

Solidarity Playbook



#KeepItOn

Organising the global effort
to end internet shutdowns



International
Civil Society Centre

solidarityaction.network

The **#KeepItOn** campaign and coalition, hosted by Access Now, unites and organises efforts to end internet shutdowns worldwide.

Access Now is an international civil society organisation (ICSO) that defends and extends the digital rights of users at risk around the world, through direct technical support, comprehensive policy engagement, global advocacy, grassroots grantmaking, legal interventions, and convenings such as RightsCon.

Members of the #KeepItOn coalition work together to identify, verify and document incidents of shutdowns in order to raise awareness of how they violate human rights. The coalition also works to prevent their occurrence through advocacy, capacity-building and litigation.

Overview

In 2016 Access Now brought like-minded organisations together to create a campaign to end internet shutdowns, which represent a popular tool of repression by states looking to close the space for civil society and restrict freedoms of association, assembly and expression. Uniting under the banner of #KeepItOn and now with 220 members worldwide, they have successfully fought internet shutdowns in several national contexts, while raising the profile of the issue at the international level.





What launched the coalition?

Access Now had tracked internet shutdowns globally and found that its incidence was rising. Yet this was not being reported in a coordinated fashion, and it was not part of a global conversation on censorship and digital rights.

At their annual RightsCon event in 2016 in Silicon Valley, Access Now convened a group of partners and allies to look at the tools being used to silence dissent, in order to create a shared definition of what shutdowns are and why they are dangerous.

“Shutdowns harm everyone and allow human rights crackdowns to happen in the dark, with impunity. Journalists can’t file their stories. Demonstrators and human rights defenders are abused by authorities and thrown in jail. Citizens can’t participate fully in democratic discourse during elections. Business is disrupted and people can’t access emergency services for themselves and their families.”

Access Now (2016): [Access Now launches global #KeepItOn campaign with nearly 70 organizations committing to fight internet shutdowns.](#)

Through this discussion, and by articulating and defining the issue as **a violation of international law**, it became clear that this was something concrete around which a coalition could be built with a clear mission and goals. The partners launched the #KeepItOn campaign, now a global movement of more than 200 organisations.

What is an internet shutdown?

The #KeepItOn coalition defines a shutdown as:

*“An intentional disruption of internet or electronic communications rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, **often to exert control over the flow of information**”.*

This definition includes full network shutdowns, bandwidth ‘throttling’, and blocking of two-way communication platforms such as Twitter, WhatsApp or Facebook.

How does it work?

Access Now, an ICSSO, hosts the campaign, however the intention was for the initiative to be fairly **decentralised**, so that all members could feel **a sense of ownership** and so that there would be **leadership opportunities** for others. Initially, the priority was to create a kit of various resources such as #KeepItOn **branding which anyone could adopt and use**, or an open letter format with **templates that members could use** to kick-start specific actions. Therefore, while Access Now has driven the day-to-day activities of the coalition, other members are often 'in the driving seat.' As the coalition has matured, many new strategies have been incorporated into a **collective library of action**.

There is a **coalition mailing list** (a moderated [Riseup list](#) based on open-source technology), through which members can plan campaigns from start to finish, and where members highlight the work that they are doing. There are also **virtual and physical meetings**, for example at the annual RightsCon event or at other digital rights meetings, where planning and engagement can take place, particularly for longer-term work. However, the mailing list is at the heart of the collaboration and is active every day.

Access Now had already been [prioritizing funding](#) of shutdown-related work, and continues to coordinate with the #KeepItOn team to support coalition members' work and operations, for example through legal, technology or security support.

How Access Now's strategy developed

The make-up of Access Now's internal team that was set up around the campaign helped to inform the coalition's strategies. The team had advocacy expertise, but core members also included:

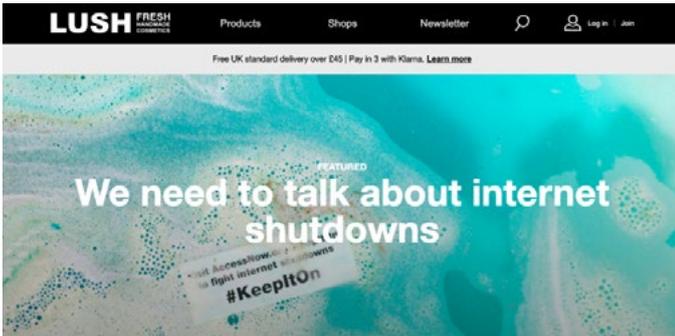
- A General Counsel, who focused on **legal opportunities** that could be leveraged.
- A Chief Technologist who focused on ways **to identify how shutdowns are being implemented**, and what **circumvention tactics** are possible.
- A **Grantmaking Program** that focused on expanding and strengthening the coalition at the grassroots and in high-risk environments.

