The Impact of Senegal's 2023 Internet Shutdowns on Society, the Economy, and Trust in Democracy

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About This Report

The main objective of this report is to analyze the long-term impacts of internet shutdowns in Senegal, with particular emphasis on their economic and societal repercussions, as well as on Senegalese trust in democratic institutions and government. To achieve this objective, we gathered the testimonies and experiences of over one hundred Senegalese citizens through questionnaires and interviews. We spoke with civil society, students, e-commerce professionals, and other relevant stakeholders.

This report builds on two previous studies carried out by Internews in Senegal: The Internet Shutdown Advocacy in Senegal: A Needs and Capacity Assessment report, which highlighted the strengths, weaknesses, and specific needs of Senegalese civil society in the face of internet shutdowns, and the Senegal Shutdown After-Action report, which documented the immediate impacts of the shutdowns observed in 2023. Extending the reflections initiated in these two studies, this report focuses on the long-term impacts of shutdowns, exploring their influence on the daily activities of Senegalese people, as well as on their political participation and civic engagement.

This research enabled us to gather a rich and diversified perspective, at both the individual and collective level. A questionnaire, based on previous research findings and enriched with new study questions, was completed by 127 participants. This data was then expanded through individual interviews with stakeholders from different groups relevant to the analysis.

For further methodological details, please refer to the appendices, where detailed explanations of this approach are provided.

Our research team also benefited from the invaluable help of local experts Ndeye Fatou Diouf and Abdou Aziz Cissé, members of the Senegalese digital rights organization AfricTivistes, who greatly enriched our reflections. This report was compiled with assistance from Skyler Sallick, Ashley Fowler, and Benjamin Whitehead.

Introduction and Research Objectives

Politically-motivated internet shutdowns in Senegal are a crucial issue, given the importance of digital access to the country's social and political stability, as well as the rise in use of this practice in recent years. During electoral crises, internet shutdowns exacerbate chaos, creating information gaps and increasing confusion among citizens. Moreover, they are a maneuver frequently used by governments to control or limit protest movements without directly assuming the consequences of such measures, which has a profound impact on people's daily lives.

Although internet shutdowns are nothing new in Senegal (2021, 2022), those experienced in 2023 seem to have marked a turning point. Until this year, as in many countries, these practices were poorly understood by the general population, and civil society was unprepared to deal with them.

In conversations with members of local digital rights organizations, the idea emerged that the shutdowns of 2023 represented a "before" and an "after". These exchanges underlined a growing awareness of the scale of the threat posed by the use of internet shutdowns as a tool of government control. According to the Needs Assessment Report, a majority (63%) of respondents felt that Senegalese civil society would be "very unprepared" or "unprepared" to deal with a potential internet shutdown, and only 6% said they were "prepared" or "very prepared". These results, corroborated by workshop group discussions, revealed the major challenges faced by civil society, particularly in preparing effectively for such events. These shutdowns are therefore perceived as a direct threat to democracy, not least because of their link with the rise of authoritarian regimes in neighboring countries.

With the rise of digital authoritarianism, internet shutdowns are becoming more frequent around the world. Although their impact is difficult to measure, they underline the need for greater transparency on behalf of the governments enacting these practices. Studying each case allows us to better understand the contexts in which these shutdowns occur, as well as their repercussions in various sectors and on different scales.

Combating internet shutdowns relies on an assortment of strategies. It includes not only preparation, but also advocacy to educate elected representatives on the disproportionate impact of internet shutdowns. These disruptions cause more harm than good in maintaining order and require efforts to be limited in the future. It also involves the collection and dissemination of knowledge about internet shutdowns. Just as authoritarian governments around the world observe and replicate internet shutdown practices in their own contexts, civil society organizations, human rights defenders, lawyers and others can draw on the experiences of neighboring countries and other regions to better understand the causes, consequences, and possibilities for action to combat these practices in their own countries.

Studying these practices helps us to better understand the motivations of governments, as well as their profound and long-term impacts on democracies and populations. Thanks to these analyses, we hope to provide concrete guidance for strengthening the resilience of democratic systems in the face of attempts to control populations through digital means.

Summary of Results

The 2023 shutdowns had a significant and varied impact on society, affecting crucial areas such as security, the economy, trust in government, and perceptions of democracy.

Security

The shutdowns created a sense of insecurity and anxiety for many citizens, who found themselves isolated from their loved ones and deprived of reliable real-time information. Participants reported that the shutdowns increased vulnerability to social tensions, particularly in areas where demonstrations were taking place, and reinforced rumors and misinformation, contributing to a climate of mistrust and fear.

Economy

The economic impact was particularly severe for workers in the informal sector and small businesses dependent on e-commerce and digital services. The disruptions reduced income, prevented financial transactions, and limited access to the platforms needed for business activities. These disruptions revealed the fragility of the digital economy in the face of seemingly sudden political decisions, and accentuated inequalities, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas.

Trust in government and democracy

The shutdowns eroded citizens' trust in government, particularly its transparency and ability to manage political crises responsibly. Although democratic institutions continue to inspire a certain level of trust, and the value of democracy is recognized, survey respondents viewed the shutdowns as a direct threat to freedom of expression and citizen participation. These views suggest that, even if trust in democracy persists, shutdowns are seen as attacks on essential pillars of democracy, reinforcing the idea that such practices undermine institutions and democratic stability.

Respondents to our survey remain cautiously hopeful about the recently elected government, expressing expectations for a more respectful approach to digital rights and for reforms that guarantee stable internet access, even in times of crisis. They call for concrete action to better protect digital rights and make transparency a priority in governance.

However, the results show a divided opinion on the new government's ability to restore trust and adopt an inclusive and transparent digital policy. A significant proportion of respondents express increased mistrust and concern that the government may resort to internet shutdowns during future crises, but they hope to see genuine commitment and legal reforms that would prohibit the use of such restrictive practices.

Respondents also want policies that promote digital governance that respects citizens' rights. The majority of participants see civil society as a key player in the protection of these rights and call for greater collaboration between local authorities and organizations to ensure the transparency and resilience of digital infrastructure. In summary, participants stressed the crucial importance of digital rights and freedom of access to information in building a stable and inclusive democracy in Senegal.

The Shutdowns of 2023: Background and Timeline

On June 1, 2023, the Senegalese government begun blocking several digital platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram, and YouTube, in certain areas. A few days later, these disruptions extended to mobile internet and the Walf TV channel. For two days, social networks were unavailable, followed by a four-day mobile internet blackout.

