-day internet outage. Even though internet connectivity

⁷ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), OONI research reports, <https://ooni.org/reports/>

⁸ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), "How Uganda blocked social media, again", 17th May 2016, <https://ooni.org/post/uganda-social-media-blocked/>

⁹ Global Voices, "Social Media Blocked in Uganda Ahead of President Museveni's Inauguration", 11th May 2016, <https://advoc.globalvoices.org/2016/05/11/social-media-blocked-in-uganda-ahead-of-president-musevenis-inauguration/>

¹⁰ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) and DefendDefenders, "Uganda's Social Media Tax through the lens of network measurements", 12th November 2018, <https://ooni.org/post/uganda-social-media-tax/>

¹¹ CIPESA, "Uganda's Social Media Tax Threatens Internet Access, Affordability", 16th April 2018, <https://cipesa.org/2018/04/ugandas-social-media-tax-threatens-internet-access-affordability/>

¹² CIPESA, "Uganda Abandons Social Media Tax But Slaps New Levy on Internet Data", 1st July 2021, <https://cipesa.org/2021/07/uganda-abandons-social-media-tax-but-slaps-new-levy-on-internet-data/>

in Uganda was restored on 18th January 2021, access to social media platforms remained blocked on many networks thereafter¹³.

Mali, Benin, Togo, and Burundi

OONI data collected from Mali suggests that access to WhatsApp and Twitter was disrupted amid Mali's 2018 presidential election¹⁴. On 28th April 2019 – the day of Benin's 2019 parliamentary election – OONI data collected from Benin suggests that access to a number of social media websites was blocked (this was followed by an internet outage)¹⁵. On 22nd February 2020 – the day of Togo's 2020 presidential election – OONI data collected from Togo shows that access to WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook Messenger was blocked in the country¹⁶. On 20th May 2020 – the day of Burundi's general election – OONI data collected from Burundi shows that access to numerous social media websites (such as facebook.com and instagram.com) and instant messaging apps (WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook Messenger) was blocked (and that access was restored within the next two days)¹⁷.

Tanzania and Zambia

Starting from the eve of Tanzania's 2020 general election (27th October 2020), OONI data collected from Tanzania started to show the blocking of WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook Messenger, and several social media websites (overall, OONI data suggests that these blocks were lifted by 11th November 2020)¹⁸. Similarly, OONI data collected from Zambia shows that access to WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook was blocked in Zambia on 12th August 2021 – the day of Zambia's 2021 general election – and that access to these social media services was restored by 14th August 2021¹⁹.

Social media blocks during protests

Over the past 5 years, OONI data has shown that access to online social media services has commonly been blocked during protests around the world.

¹³ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), CAIDA, DefendDefenders, Defenders Protection Initiative, "Uganda: Data on internet blocks and nationwide internet outage amid 2021 general election", 22nd January 2021, <https://ooni.org/post/2021-uganda-general-election-blocks-and-outage/>

¹⁴ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) and Internet Sans Frontieres, "Mali: Social media disruptions amid 2018 presidential election?", 31st July 2018, <https://ooni.org/post/mali-disruptions-amid-2018-election/>

¹⁵ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) and CAIDA, "Benin: Social media blocking and Internet blackout amid 2019 elections", 30th April 2019, <https://ooni.org/post/2019-benin-social-media-blocking/>

¹⁶ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), "Togo: Instant messaging apps blocked amid 2020 presidential election", 25th February 2020, <https://ooni.org/post/2020-togo-blocks-instant-messaging-apps/>

¹⁷ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), "Burundi blocks social media amid 2020 general election", 21st May 2020, <https://ooni.org/post/2020-burundi-blocks-social-media-amid-election/>

¹⁸ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), "Tanzania blocks social media (and Tor?) on election day", 28th October 2020, <https://ooni.org/post/2020-tanzania-blocks-social-media-tor-election-day/>

¹⁹ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), "Zambia: Social media blocked amid 2021 general elections", 24th August 2021, <https://ooni.org/post/2021-zambia-social-media-blocks-amid-elections/>

Pakistan

OONI data collected from Pakistan shows that access to WhatsApp, Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram was temporarily blocked in Pakistan during the November 2017 Islamist protests²⁰. Pakistan's Media Matters for Democracy filed a petition in the Islamabad High Court, challenging the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority's (PTA) authority to block websites without due process²¹. As an outcome, the Islamabad High Court declared that the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority's interpretation of Section 37 of PECA is against the Constitution, and that they cannot regulate content without following the due process, the principles of transparency, and oversight²².

Iran and Jordan

Amid the 2017-2018 anti-government protests in Iran, OONI data shows that access to Telegram, Instagram, and Facebook Messenger was blocked in the country²³, reportedly as part of a government attempt to stifle the unrest²⁴. During anti-austerity protests in Jordan, OONI measurements suggest that Facebook Live Stream was temporarily interfered with in Jordan between 20th December 2018 to 10th January 2019²⁵.

