

Fighting internet shutdowns around the world.



RightsCon
BRUSSELS
MARCH 29-31, 2017
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A faint world map is visible in the background of the red section.A white Wi-Fi symbol is positioned above the 'n' in the main title.

#KeepItOn

S U M M I T

Outcomes Report | May 2017



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Overview: RightsCon Brussels 2017

From March 29 to 31, 2017, Access Now brought the sixth iteration of RightsCon to Brussels, Belgium, the heart of European politics and policymaking. Decisions made in Brussels affect not just the European Union and its member states, but are increasingly consequential for policies, frameworks, and best-practices worldwide. Europe is a standard setter and home to nearly 750 million people. It is a place where our digital rights are both protected and abused, where democratic principles remain a beacon of hope for many, yet at the same time, are being weakened.

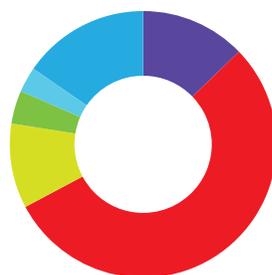
RightsCon Brussels gathered more than 1,500 experts from around the world: business leaders, civil society advocates, policy makers, lawyers, bloggers, technologists, activists, and users, working together to tackle the most pressing issues of human rights in the digital age.

The conference comprised three full days of programming, with over 250 unique sessions organized into 21 program tracks.



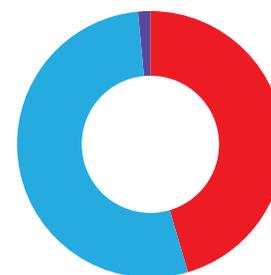
Participants by Region

- Asia Pacific: **6.5%**
- Latin America: **5.3%**
- CIS: **2.6%**
- Europe: **50.3%**
- North America: **27.9%**
- MENA and Sub-Saharan Africa: **7.4%**



Participants by Stakeholder

- Academic: **12.7%**
- Civil Society: **54.8%**
- Government and intergovernmental: **10.2%**
- Independent: **3.5%**
- Media and Press: **3.1%**
- Private Sector: **15.7%**



Participants by Gender Group

- Self-identified as female: **45.4%**
- Self-identified as Male: **53.1%**
- Non-binary: **1.5%**



The #KeepItOn Summit

The #KeepItOn Summit at [RightsCon Brussels](#) was the first dedicated convening in the world to explore internet shutdowns. This document records the fascinating conversations that took place over three dynamic days between stakeholders, and highlights the major outcomes they achieved.

Background

Internet shutdowns pose a rising threat to human rights and innovation around the globe. Justified by governments under a variety of pretexts, shutdowns harm free expression and drain billions from the global economy. In 2016, more than 25 countries issued 56 shutdowns, some of them repeat offenders. Intentional disruptions of networks are complex, involving telecommunications providers, ISPs, policy makers, internet companies, and end users. This complexity demands creative solutions from diverse stakeholders.

The internet community has already made great strides in pushing back against internet shutdowns through the [#KeepItOn campaign](#), which now comprises 120 organizations from more than 50 countries. The United Nations Human Rights Council unequivocally condemned internet shutdowns in June 2016. The multistakeholder organization Global Network Initiative – which includes companies such as Google, Facebook, Vodafone, and Microsoft – has also spoken out against the practice. One of the largest technology associations in the world, the GSMA, issued strict guidelines, and two major economic studies by Deloitte and the Brookings Institution have shed light on the terrible cost of disruptions to societies. But there remains much more work to be done, and the #KeepItOn Summit helped chart new pathways in the effort to end disruptions.