With the majority of Senegalese users accessing the internet via their cell phones, these decisions resulted in a total shutdown of digital communication and information. Internet penetration in Senegal has increased exponentially in recent years: in 2013, only 13% of the population was connected, but by 2021, that number reached over 58%. In justifying the blockages, the Minister of Communication, Telecommunications and the Digital Economy at the time, Me Moussa Bocar THIAM, cited threats of "hateful and subversive" messages.

As mentioned above, this was not the first time the Senegalese government had disrupted internet access. In 2021, there were shutdowns during demonstrations following the arrest of opposition figure Ousmane Sonko, albeit for a shorter period. The practice is also normalizing in other parts of the continent. In 2022, similar disruptions were observed in several other countries, and between January and May 2023, six more countries experienced shutdowns, highlighting a worrying trend for fragile democracies.

In this context, the internet shutdowns of 2023 in Senegal represent a particularly revealing case, not least for their scale and impact on various aspects of citizens' lives. Analysis of the responses to our survey highlights how the population experienced these shutdowns and the vulnerabilities they exposed, despite some awareness of the risks. The change of government has, however, raised cautious hope among some, while others prefer to place their trust in the resilience and commitment of civil society, seen as a central pillar of social cohesion and the defense of Senegalese democracy.

This crisis has also underlined the importance of remaining vigilant and ready for future challenges, as Ndeye Fatou Diouf said: "*We tell ourselves that this mu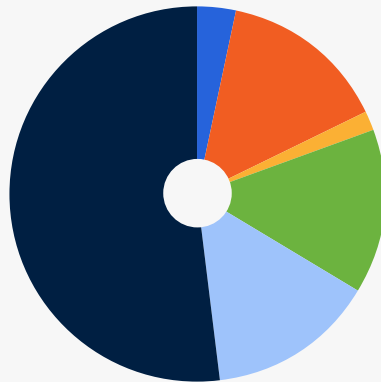st never happen again… we must remain ready.*" Local and international NGOs, as well as citizen alliances, play a decisive role in this process, strengthening the foundations of resilient and inclusive democratic governance.

The responses received in our survey reveal how the population, although aware of the risks of shutdowns, remained vulnerable to communication interruptions in times of crisis. The majority of respondents noticed the internet shutdowns due to issues with their mobile connection, with 52% of respondents stating that their connection no longer worked. The remainder experienced feelings of confusion, sometimes attributing the outage to their lack of phone credit or system malfunctions, illustrating the difficulty of determining the intentionality of the outage. Some (14.5%) had to test different services to understand that the shutdown was taking place, while another 14.5% were informed of the shutdown by messages received from friends or relatives. A small proportion (7.9%) used network measurement tools such as OONI Probe.

It is also important to note that telecommunications operators sent SMS messages informing users of the interruption. These notifications explicitly stated that the decision to suspend mobile internet came from the State, highlighting that the operators were complying with a government order. An example of a message sent out stated: "*Dear customers, by decision of the State, mobile internet is suspended with all operators. We apologize for any inconvenience caused.*" Although the operators did not necessarily approve of this decision, they were obliged to carry it out, reflecting the State's significant control over digital infrastructure.

The internet shutdowns of 2023 are part of a global trend in which such practices are becoming frequent tools of control during political crises and popular protest. However, the specificities of the Senegalese case, notably the scale of the disruptions and their direct impact on various aspects of citizens' lives, underline the need for a detailed analysis of their consequences. The results of our survey offer an insight into the immediate and lasting repercussions of these shutdowns, revealing vulnerabilities in a society increasingly dependent on digital technology.

Internews

How did you first become aware that an internet shutdown was occurring?

- 🔴 I tested different services and realized none of them worked. **(14.4%)**
- 🔵 I received a call/message from someone informing me of the outage. **(3.2%)**
- ⚫ My mobile data or my WiFi connection no longer worked so I restarted my device. **(52%)**
- 🔵 I figured it was a regular network problem or maybe I ran out of credit. **(14.4%)**
- 🟠 I used a network measurement tool to see the outage. **(1.6%)**
- 🟢 I heard about it in the media or through an official press release. **(14.4%)**

Figure 1: Awareness of shutdown occurrence

Economic Impact

These shutdowns not only represent an infringement on digital rights, but they have also resulted in considerable financial losses. The economic impacts of the 2023 internet shutdowns were particularly severe, illustrating the growing dependence of individuals and businesses on digital services. According to a report recently published by Internews on the economic impacts of the 2023 internet shutdowns, Senegal suffered a 1.3% percentage point decrease in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) during the fiscal quarter in which the shutdowns occurred, corresponding to a loss of around US$76.8 million. This has exacerbated inequalities, disproportionately affecting rural and peri-urban populations, as well as digitally-connected urban youth and many small businesses that rely on social networks to carry out their work. This section explores the direct and indirect economic consequences of these shutdowns, drawing on data from our survey and testimonies gathered.

The internet shutdowns of 2023 in Senegal had a profound economic impact and disrupted many economic sectors, revealing the vulnerability of individuals and businesses to this technological dependency. Other sources have already indicated this, insofar as access to the internet, and in particular mobile internet, is central to people's economic livelihood. The results of our survey show that 56.7% of respondents consider the internet to be indispensable for their work, and 54.6% emphasize that shutdowns have seriously compromised their ability to work. This finding is reinforced by the testimonies of entrepreneurs and workers in the informal sector, for whom access to the internet is essential to their economic survival.

For "Abdou", one of our respondents who is an online salesman, the shutdown represented a direct loss of around 400,000 XOF (around $640 USD). His feeling of helplessness was amplified

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The specific challenges we faced include the inability to access collaborative working platforms, management systems, and online banking to process payments or orders. With email and instant messaging interrupted, it was difficult to track critical project updates or react to urgent customer requests. To limit financial losses, we tried to implement certain strategies, such as using alternative communications via phone calls or SMS and sending messages via VPN to bypass the restrictions. However, these solutions were limited and insufficient to replace working online. Despite our efforts, we suffered a drop in revenue estimated at 7,000,000 XOF (around $11,200 USD), which affected our overall performance for the period concerned.

Testimony shared in the survey

by the fact that he had paid for an unusable service. His experience is far from isolated: many other respondents, like "Fatima", spoke of similar losses and the need to postpone high-profile projects, not least because of the interruption of communications via WhatsApp and Instagram, essential platforms for their professional exchanges. The survey results support these testimonies: individual economic losses ranged from 60,000 XOF ($95 USD) to 7 million XOF ($11,200 USD), illustrating the scale of the economic damage.

Internet shutdowns also affected other crucial sectors, including financial services and the workplace more broadly. These interruptions disrupted employees' professional activities and weakened the digital economy, revealing the extent of the impact of this crisis on individuals and businesses in Senegal.