Zimbabwe

During Zimbabwe's 2019 fuel protests (between 14th to 17th January 2019), OONI data shows that access to WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube was blocked in Zimbabwe. During these protests, data from the Internet Outage Detection and Analysis (IODA) project shows that Zimbabwe also experienced two internet outages²⁶. On 21st January 2019, Zimbabwe's High Court reportedly ruled that the internet shutdowns were illegal and ordered the

²⁰ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), "How Pakistan blocked news outlets, social media sites, and IM apps amidst protests", 29th November 2017, <https://ooni.org/post/how-pakistan-blocked-social-media/>

²¹ Digital Rights Monitor, "Islamabad High Court takes up petition filed by rights activists challenging the legality of social media takedown during Faizabad Dharna; issues notices to PTA and the Federal Government", 13th March 2018, <https://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/islamabad-high-court-takes-up-petition-filed-by-rights-activists-challenging-the-legality-of-social-media-takedown-during-faizabad-dharna-issues-notices-to-pta-and-the-federal-government/>

²² The Express Tribune, "PTA not empowered to block any website: IHC", 21st September 2019, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2061933/1-pta-not-empowered-block-website-ihc>

²³ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), "Iran Protests: OONI data confirms censorship events (Part 1)", 5th January 2018, <https://ooni.org/post/2018-iran-protests/>

²⁴ Vice Motherboard, "Iran Is Blocking the Internet to Shut Down Protests", 1st January 2018, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/wjpxjy/iran-is-blocking-the-internet-to-shut-down-protests>

²⁵ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) and Jordan Open Source Association (JOSA), "Jordan: Measuring Facebook live-streaming interference during protests", 12th June 2019, <https://ooni.org/post/jordan-measuring-facebook-interference/>

²⁶ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) and Digital Society of Africa, "Zimbabwe protests: Social media blocking and internet blackouts", 23rd January 2019, <https://ooni.org/post/zimbabwe-protests-social-media-blocking-2019/>

government to restore full internet access to the whole country²⁷. Zimbabwean ISPs subsequently unblocked access to social media apps and sites.

Cuba

Amid mass anti-government protests in Cuba in July 2021, OONI data shows that access to several online social media services was blocked in the country, including Signal, WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook, and TikTok²⁸.

Social media blocks during other sensitive political time periods

Over the past 5 years, OONI data has shown that access to online social media services has also been blocked during other sensitive political time periods around the world.

Ethiopia

Amid the Oromo protests in 2016, OONI collaborated with Amnesty International on researching the extent of internet censorship in Ethiopia, documenting the blocking of WhatsApp and numerous news media websites²⁹. Under a new Prime Minister, many political reforms took place in Ethiopia in 2018, including the unblocking of hundreds of websites³⁰.

About a year later, Ethiopia experienced several internet outages between 11th to 14th June 2019, while OONI measurements revealed that access to WhatsApp and Telegram was blocked thereafter (between 15th to 18th June 2019)³¹. As these events coincided with Ethiopia's national high school exams, it was reported that internet access may have been restricted in an attempt to prevent students from cheating³². On 22nd June 2019, following an alleged coup attempt in the Amhara region, access to the internet was shut down again. Once internet access was restored, access to WhatsApp and Facebook was blocked again³³.

Myanmar

²⁷ Zimbabwe News (ZIM NEWS), "Internet shut down illegal...Zimbabwe High Court rules", 21st January 2019, <https://zwnews.com/breaking-internet-shut-down-illegal-zimbabwe-high-court-rules/>

²⁸ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), "How countries attempt to block Signal Private Messenger App around the world: Cuba", 21st October 2021, <https://ooni.org/post/2021-how-signal-private-messenger-blocked-around-the-world/#cuba>

²⁹ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) and Amnesty International, "Ethiopia: Evidence of social media blocking and internet censorship", 14th December 2016, <https://ooni.org/post/ethiopia-report/>

³⁰ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) and Access Now, "Ethiopia: Verifying the unblocking of websites", 29th June 2018, <https://ooni.org/post/ethiopia-unblocking/>

³¹ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), "Ethiopia: From internet blackouts to the blocking of WhatsApp and Telegram", 21st June 2019, <https://ooni.org/post/ethiopia-whatsapp-telegram/>

³² BBC, "Ethiopia anger over texting and internet blackouts", 16th June 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-48653392>

³³ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) and Access Now, "Resurgence of Internet Censorship in Ethiopia: Blocking of WhatsApp, Facebook, and African Arguments", 14th August 2019, <https://ooni.org/post/resurgence-internet-censorship-ethiopia-2019/>

In the wake of a military coup in February 2021, Myanmar experienced unprecedented levels of internet censorship. On 1st February 2021, IODA data shows that Myanmar experienced a significant internet outage, starting at 03:30 AM local time. Starting from 4th February 2021 (3 days after the coup), OONI data shows that ISPs in Myanmar started blocking access to online social media services (such as facebook.com and twitter.com) – as of February 2022, these blocks remain ongoing. On 6th February 2021, IODA data shows that Myanmar experienced a 28-hour long internet outage that affected most ISPs in Myanmar. The outage end-times were similar across most ISPs, suggesting synchronization and improved planning, coordination, and execution of the shutdown³⁴.