Who are the members?

The coalition launched with 70 members in 2016, and membership has since grown to include more than 220 organisations from 99 countries around the world. Members are a mix of international, national, and local

groups, including research centres, rights and advocacy groups, detection networks, foundations, press freedom organisations, and groups focused on digital rights, freedom of expression, and democracy.

Coalition in Action



Following this initial push, the group has continued to advocate against internet shutdowns through various joint efforts to raise awareness, build resilience amongst communities and resist actual blackouts, including through grassroots advocacy, direct policy-maker engagement, technical support, and legal interventions.

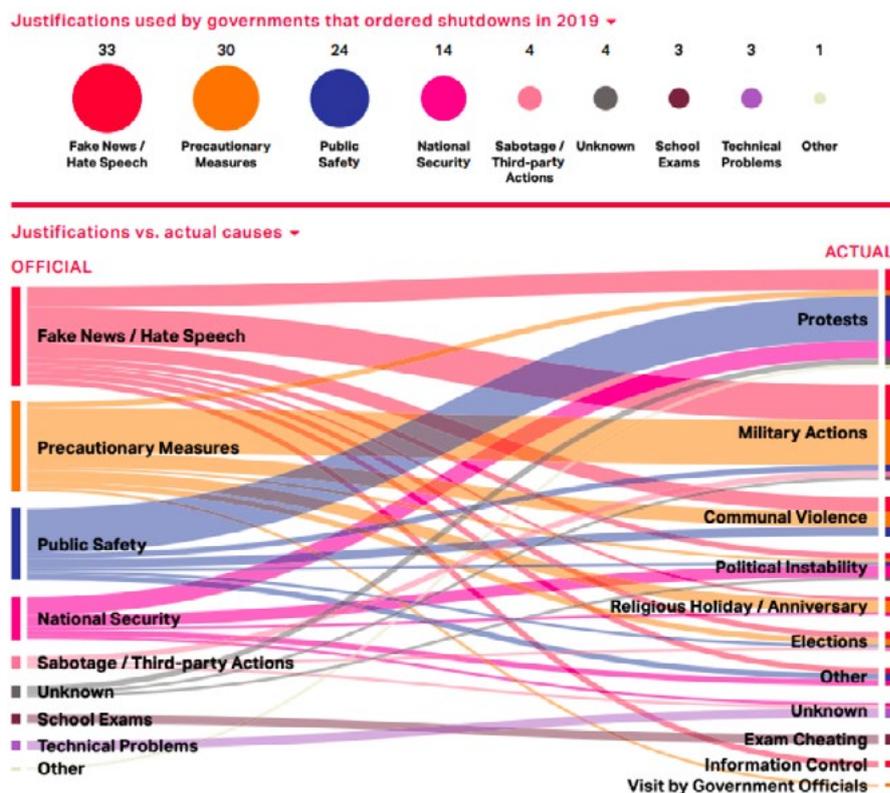
Strategies

- Documentation**
 Access Now's Shutdown Tracker Optimization Project (STOP) works with coalition members to **record instances of shutdowns**, and identify emerging challenges. In 2019 STOP documented that shutdowns were increasing in number, lasting longer, affecting more people, and targeting vulnerable groups. Aggregating this data makes it easier for advocates and researchers to find information about particular shutdown events, and **to analyze local, national, and global trends**.

The first campaign that the coalition ran was a global petition focused on general awareness raising of **internet shutdowns as violations of human rights** at the international level (i.e. not targeted at a specific country). The campaign created a unique partnership with the cosmetics company Lush, which sells in 50 countries worldwide. They developed a dedicated product – a 'bath-bomb' called Error404 – for the campaign. When the product dissolved, a message was revealed that had a link to the petition online. Through this campaign, over 60,000 signatures were collected **calling for the recognition of shutdowns as a violation of people's human rights**.

Figure taken from: *Targeted, cut off and left in the dark: The #KeepItOn report on internet shutdowns in 2019*

Justifications



- **Litigation**

Coalition members have litigated against internet shutdowns in order to **engage national and international courts in the fight**. Access Now's Digital Rights Litigators Network has supported litigants, and the coalition has also **produced amicus briefs with local partners** in different regions, to educate and sensitize judges who are not familiar with the impacts of shutdowns.