Respondents under salaried employment reported specific challenges during this crisis: problems communicating with customers, contract cancellations, and the inability to manage projects remotely. These obstacles not only disrupted crucial business interactions, but also led to direct economic losses for many companies and employees, limiting their ability to meet the demands of their employers or business partners.

Survey respondents also indicated that the disruption in access to financial services was particularly damaging, with 41.4% saying that the shutdown compromised their ability to transfer or receive money. This problem illustrates the growing importance of online banking and money transfer platforms, which have become indispensable in the Senegalese economy. It also highlights the fragility of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which are heavily dependent on the internet for their survival. According to estimates by NetBlocks, via its Cost of Shutdown Tool (COST), an internet shutdown in Senegal could result in an economic loss of around $8 million per day, or around 5 billion XOF per week. These losses particularly affect e-commerce, financial services, and money transfer sectors, where SMEs are the most vulnerable. Digital disruptions of this magnitude reveal not only the increased dependence of local businesses on online services, but also the significant economic losses suffered by local economies when internet access is restricted.

Economic Concerns for the Future: The Lasting Impacts of Internet Shutdowns

According to the analysis, the internet shutdowns of 2023 exacerbated existing economic and social vulnerabilities, revealing the fragility of a modern economy without stable digital access. As businesses and individuals try to recover from the losses they suffered, it becomes clear that policies to protect internet access are essential to sustain growth and strengthen the resilience of the Senegalese economy for future crises.

Beyond the immediate economic losses, the crisis has raised deep concerns about the long-term stability of the Senegalese economy. Many survey participants feared that the use of internet shutdowns as a response to political crises would tarnish Senegal's image as a technology hub in West Africa, potentially discouraging foreign investors and slowing down the country's digital transformation: "*Personally, these events have reinforced my concerns about the country's future economic stability.*" Political instability and internet shutdowns are creating a climate of uncertainty that could hamper long-term growth. Indeed, the shutdowns are contradictory to the Digital Senegal Strategy (2025-2035), an ambitious initiative that seeks to make the country a regional leader in technology and digital innovation. Several respondents also saw these shutdowns as an opportunity to reassess the importance of stable internet access for economic development, calling for structural reforms to avoid such incidents in the future.

> "
> Personally, these events have reinforced my concerns about the country's future economic stability. Political instability and internet shutdowns are creating a climate of uncertainty that could hamper long-term growth.

Testimony shared in the survey

Access to Education and Vocational Training: A Weakened Dependence on Digital Technology

By disrupting both economic activities and access to financial services, the internet shutdowns also impacted training and education initiatives, which play a crucial role in opening doors to economic opportunities. Although this report does not place much emphasis on education, discussions with Senegalese trainees show that access to digital tools is essential, particularly for students and professionals seeking better prospects. In this context, dependence on mobile internet, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas, has accentuated inequalities. Network disruption severely penalized students who depend exclusively on mobile internet, who have been deprived of educational platforms, online courses, and other indispensable pedagogical resources. By contrast, those with access to Wi-Fi, often in urban centers like Dakar, were relatively less affected, further widening the gap between digitally-connected and peripheral populations.

The survey gathered testimonies from students at the Université Virtuelle du Sénégal (UVS) and the Université Numérique Cheikh Hamidou Kane who were particularly affected by the shutdowns. "*I had trouble working, studying and accessing my online courses,*" said one UVS student. For others, such as students at Cheikh Hamidou Kane University, the internet shutdowns paralyzed their activities: "*We simply couldn't advance without internet,*" they

explained. This imbalance also had an impact on students preparing for major exams, such as the baccalauréat. One student, preparing for their final philosophy exam, recounts: "*One evening, a few days before the exam, I was immersed in videos and articles to better understand key concepts. Suddenly, the internet went down*." Faced with this situation, she decided to go to a house in her neighborhood offering free Wi-Fi. This place, quickly invaded by other students in the same situation, turned into an improvised collaborative revision space.

The shutdowns also revealed marked regional and sectoral disparities that compounded the challenges students faced in accessing classes and evaluations. With most of Senegal's population living in rural areas, and higher rates of internet access in urban centers like Dakar, the shutdowns' impacts were felt disproportionately by those only able to access university through the internet. In fact, internet dependency in the education sector is evident in the results of both the survey and the interviews. Maguette Ba, a cybersecurity student who was part of the series of interviews we conducted, expressed her frustration with the backlog in her studies, a direct consequence of the shutdowns which, she said, "*further widens the inequalities between those with access to Wi-Fi and those relying exclusively on mobile internet*."

In the following graph, respondents were asked to rate the impact of the internet shutdowns on their access to educational resources (e.g. online courses, educational platforms and research tools) on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 meant "seriously worsened" and 5 "greatly improved". The results show that over 79% of respondents (53.1% for score 1 and 26.5% for score 2) felt that their access to these resources had been seriously worsened. Only 6.2% of respondents (3.5% for grade 4 and 2.7% for grade 5) perceived an improvement, while 14.2% awarded a medium grade (3), reflecting a moderate impact.

These figures underline the heavy reliance on the internet for education in Senegal, which is particularly important to note in a context where digital education infrastructures remain fragile in the face of crises such as internet shutdowns. This situation has not only limited access to essential resources, but also exacerbated inequalities between those with access to alternative solutions such as Wi-Fi or VPNs, and those relying solely on mobile internet.

For Ms. Ba and other students like her, the internet shutdown jeopardized academic and professional opportunities, including internships and funding: "*I was thinking, 'If this keeps up, what am I going to do? No one is going to pay me back' and it created frustration and a fear of not being able to finish my classes and being behind my classmates.*"

These interruptions in access to education and training reveal the limits of an education system that is increasingly dependent on digital technology. They exacerbate regional and economic inequalities, while highlighting the need to rethink educational infrastructures and strategies to ensure their resilience in the face of such crises. However, these shutdowns have not only affected the educational and economic spheres: they have also had profound repercussions on the sense of security and collective trust, issues explored in the next section.