Major outcomes

The #KeepItOn Summit featured nine separate, engaging events. Here are some key takeaways:

- **30 countries from four continents declared their official opposition to internet shutdowns**, and issued strict guidelines for other governments to follow
- Stakeholders from internet companies, telcos, governments, and civil society gathered for the first time in an event specifically dedicated to internet shutdowns
- A new study launched at RightsCon found that telecommunications companies are falling far short on addressing internet disruptions in their corporate governance and policies
- Participants released innovative research on disruptions in India, Bahrain, and Venezuela
- Participants shared personal stories of the impact of internet shutdowns, and engaged in passionate debates crossing regions and stakeholder groups
- Participants released a new database documenting the labyrinthine ownership arrangements of telecommunications companies
- The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and freedom of expression presented a special preview of a report analyzing shutdowns and human rights law

Everything we know about internet shutdowns

Government-ordered internet shutdowns nearly tripled in number between 2015 and 2016, harming human rights and economies worldwide. This session offered a crash course in internet shutdowns with a global perspective, mapping out their causes and impacts, tracking emerging trends and hotspots, spotlighting new research on circumvention and economics, and identifying who is fighting back to stop them.



Summit Chair Deji Bryce Olukotun [opens the #KeepItOn Summit](#)

WITH

RON DEIBERT

Citizen Lab

RAMAN JIT SINGH CHIMA

Access Now

REBECCA MACKINNON

Ranking Digital Rights

DOUG MADORY

Dyn Research

JULIE OWONO

Internet Without Borders

Outcomes

- The Internet Freedom Foundation **launched [Keepusonline.in](#)**, a campaign tailored specifically to the threat of shutdowns in India. India is a global “hotspot” for internet shutdowns, but orders are usually issued by state governments instead of the federal government, based on an outdated law from 1885. The country lost nearly \$1 billion between 2015 and 2016 to shutdowns, according to the Brookings Institution. This innovative campaign seeks to intervene at the state level and through the courts.
- The **Internet Society [officially joined the #KeepitOn campaign](#)**, adding 110 chapters on 6 continents to campaign against internet shutdowns.
- Ranking Digital Rights released its **[Corporate Accountability Index](#)**, highlighting how internet companies and telcos address the threat of internet shutdowns, revealing poor performance across the sector. The Index evaluates 22 internet, mobile, and telecommunications companies on commitments and policies affecting users’ freedom of expression and privacy.

What’s an internet shutdown like? Experiences of disruptions and how to circumvent them

Internet shutdowns impact real lives in often devastating ways. In this session, we heard testimonies from people who have experienced shutdowns — and also how they have tried to circumvent them. The session concluded by looking at the latest tools for circumvention, including what works and how they can be improved.



Gambian activist Saikou Camara

What's an internet shutdown like? Experiences of disruptions and how to circumvent them

WITH

SAIKOU CAMARA

Your Change for a Change

MARIENGRACIA CHIRINOS

Institute for Press and Society / Instituto Prensa y Sociedad de Venezuela

KARL KATHURIA

Psiphon

GIORGI KLDIASHVILI

Institute for Development of Freedom of Information

RITU SRIVASTAVA

Digital Empowerment Foundation

Outcomes

- **Captured stories** from individuals impacted by shutdowns, including a heartbreaking tale from an activist in Gambia whose family member lost a child during her pregnancy because she was unable to contact a doctor.
- Researchers in Venezuela released **new research** on disruptions to the internet for economic and political reasons
- An activist in Ecuador alerted the coalition to a **looming conflict in Ecuador**, where a shutdown was possible, and was connected to Access Now's free 24-hour Digital Security Helpline
- A civil society group from Georgia described the **blocking of Wordpress in the country**. A member of the Trust & Safety team from Automattic, the makers of Wordpress, confirmed from the audience that he had in fact received the blocking order, and connected with the civil society group to discuss solutions moving forward.
- Discussed how data usage of VPNs during shutdowns impacts users for the first time
- Digital Empowerment Foundation (India) **released new research** on the social impact of internet shutdowns entitled [*Anatomy of Virtual Curfews: Human Rights v. National Security*](#).

Advances in measuring internet shutdowns

A central challenge of fighting internet shutdowns is knowing when and where they occur. Some shutdowns can be detected inside international borders, while at other times even tech companies don't know whether the internet is available. This session looked at innovative approaches to measuring disruptions by both public and private sector actors.