- **Election Assessments**

When there is an upcoming election in a country and there is a high risk of a shutdown, the coalition works with local partners to try to prevent any disruption. For example open letters are produced **highlighting the impact of shutdowns on people and the economy**. In some cases, groups might be equipped with alternative means of access such as a VPN, so that information can still flow during a partial, selective shutdown.

- **Shutdown Stories**

This project collects stories that demonstrate the harm of internet shutdowns. They show how people experience the blackouts on a personal level, and these **testimonies then inform the broader campaign** and its goals.

- **Digital Security Assistance**

Access Now's Digital Security Helpline and partners provide **one-on-one digital security support** to civil society organisations, journalists, and human rights defenders, as well as access to tools such as encryption. Access Now also provides the general public with **educational materials** to help them get back online.

- **Grassroots Grants to 'Keep It On'**

Access Now provides grants to grassroots and frontline organisations in order to support the communities most affected by shutdowns, and **build capacity** where it is needed.

How the coalition fought shutdowns in Bangladesh

In September 2019 authorities in Bangladesh initiated an internet shutdown targeting Rohingyas who had fled Myanmar to avoid persecution. There were no 3G or 4G services in the refugee camps and surrounding areas, and no reliable internet service. This disrupted humanitarian efforts on the ground, and affected the Rohingyas' ability to access accurate information and express themselves freely.

#KeepItOn campaign members have been actively involved in advocacy efforts around this shutdown, for example by reaching out to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to highlight the impact using a series of their Shutdown Stories. As COVID-19 entered the camps in May 2020, coalition members sent an open letter to the World Health Organization, asking that it urge governments to end ongoing internet shutdowns amid the pandemic.

"The internet ban cut our only lifeline to the outside world and now it may even kill us. As Coronavirus arrives in [Cox's] Bazar, depriving us of the internet deprives us of lifesaving information..."
Access Now (2020): [#KeepItOn: Internet shutdowns put lives at risk during COVID-19](#).

Members continued to highlight the shutdown, until it was recently lifted.

Outcomes

High-level figures and international and regional bodies have **denounced internet shutdowns** as a result of the coalition's advocacy efforts, for example:

- ✓ In 2016 the **UN passed the resolution** on the Promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the internet, condemning internet shutdowns, and urging states to refrain from ordering such measures. This was further maintained in 2018. Meanwhile, the African Commission on Human and People's Rights passed a resolution in 2016 condemning the use of shutdowns by state parties during elections and protests.
- ✓ In 2017, **30 governments coordinated by the Freedom Online Coalition** declared their commitment to fight internet shutdowns, in a statement issued at Access Now's RightsCon meeting in Brussels.
- ✓ The **UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Special Rapporteurs** have condemned internet shutdowns, and have cited data collected by the coalition in their annual reports to UN bodies. Such reports include the 2019 Human Rights Council Report on Freedom of peaceful assembly and association in the digital age, and the 2020 Human Rights Council Report on Disease pandemics and freedom of opinion and expression.
- ✓ Recent litigation wins against internet shutdowns have been recorded in Togo and Indonesia.

This has created important **international and regional support and accountability**, and is an important step in ensuring that shutdowns do not become the new normal.

CHALLENGES

Coordinating a holistic response

It is a challenge to ensure that the right resources are in the hands of the right partners in the right place at the right time. Contexts where shutdowns are most prevalent are also settings where civic space is narrower, or closed. Thus, there are fewer civil society organisations operating there who are able to work with a global coalition, or who have the skills needed for a holistic response (policy expertise for understanding the political context and technical expertise for running tests and identifying how the shutdown is implemented). Coordinating these moving parts is challenging - the grassroots grants programme is aimed at developing this infrastructure through capacity-building, in order to mitigate this ongoing challenge.

LESSONS LEARNED

Be prepared

Coalition members have learned from different contexts to be proactive rather than reactive. Now, rather than waiting for a shutdown to happen and then responding, they try to anticipate the challenges that may arise, for example around upcoming elections, and create strategies depending on the risks that are foreseeable.

Inclusivity

The decentralised model has been key to the coalition's success. Although Access Now is an international organisation, many of its team members don't have first-hand experience of internet shutdowns. It is vital therefore that those with direct experience of blackouts and restrictions are able to speak for themselves. Access Now has provided guidance and resources and initiated the development of the coalition, with the aim of being inclusive and raising up the true diversity of experiences. More support is needed from ICSOs to support those communities on the ground who are most affected by restrictions.

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