Rate the impact of internet shutdowns on access to educational resources (e.g. school/classes, online learning platforms, research materials)
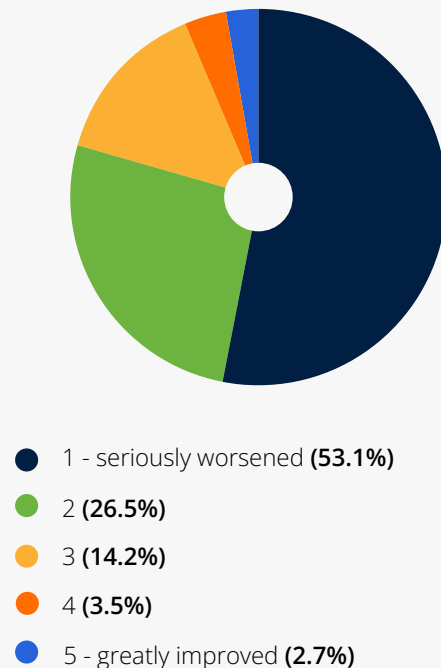
- 1 - seriously worsened **(53.1%)**
- 2 **(26.5%)**
- 3 **(14.2%)**
- 4 **(3.5%)**
- 5 - greatly improved **(2.7%)**

Figure 2: Impact on access to educational resources

> I was thinking, 'If this keeps up, what am I going to do? No one is going to pay me back' and it created frustration and a fear of not being able to finish my classes and being behind my classmates.
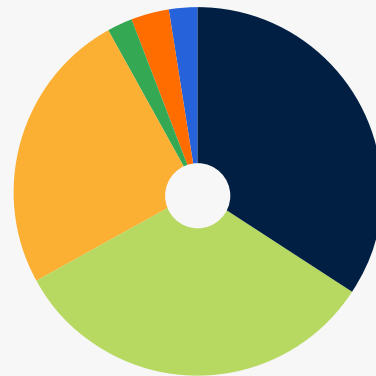
Testimony shared in the survey

The Impact of Shutdowns on Collective Safety and Trust

Based on the report's findings, internet shutdowns in Senegal in 2023 left a lasting imprint on the population's sense of security, with persistent psychological, social, and communication-related impacts. The survey results reveal that 34.4% of respondents felt a significant decrease in their sense of security, while 24.8% felt a slight decrease in their sense of security. This climate of uncertainty was reinforced by limited communication and the spread of rumors, amplifying feelings of vulnerability.

Communication restrictions left many citizens in a state of anxiety, especially those with relatives living in areas prone to tension. The testimony of "Mastermind", an NGO member who was abroad at the time of the shutdowns, illustrates this phenomenon: deprived of the means to obtain reliable news from his home neighborhood, amid rumors of violent riots, he felt deep concern for his family. Survey responses in this regard were varied, with 20% of respondents finding it "very difficult" to obtain reliable information about the safety of their loved ones, 23% finding it "moderately difficult," and 27.8% finding it "a little difficult". It is likely that, at the time of the crisis, a number of solutions emerged to overcome these obstacles.

According to online newspaper New African, demand for VPNs in Senegal experienced an unprecedented boom during these internet shutdowns. The publication cites research agency TOP10VPN, which notes that demand rose by over 8,000% on the first recorded day of the outage (June 1, 2023), followed by a further increase of

How did the internet shutdown affect your sense of safety and security?

- I felt a lot less safe during the shutdown **(34.4%)**
- I felt a little safer during the shutdown **(3.2%)**
- I felt a little less safe during the shutdown **(24.8%)**
- I felt much safer during the shutdown **(2.4%)**
- My sense of security was not affected **(32.8%)**
- I don't know/am not sure **(2.4%)**

Figure 3: impact on sense of safety and security

over 20,000% the next day. TOP10VPN analysts called this "the biggest increase in VPN demand on record". However, VPNs are still mainly used by individuals, and their cost can become prohibitive.

In the suburbs of Dakar, this feeling of uncertainty has also affected residents like "Khadija", who explained in interviews that the lack of information led to a fear of leaving her home. Although living

Rate the difficulty you experienced in obtaining information about the safely of your family and friends during the shutdown

- Very dificult, I had a lot of trouble comminicating **(20.6%)**
- Moderately difficult, communicating has been a challenge at times **(23.0%)**
- A little difficult, but I was still able communicate **(27.8%)**
- I don't know/am not sure **(4.8%)**
- Not dificult at all, I was able to communicate easily **(12.7%)**
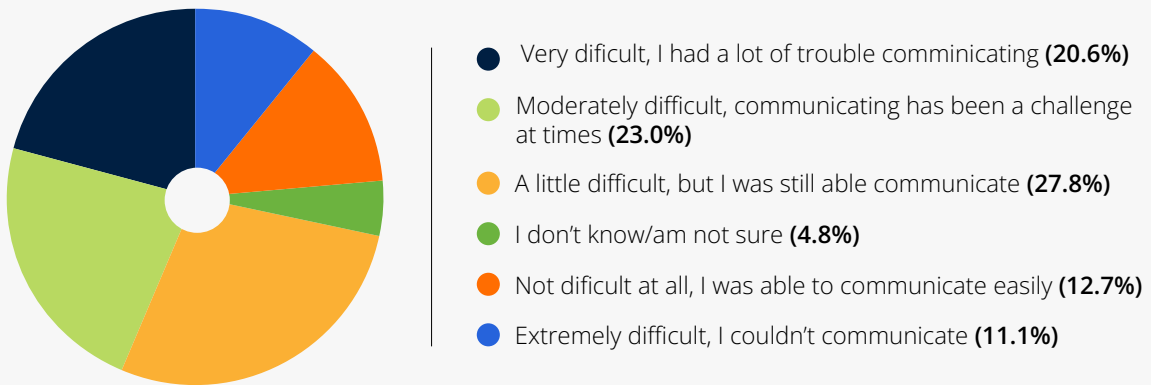- Extremely difficult, I couldn't communicate **(11.1%)**

Figure 4: impact on access to information about safety of family and friends

with her family at the time, Khadija expressed that the shutdowns profoundly disrupted her ability to communicate with her loved ones, especially those living abroad.

The interruption of WhatsApp, her main communication tool for studies and family exchanges, compounded this sense of isolation and uncertainty. During the shutdowns, being

How do you think the interest shutdown affected the spread of misinformation and rumors?