Outcomes

- [SFLC.in](#) revealed its **new internet shutdown tracker**, which documents disruptions in India.
- The [Open Observatory for Network Interference](#) discussed its latest reports on disruptions, its **mobile app**, and probe technology.
- Access Now **shared its research and shutdown tracker**, which are in development.
- The panelists discussed the possibility of **creating a shared technical standard** in which data could be more rapidly shared.

WITH

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ALP TOKER

Turkey Blocks

What is the role of private actors? A special report to the UN Human Rights Council

How should companies combat internet shutdowns and excessive government surveillance, and create a free and open internet for all? In June 2016, the Human Rights Council unequivocally condemned network disruptions, calling on member states to cease ordering them, but there are a variety of stakeholders who hold leverage in each shutdown. This special preview of a forthcoming report by a UN expert offered an assessment of emerging threats to free expression online, and clarified the roles and responsibilities of private actors who provide internet and telecommunications access around the world.

WITH

DAVID KAYE

UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression



UN Special Rapporteur David Kaye

Outcomes

David Kaye shared a preview of a [forthcoming report](#) that includes a study of network disruptions, and solicited feedback from the audience.

- The report, which broadly condemns shutdowns, will be released to the public in June.

At what cost? Telecoms and internet companies discuss internet shutdowns

Technology and telecommunications companies sit at the very center of the internet shutdown crisis as governments order them to shut off the internet on a variety of pretexts. These decisions often have drastic economic impacts, which Deloitte, the Global Network Initiative, and the Brookings Institution have analyzed through groundbreaking studies. In this session, leading stakeholders gathered to discuss internet shutdowns, including their efforts to push back and disclose more information about them.



Facebook's Alex Warofka speaks about the economic impact of shutdowns

At what cost? Telecoms and internet companies discuss internet shutdowns

WITH

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Global Network Initiative

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Outcomes

- Panelists discussed the different approaches of the [Brookings Institution](#) and [Global Network Initiative](#) reports
- Bahrain Watch released its [economic study](#) of a new form of economic shutdowns in Duraz, Bahrain, which focused on subscriptions rather than population
- A telecommunications company revealed that economic estimates are far too low because of the impact on local entrepreneurs or health
- Turkey Blocks announced a [beta online calculator](#) that quickly calculates the economic cost of shutdowns
- Participants called for more reliable population measures
- The Global Network Initiative committed to supporting more economic research
- Participants identified the need for sovereign debt and bond traders to consider the impact of internet shutdowns

Regional fights against internet shutdowns – breakouts!

Internet shutdowns harm human rights and economies all over the globe, but they come in different forms, ranging from long-term nationwide disruptions to app blocking to “internet curfews” that impact small neighborhoods. This variation requires localized strategies. Participants broke into groups to address their particular concerns.



A breakout session explores advocacy strategies in different regions

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Paradigm Initiative Nigeria

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TRINH NGUYEN

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Access Now

Outcomes

This rapid-fire session led to a variety of different recommendations by the participants, including the need for:

- more statements from international organizations declaring that internet shutdowns are neither necessary nor proportionate;
- more economic studies, especially detailed studies at the country level;
- a strategy around stopping shutdowns for school exams, such as a new proposal in Tunisia to stop exam cheating;
- highlighting positive stories when governments refrained from blocking, such as in Bangalore where the local government used WhatsApp to calm citizens concerned about water hoarding; and in Ghana, where the police threatened to shut down the internet but were overridden by the president and civil society groups;
- mapping of different forms of shutdowns as well as tools that people can use to fight them, such as SLFC.in, OONI, and Bloqueios.org, which charts judgments in Brazilian courts;
- adjustment of campaigns based on local context, such as legal strategies and other forms of pressure.