Starting from the night of 14th February 2021, Myanmar experienced nightly internet outages (which affected most ISPs) for 72 nights, until 28th April 2021. These outages began at the same time (01:00 local time) and lasted 8 hours for most nights. In contrast to the coup-day outage, the nightly outages occurred in a highly synchronized manner, with outages beginning and ending at identical times for most ISPs³⁵.

While nightly internet outages in Myanmar have now ended, the ongoing blocking of social media websites (which has persisted since February 2021) may indicate a move toward more selective methods of censorship. This shift is consistent with a pattern in authoritarian regimes of engaging in targeted censorship to maximize political impact while minimizing its cost³⁶.

Venezuela

When Venezuela's presidential crisis began in January 2019, access to social media platforms was temporarily blocked at various moments in time on the state-run CANTV network. On 21st January 2019, OONI data suggests that access to YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter was temporarily blocked for about two hours. Instagram appears to have temporarily been blocked again on CANTV on 25th January 2019, while the testing of Twitter also presented signs of potential temporary blocking the next day³⁷.

These measurement findings corroborate the reporting of civil society organizations in Venezuela, who argue that the timing of these temporary social media blocks coincides with the circulation of videos showing members of the Bolivarian National Guard of Venezuela chanting

³⁴ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), CAIDA, and Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO), “Myanmar: Data on internet blocks and internet outages following military coup”, 9th March 2021, <https://ooni.org/post/2021-myanmar-internet-blocks-and-outages/>

³⁵ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), CAIDA UC San Diego, Kentik, University of Michigan, “A multi-perspective view of Internet censorship in Myanmar”, 11th November 2021, <https://ooni.org/post/2021-multiperspective-view-internet-censorship-myanmar/>

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), IPYS Venezuela, Venezuela Inteligente, “From the blocking of Wikipedia to Social Media: Venezuela's Political Crisis”, 29th January 2019, <https://ooni.org/post/venezuela-blocking-wikipedia-and-social-media-2019/>

anti-government slogans and showing solidarity with the opposition. They also argue that Instagram live streams (among other services that include streaming) became a popular source of live news in Venezuela during the crisis, and that the timing of the temporary blocking of Instagram, Youtube, Facebook and Periscope on 27th January 2019 coincided with an online statement made by Juan Guaidó³⁸.

These censorship events suggest a shift in Venezuela's internet censorship landscape, as they mark the first time that fast-paced, tactical changes to censorship were reported in Venezuela.

Conclusion

Over the past 5 years, the analysis of OONI censorship measurements from around the world has demonstrated clear patterns:

- Access to online social media platforms is commonly blocked during sensitive political time periods and periods of potential power transitions, such as elections and large-scale protests.
- Leading up to an intentional internet outage, and/or following the restoration of internet access (after an internet outage), access to social media services is commonly blocked (as seen, for example, in Ethiopia, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and Myanmar – discussed previously). This suggests that the targeted blocking of social media services may maximize political impact (for example, if used as a tool to stifle protests), while minimizing the cost to the country's economy (which may be incurred during a complete internet connectivity shutdown).

Recommendation

The OHCHR call for submissions in support of the report on internet shutdowns and human rights mentions that shutdowns include *“bandwidth throttling to slow internet access, blocking of specific apps such as social media or messaging services and other services, and the partial or complete shutdown of access to the internet.”*

OONI recommends that the OHCHR considers expanding this scope to also report on cases that involve the blocking of websites of marginalized communities.

Over the past 5 years, OONI data has provided evidence that a number of minority group websites are blocked around the world. In August 2021, OONI, OutRight Action International, and the Citizen Lab published a research report documenting the blocking of numerous LGBTIQ websites in Iran, Russia, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and Malaysia³⁹. OONI data also

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), Citizen Lab, OutRight Action International, *“No Access: LGBTIQ Website Censorship in Six Countries”*, 31st August 2021, <https://ooni.org/post/2021-no-access-lgbtqi-website-censorship-six-countries/>

demonstrates the blocking of religious and ethnic minority group websites, such as the blocking of Kurdish human rights websites and Baha'i websites in Iran⁴⁰.

While internet connectivity shutdowns and the blocking of online social media platforms can impact the lives of marginalized communities, such censorship cases are often reported quite widely by the media (since it is unlikely that a complete internet connectivity shutdown, or the blocking of a platform like WhatsApp, would go unnoticed). In contrast, the blocking of minority group websites risks receiving less media attention and public debate, since they affect communities who are already marginalized.

Monitoring the accessibility of websites that provide information that is relevant to the human rights of marginalized communities is therefore essential to ensure that their rights are protected.

For more information, please contact OONI: contact@openobservatory.org

⁴⁰ Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), “*Internet Censorship in Iran: Network Measurement Findings from 2014-2017*”, 28th September 2017, <https://ooni.org/post/iran-internet-censorship/#human-rights-issues>