- Greatly increased the spread of misinformation and rumors **(44.1%)**
- Somewhat increased the spread of misinformation and rumors **(31.5%)**
- Had no effect on the spread of misinformation and rumors **(5.5%)**
- Has somewhat reduced the spread of misinformation and rumors **(9.4%)**
- Greatly reduced the spread of misinformation and rumors **(4.7%)**
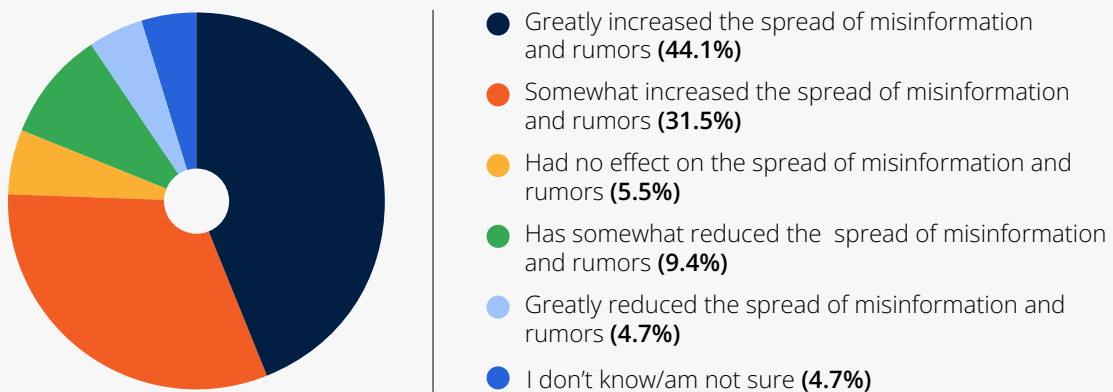- I don't know/am not sure **(4.7%)**

Figure 5: Impact on spread of misinformation and rumors

physically close to her family alleviated some of her immediate concerns, but she also emphasized how much more difficult this situation would have been if she had been alone or away from her loved ones.

These testimonials highlight the psychological impact of internet shutdowns, where digital isolation creates an environment of distrust and anxiety. Additionally, 44.1% of respondents observed an increase in the spread of misinformation and rumors during the shutdowns, exacerbating confusion and fear.

Rumors and Misinformation: A Climate of Panic and Uncertainty

The 2023 internet shutdowns profoundly affected the perception of security in Senegal, generating impacts that extended beyond communication difficulties. The lack of access to real-time information not only exposed populations to increased physical risks, but also contributed to a climate of mistrust and collective panic, fueled by the rapid spread of unverified rumors. This section examines how the shutdowns undermined individual and collective security, while eroding trust between citizens and the authorities.

One of the most destructive effects of the shutdowns was the uncontrolled spread of rumors, fueling an atmosphere of panic and confusion. In her interview, Maguette Ba recounted how misinformation circulated even among trusted people, contributing to a climate of constant stress: "*It had an impact on mental health because you're afraid of something that's been said when it's not true.*" In rural and peri-urban areas, where access to circumvention tools was limited, residents found themselves particularly vulnerable to misinformation, with no means of verifying news at the local level. The inability to share or quickly verify information created a climate of paralysis, where many were reluctant to leave their homes, fearing accidental encounters with law enforcement amidst a tense period.

According to respondents, internet shutdowns also compromised collective safety by limiting the dissemination of real-time alerts and advice in demonstration areas. According to the testimony of Ndeye Fatou Diouf (AfricTivistes), the absence of social networks to inform residents of immediate

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> There was tension in certain neighborhoods, young people were over there, demonstrating [...] the person who lived in the other neighborhood might not know that right next door [...] that person might be going out to work or shopping and run into the police. During that time, security forces would arrest anyone who happened to be there, which made the situation really perilous for those who couldn't be informed.

Testimony shared in the survey

risks exposed some people to unforeseen dangers, including arbitrary arrests.

This compromised sense of security not only affected social interactions, but also weakened the relationship of trust between the population and the authorities. Many respondents expressed frustration at the way the crisis was being managed, pointing to a lack of transparency and official communication that contributed to the chaotic

climate. Many also reported that the government "did not assume" its responsibilities. This loss of trust in institutions has lasting repercussions, exacerbating the feeling of abandonment among citizens and compromising the authorities' ability to mobilize the population around common solutions, which is a crucial element in maintaining social cohesion and effectively managing future crises.

To what extend did you feel that the shutdown was responsible for the increased sense of chaos or instability during the riots?

- Greatly increased the feeling of chaos/instability **(45.5%)**
- Increased the feeling of chaos/instability a bit **(30.9%)**
- Did not have a significant effect on feelings of chaos/instability **(8.1%)**
- Reduced the feeling of chaos/instability a bit **(7.3%)**
- I don't know/am not sure **(4.1%)**
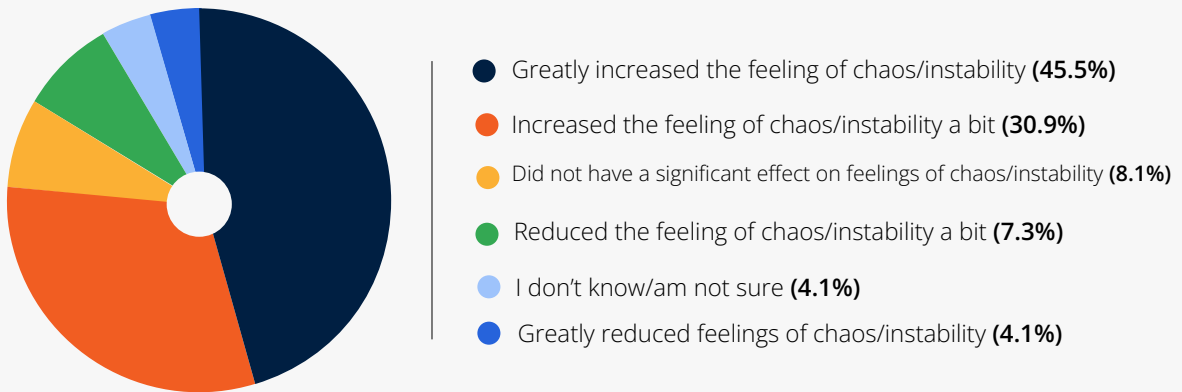- Greatly reduced feelings of chaos/instability **(4.1%)**

Figure 6: Impact on sense of chaos and instability

Trust in the Government, Institutions, and Democracy

The results of this study highlight that the internet shutdowns of 2023 marked a turning point in the Senegalese population's perception of the government. These events tested trust in democratic institutions and raised questions about the future stability of democracy in the

Has the government decision to shut down the internet in 2023 affected your feeling of uncertainly about the future of Senegalase democracy?