Freedom Online Coalition: Multilateral Approaches to Network Disruptions

While more than 25 governments ordered internet shutdowns last year, other governments and bodies such as the UN and African Union are pushing back. We heard from members of the Freedom Online Coalition, a collection of 30 governments supporting freedom of expression and human rights online.



[Click here](#) to watch a video of this session

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Global Partners Digital

Outcomes

- **30 Governments spoke out against shutdowns.** Thirty governments of the Freedom Online Coalition (FOC) declared their commitment to fight internet shutdowns in an important Joint Statement on State Sponsored Network Disruptions at RightsCon Brussels. The FOC includes member countries as diverse as France, Tunisia, Ghana, the United States, and Australia.
- In the statement, the FOC **expressed “deep concern,”** and called “on all governments to end such violations of the rights to freedom of expression and of peaceful assembly.” It explained that “disruptions undermine the economic benefits of the internet and disrupt access to essential services such as health care,” citing two influential studies by the Brookings Institution and the Global Network Initiative, the former of which found that shutdowns had drained \$2.4 billion from the global economy.
- The statement then encouraged all governments who are concerned about the growing trend of state-sponsored network disruptions to **adopt or implement a list of measures,** or good practices, as appropriate.

Better ways to document internet shutdowns

The wide array of stakeholders involved in internet shutdowns — telcos, tech companies, end users, and governments — makes documenting them extremely complex. It’s often a case of each person feeling a piece of the elephant but not being able to identify the whole animal. But if we don’t know how many disruptions happen, and where, it’s difficult to take action to stop them. In this session, participants examined new research on how we can better document shutdowns, and proposed solutions.

WITH

COLLIN ANDERSON

Measurement Lab

Outcomes

- Researchers at the Open Technology Institute circulated draft findings from its research into the needs of various stakeholders measuring disruption and responding to shutdowns.
- Participants called for trainings on understanding censorship on the internet.
- Participants also identified needs for improvements in usability.
- Participants reached consensus about the need for more data sharing, but noted the importance of contextual information.
- Examined RIPE Atlas, OONI, SFLC.in, and tools from Turkey blocks.

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The laws and agreements we want on internet shutdowns

Internet shutdowns are enabled by a patchwork of outdated, vague, or repressive laws worldwide. Telecommunications companies are also bound by restrictive license agreements that require them to disrupt networks when governments order them to. Courts inconsistently approach the private contracts and public interests governing platform liability. In this session, we looked at the bad laws and licenses that enable shutdowns, and argued a lively hypothetical through multiple perspectives to theorize better contracts and agreements to end this practice.



Peter Micek of Access Now discusses business and human rights

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Global Partners Digital

Outcomes

- Participants identified jurisdictions to promote model laws and licensing agreements against shutdowns.
- Access Now released Who Owns What?: The Telco Ownership Database. With hundreds of leaders from the business and human rights communities assembled at RightsCon Brussels sharing their insights on pressing technology and public policy issues, the database aims to help advocacy groups, investors, and regulators worldwide engage telcos, making it easier to find information about which carriers and groups operate in countries that have experienced internet shutdowns due to government-ordered network disruptions.
- Participants explored the right to remedy following internet shutdowns, via a hypothetical case involving social media platforms, advertisers, and users at risk.
- Holding telcos and ISPs, as well as governments, responsible for monetary compensation may discourage internet shutdowns.
- Judiciaries and the courts continue to hold promise in redressing shutdowns, though judges must gain appreciation for their wide harms.



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Access Now (accessnow.org) defends and extends the digital rights of users at risk around the world. By combining innovative policy, global advocacy, and direct technical support, we fight for open and secure communications for all.

We are a team of 40, with local staff in 10 locations around the world. We maintain four legally incorporated entities — Belgium, Costa Rica, Tunisia, and the United States — with our tech, advocacy, policy, granting, and operations teams distributed across all regions.

Contact

For more information about the #KeepItOn Summit, RightsCon, or Access Now's work fighting internet shutdowns, contact Deji Bryce Olukotun, Senior Global Advocacy Manager, deji@accessnow.org.

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