- My feeling of uncertainly has greatly increased **(58.8%)**
- My feeling of uncertainly has increased **(26.8%)**
- My feeling of uncertainly hasn't changed **(6.5%)**
- My feeling of uncertainly has diminished a little **(4.1%)**
- My feeling of uncertainly has greatly diminished **(2.4%)**
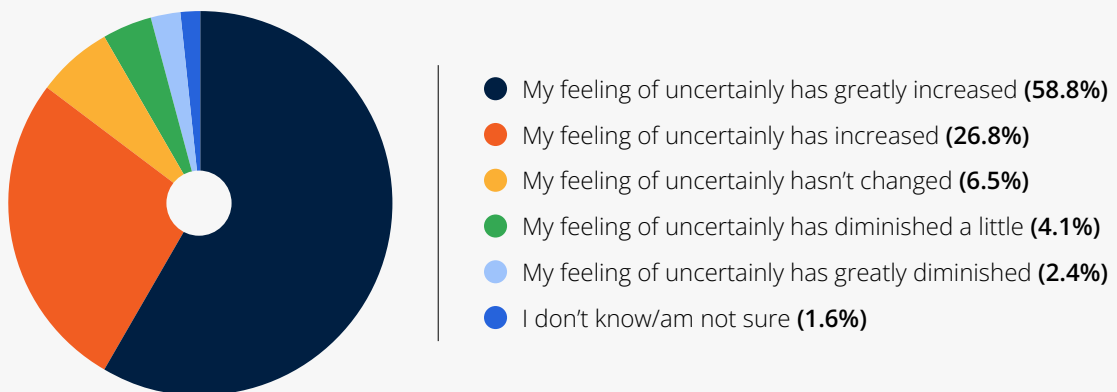- I don't know/am not sure **(1.6%)**

Figure 7: impact on feelings of uncertainty about the future of Senegalese democracy

country. According to the survey, the feeling of uncertainty "greatly increased" for 58.5% of respondents, while 26.8% felt it "somewhat increased". Despite this, a certain trust in democratic institutions and hope for a better future under the new government seem to persist. On the other hand, a significant proportion of respondents say that their trust in Macky Sall's government has been significantly undermined: 76.2% believe the shutdowns were unjustified.

For 47.1% of participants, uncertainty about the government's ability to manage political transitions has increased considerably. In interviews, "Abdou" evoked a mixed hope for the new government, stressing the importance of an approach more connected to citizens' needs: "*It was very hard, but I have hope in this government.*" These sentiments echo those expressed by other interviewees, such as "Khadija" and Maguette Ba.

On the other hand, "Cheikh" offered a more skeptical stance, believing that practices of control and repression have not been definitively ruled out: "*The government could use the same methods as the old one when it comes to cutting off the internet.*"

These divergent opinions testify to heightened vigilance among citizens, who remain attentive to the government's future actions, particularly in times of crisis. It's also interesting to note that many respondents felt that internet shutdowns impeded their ability to participate in public debates on political issues. Of these respondents, 35% said they "totally agreed" and 42.3% "agreed" with the following statement: "Internet shutdowns have had an impact on my ability to take part in public debates on political issues." In contrast, 17% of respondents took a neutral stance on this question.

Some of the open-ended responses to the survey also highlighted revealing perceptions about the link between the country's democratic future and free access to the internet. Statements such as "*[internet shutdowns] are a coup against democracy*" illustrate this connection. Similarly, another respondent asserts: "*As well as limiting access to information, the internet shutdowns hampered my freedom of expression. By cutting myself off from public debates, I felt disconnected from political reality, which amplified my concerns about the country's transparency and governance.*"

> As well as limiting access to information, the internet shutdowns hampered my freedom of expression. By cutting myself off from public debates, I felt disconnected from political reality, which amplified my concerns about the country's transparency and governance. These interruptions have also cast doubt on citizens' ability to actively participate in the democratic process, which in the long term could weaken trust in democratic institutions.

Testimony shared in the survey

To what extend do you agree or disagree with the folowing tatement: "The interest shutdown has impacted my ability to participate in public debates on political issues"

- Fully Agree **(35.0%)**
- Agree **(42.3%)**
- Neutral **(17.9%)**
- Disagree **(4.1%)**
- Absolutely Disagree **(0.8%)**
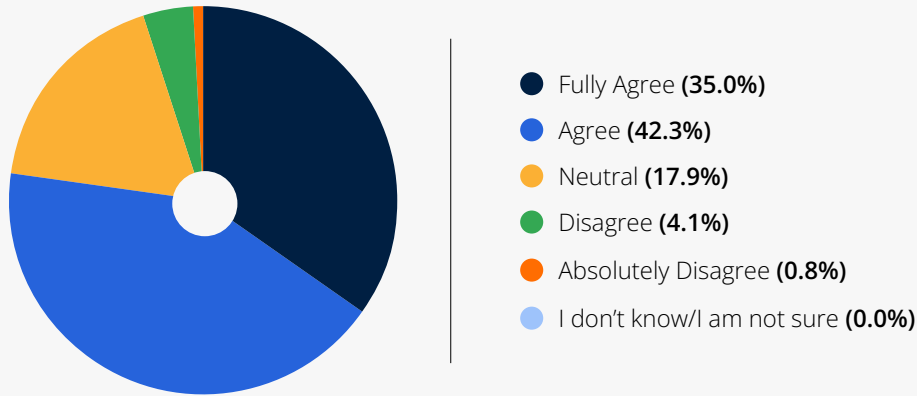- I don't know/I am not sure **(0.0%)**

Figure 8: impact on ability to participate in public debates on political issues

These interruptions have also cast doubt on citizens' ability to actively participate in the democratic process, which in the long term could weaken trust in democratic institutions

Another key aspect of internet shutdowns, linked to the protection of democracy, concerns access to information, limitations on the work of journalists, and the right to freedom of expression, all of which respondents felt were seriously threatened during the events. Many participants expressed their frustration, stating that the shutdowns restricted their access to information and hampered their freedom of expression.

For many, this was a "clear restriction of the rights of expression and access to information", these rights being considered "fundamental to the survival of democracy". This restriction in access to information reinforced the feeling that transparency and citizen participation are jeopardized every time a government disrupts communications without clear justification.

The survey results confirm this impression: 56.1% of respondents fully agreed and 34.1% agreed that internet shutdowns had a major impact on journalists' ability to provide the public with information on important political issues. By contrast, only 8.1% of respondents took a neutral stance.

Although the precise circumstances of the June 2023 shutdowns are still difficult to delineate, it is relevant to compare this context with previous shutdowns in the country, such as the one in March 2021. According to the analyses in the [Internews Needs Assessment Report](#), the March 2021 shutdown occurred at specific times, seemingly aimed at limiting journalists' ability to cover the protests and the arrest of an opposition leader. This event set a worrying precedent in the restriction of information in times of crisis.

During the focus groups conducted as part of Internews' report, participants noted that these interruptions occurred early in the morning, a time when only a minority of social network users were active. As one participant noted, "*there's a time of day when people in Senegal tend to be more online. If the interruptions occur outside this time, most people won't even notice.*" Several participants interpreted the shutdown as an attempt to target journalists' communications, notably by limiting the sharing of audiovisual content.

In contrast, the shutdowns of 2023 were far more extensive and severe, affecting a greater number of people and demonstrating an evolution in government strategy. These shutdowns not only disrupted citizen participation and prevented demonstrations, but also had a significant impact on all day-to-day activities. They reveal a greater willingness to exert control over the population.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "The internet shutdowns have impacted the ability of Senegalese journalists to provide the public with information on important political issues"
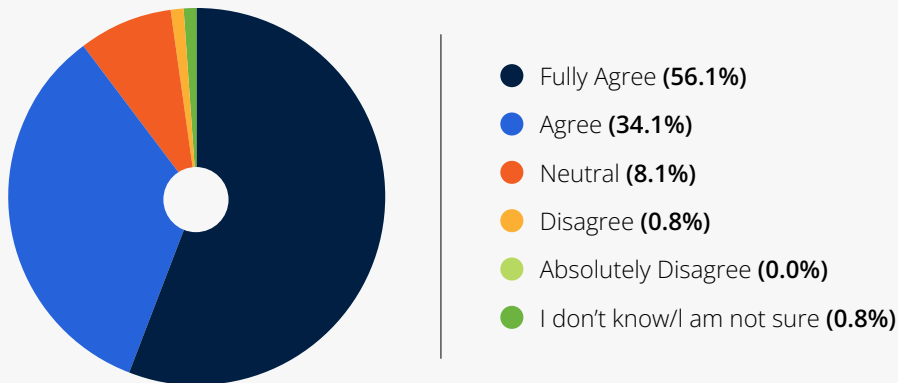
- Fully Agree **(56.1%)**
- Agree **(34.1%)**
- Neutral **(8.1%)**
- Disagree **(0.8%)**
- Absolutely Disagree **(0.0%)**
- I don't know/I am not sure **(0.8%)**

Figure 9: impact on ability of Senegalese journalists to provide the public with information on important political issues

Trust in Democracy in the Face of Shutdowns: 'Shutting off the internet means shutting off democracy'

Internet shutdowns have also highlighted the perceived limits of democratic institutions in protecting citizens' digital rights. Several respondents expressed concern about the lack of legal recourse for people to oppose these practices, reinforcing the idea that the government can impose them "as it sees fit". Others pointed out that these shutdowns have not been followed up by corrective measures or public discussion regarding their justification, which, in their view, suggests that current or future government officials could continue to resort to them without constraint. These perceptions illustrate a lack of transparency and institutional guarantees, undermining citizens' trust in the ability of institutions to defend their fundamental rights, and reinforcing fears of a lasting negative impact on the country's democratic stability and economic future.

In times of crisis, access to the internet is seen as essential for engaging citizens and preserving collective stability. The perception that the government is trying to control narratives and influence the public sphere heightened feelings of distrust in the transparency of institutions, with some participants speaking of a "confiscation of democracy".

Testimonies also reveal concerns about the future of democracy in Senegal, with many fearing that shutdowns will become a common practice to control the population. Ndeye Fatou Diouf, Digital Content Manager at AfricTivistes, points out that this crisis has highlighted a lack of respect for citizen participation: "*When the government is in trouble, it doesn't hesitate to adopt measures that undermine transparency and citizen participation*."

For this expert, the events of 2023 have reinforced the conviction that reforms are needed to protect the internet from misuse, and to ensure that citizens can access information freely. According to one survey respondent, confirmed by others questioned during the interviews, "*Shutting off the Internet means shutting off democracy.*"

Although trust in government is often questioned, the survey revealed continued support for participatory democracy and civil society initiatives. For some, like Abdou Aziz Cissé, a member of the AfricTivistes organization, the real strength of Senegalese democracy lies more in civil society than in formal institutions: "*Civil society is our strength, not the government.*"

The change of government has raised cautious

hopes among some respondents, while others prefer to place their trust in the resilience and commitment of civil society. The crisis also underlined the importance of remaining vigilant and ready for future challenges, as Ndeye Fatou

Diouf testifies: "*We tell ourselves that this must never happen again… we must remain ready.*" Local and international NGOs, as well as citizen alliances, play a central role in maintaining social cohesion and defending Senegalese democracy.

Charting a New Course: Trusting the Government in the Face of Censorship

The 2023 internet shutdowns in Senegal focus attention on the challenges the current government will face in regaining public trust and building a resilient digital policy that respects citizens' rights. Despite distrust of censorship practices, some respondents remain cautiously hopeful about the new government's ability to establish a climate of stability without resorting to internet shutdowns.

For many respondents, hope lies in the arrival of a younger government, perceived as more connected to the needs of citizens. "Khadija" speaks of this hope, saying, "*It was very hard, but I have hope in this*

government." This optimism reflects the expectation that the next government, sensitized to the hopes of young people and to digital issues, will be able to manage future crises without resorting to digital repression.

However, other respondents are more reserved, like "Cheikh", who doubts that the practice of shutting down the internet will be definitively abandoned. This ambivalence underscores a need for greater vigilance on the part of the population who wish to see a tangible change in the management of political crises. Indeed, the perception of the risk

How do you view the risk of similar internet shutdowns during future political events?
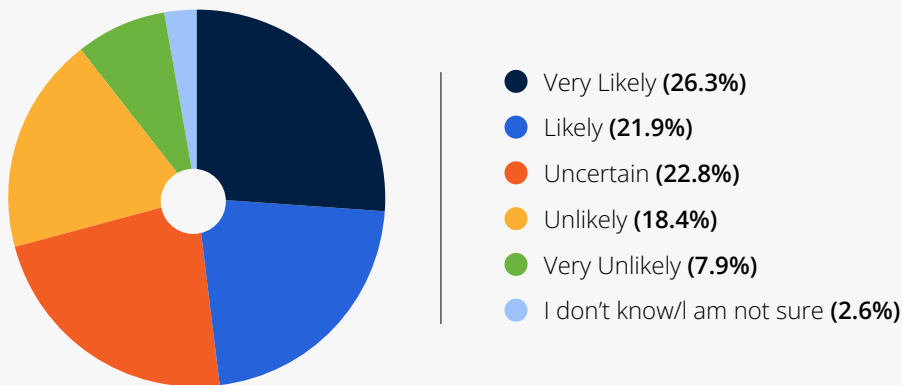
- Very Likely **(26.3%)**
- Likely **(21.9%)**
- Uncertain **(22.8%)**
- Unlikely **(18.4%)**
- Very Unlikely **(7.9%)**
- I don't know/I am not sure **(2.6%)**

Figure 10: Risk of future shutdowns

of similar internet shutdowns in the future was heterogeneous: 22.8% of respondents said they were "uncertain", and 18.4% felt the risk was "unlikely", while 21.9% found it "likely" and 26.3% "very likely."

The survey results also show that, despite the shutdowns, a significant proportion of the population remains hopeful that respect for digital rights will become an important mission for the current government. This conviction is fueled by

the role of civil society, which many respondents see as the pillar of the defense of these rights.

Respondents expressed a need for structural reforms to guarantee freedom of access to information and the protection of digital rights. A majority of survey participants are convinced that shutting off the internet is an unjustified practice, and many hope that the current government will respect fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and the right to communicate. These

> I'm concerned about the digital divide that could widen, where the most vulnerable populations, often the hardest hit by these shutdowns, will have less access to economic and educational opportunities. This could exacerbate existing inequalities and hamper development efforts. These concerns lead me to hope that Senegal adopts a proactive approach to guaranteeing reliable and inclusive internet access, while ensuring the protection of civil rights and strengthening democratic institutions.

Testimony shared in the survey

expectations demonstrate a collective desire to see Senegal move towards a form of governance that values and protects the digital rights.

The government faces major challenges in restoring trust in the country's digital governance. This period of transition offers a unique opportunity to put in place an inclusive and resilient digital policy, adapted to Senegal's realities.

Survey respondents stressed the importance of building a digital infrastructure that enables equitable access to information, regardless of the political situation. Opinions remain divided: 24.6% of respondents said they were "somewhat pessimistic" and 22.8% "very pessimistic" about the new government's willingness to pass a law preventing future shutdowns. However, a significant proportion of participants, 18.4%, were "somewhat optimistic", and 14.9% were even "very optimistic" about the government's commitment in this direction, reflecting cautious trust.

The development of an inclusive digital strategy could also help mitigate disparities between urban and rural areas. The survey reveals that peri-urban and rural areas, where circumvention tools were not widely available, were particularly affected by the shutdowns. Participants hope that the current government will commit to strengthening internet access in these areas to avoid future exclusions. In addition, the adoption of legal protections against the use of internet shutdowns as a tool of repression is seen as an essential measure to guarantee digital rights.

These results highlight the diversity of responses and the caution with which citizens view the future. Despite expressions of mistrust, part of the population retains a certain trust in the new government, even if this remains conditionally measured.

Conclusions

The 2023 internet shutdowns in Senegal had a profound and lasting impact on various aspects of citizens' lives, revealing both the fragility of the digital economy, security challenges, and the erosion of trust in democratic institutions.

These conclusions, drawn from our discussions with people from diverse backgrounds, the survey results, and previous studies, highlight key concerns for the country's digital and democratic future.

First and foremost, these shutdowns severely disrupted economic activities, highlighting the growing dependence of businesses, individuals, and financial systems on stable digital services.

Economic losses, estimated at $76.8 million USD (46.86 billion XOF), have exacerbated inequalities, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas, and reinforced the precariousness of sectors such as e-commerce and financial services. These impacts underline the urgent need for structural reforms to guarantee stable and inclusive internet access, which is essential for economic growth and innovation.

In terms of safety, the shutdowns generated a climate of uncertainty and vulnerability, aggravated by the spread of rumors and the paralysis of real-time communications. The inability to share or obtain reliable information quickly exposed many people to increased risks, particularly during demonstrations and social tensions. These shutdowns also eroded trust between the population and the authorities, fuelling a sense of mistrust in government crisis management.

Finally, these events highlighted concerns expressed by citizens and experts about the ability of democratic institutions to guarantee adequate protections for digital rights. These observations, drawn from our discussions with people from diverse backgrounds, our survey, and previous studies, reflect a sense of fragility, reinforced by the absence of clear legal recourse or public debate on the justification for the shutdowns. Although these concerns are widely shared, they do not call into question respondents' general attachment to participatory democracy and the crucial role of civil society in defending these rights.

With Senegal's digital ecosystem poised for significant growth, it is imperative that the government, international organizations, and the private sector work together to establish a resilient and inclusive digital policy. By investing in structural reforms, strengthening equitable access to the internet and meeting citizens' expectations, Senegal could not only restore trust in its institutions, but also assert itself as a regional leader in digital transformation respectful of fundamental rights.

Methodological Notes

We used a questionnaire divided into sections corresponding to our main research questions to gather responses on economic impacts, perceptions of security, trust in democratic institutions, and hopes for the future of Senegalese democracy. The number of responses received was a positive surprise for the research team, accustomed to more limited participation in similar studies.

At the same time, we conducted 10 interviews, three with respondents to the questionnaire and the others through our team's contacts.

The interviews followed a semi-directive guide structured around the same themes explored in the questionnaire, with open-ended questions adapted to the context, circumstances, and participants' responses. These interviews, lasting between 10 and 40 minutes, were conducted in Wolof in some cases, and in French for the majority of participants. They involved five men and five women, two of whom were interviewed in person and the others via Zoom. All those mentioned by name gave their explicit consent to appear in this study. Of these interviews, two were conducted with experts who not only shared their personal experiences in answering the guided questions, but also added their professional opinions to guide our reflections.

The 10 interviews conducted as part of this research reflect a diversity of profiles, allowing us to explore a variety of experiences in the face of internet shutdowns. Participants included young people and women from marginalized communities, environmental activists, as well as students who shared their specific challenges related to access to education and economic opportunities. The panel also included stakeholders from the private sector, notably in the digital economy, as well as members of digital rights civil society organizations and an NGO working to protect the rights of young people and combat female genital mutilation.

A notable aspect of this research was the effort devoted to diversifying responses to questionnaires and interviews. Initial responses were predominantly from men, despite an extensive network of contacts. When planning the interviews, several women participants expressed the feeling that they needed technical skills to share their experiences. This was also true when inviting women to respond to the questionnaire, requiring a focused and sustained effort to achieve gender parity among respondents.

The profile of respondents to the questionnaires was as follows:

Total number of responses: 126

- **Occupations:**
  - The majority of respondents work for NGOs (18.3%, or 23 people).
  - Private-sector employees account for 15.9% (20 people), followed by the self-employed (15.1%, or 19 people) and students (15.1%, also 19 people).
  - Other significant professions include teachers (11.1%), technicians (7.1%), activists (7.1%) and politicians (7.1%).

- **Genre:**
  - 57.9% of respondents identified themselves as men.
  - 42.1% of respondents identified themselves as women.
  - No responses were recorded for the "Other" or "Do not wish to reply" options.

- **Geographical location:**
  - The vast majority of respondents (88.9%) live in Dakar.
  - Other regions represented, with less than 5% of responses each, include Diourbel, Fatick, Kaffrine, Kaolack, Kédougou, Kolda and Louga.

Questionnaire and Interview Guide

Click here to consult the questionnaire used for the survey.
Click here to consult the interview guide.