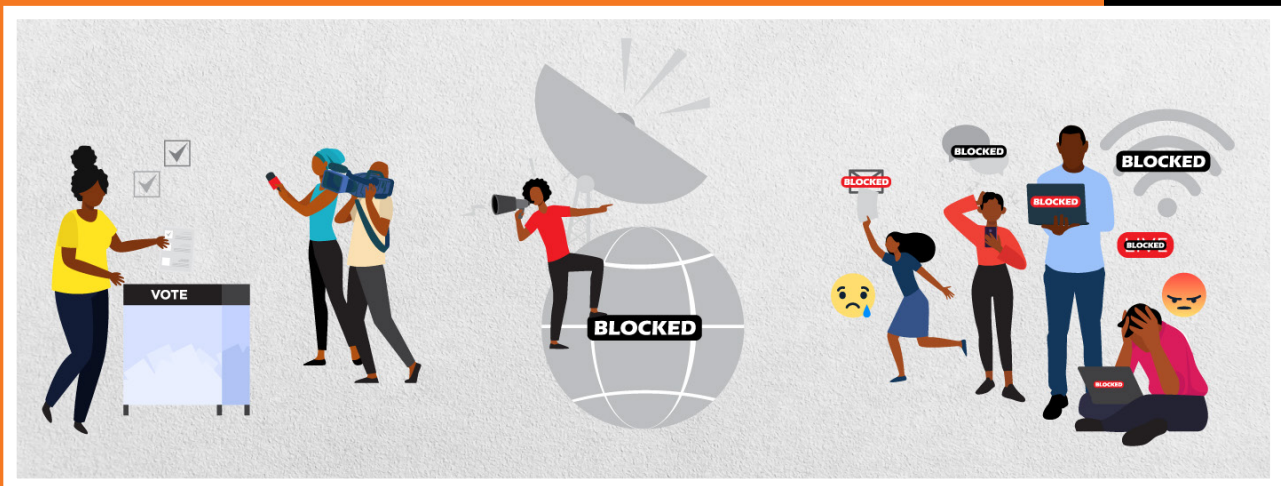




# Journalism Blocked, Information seized

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**“A tale of how internet shutdown  
crippled media work in Uganda”**

## **JOURNALISM BLOCKED, INFORMATION SEIZED**

**“A tale of how internet shutdown crippled  
media work in Uganda”**

Published by:



# Table of Contents

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1.	Who we are	<b>4</b>
2.	Acknowledgement	<b>5</b>
3.	Background to the study and	<b>6</b>
4.	Study Objectives	<b>8</b>
5.	Executive summary, conclusions and recommendations	<b>9</b>
6.	Methodology	<b>12</b>
7.	Key findings	<b>15</b>



## Who we are

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The Unwanted Witness is a civil society organization (CSO) that was established to respond to the gap in effective communication using various online expression platforms. The mission of Unwanted Witness is to put the power of change in the hands of citizens through the internet and online media to guarantee internet freedoms and improve the human rights situation in Uganda. Its key objectives are:

- To build capacities of journalists, writers and activists through training, research and institutional skills acquisition in human rights .
- To contribute to the entrenchment of an effective and efficient operational environment for the enjoyment of human rights through highlighting the challenges facing human rights .
- To establish and promote initiatives necessary for effective advocacy in human rights through utilising various media platforms .
- To encourage close collaboration and networking among human rights activists through opportunity creation, sharing forums and information exchange on human rights.



# Acknowledgement

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Unwanted Witness Uganda would like to take this opportunity to thank all those that made a contribution to this research. Special thanks are extended to Unwanted Witness Executive Director and her team, various respondents and sector opinion leaders.

# Background to the study

Internet is an electronic communications network that connects computer networks and organizational computer facilities around the world.(Merriam Webstar , 1828).

In Uganda, Facebook, Twitter, You tube, Instagram and Whatsapp usage continue to proliferate as their dominance in news sourcing and news breaking becomes paramount. Internet has evolved to the extent that it gives accounts to the events as they happen(Agena M, Ojok D & Achol.T, 2019, Pg. 5). The emergence of internet has presented several opportunities to traditional journalism such as improved access to online resources and the instant sharing of information.

The media plays an indispensable role in the proper functioning of a democracy, and this role is increasingly facilitated by the internet. Media enables full public participation in elections by educating voters on how to exercise their democratic rights, reporting results and monitoring vote counting, scrutinizing the electoral process including, electoral management, in order to evaluate the fairness of the process, its efficiency and its integrity (aceproject.org, 2011).

But this has not hindered the Ugandan Government from shutting down the internet. Internet shutdown is defined as the 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 (Access Now 2016).

Unfortunately, the shutdown occurred after government of Uganda had announced digital political campaigns as a measure to contain the spread of COVID-19, encouraging aspiring political candidates to use technology and mass media as a means of interacting with citizens (East African, 2020). Internet blockage greatly affected the flow/ sharing of information as well as meaningful citizens' participation in the entire electoral process.

We see a pattern of decrease in global internet freedom as more governments decide to throttle online dissent. Many of these shutdowns, especially in Africa have occurred during elections and other moments of political tension, at a time when access to information is critical for the public to make informed decisions. During that period citizens were not able to hold opinions, seek, impart and receive information through the internet. Internet shutdowns became a common trend and especially gained attention in 2011 during the uprising in Egypt. It was when the government shut down the internet supply for about a week. This was done to disrupt communication among protestors ( keep it on 2021 elections).

Other prominent internet shutdown cases in Africa include;

- ▶ **On 25 June 2017**, Congo-Brazzaville's internet connection was restored after 15 days shutdown ( Akwei, 2017).
- ▶ Tanzania restricted access to the internet and social media applications during elections in **October 2020 (Delali .S. 2020)**.
- ▶ **In June 2020**, Ethiopia imposed an internet shutdown which lasted for close to a month after unrest which followed the killing of a prominent Oromo singer (Net Blocks 2020).
- ▶ **For 93 days between January through April 2017**, the Cameroonian government with cooperation from private mobile operators cut off internet access in the two western, Anglophone regions of the country ( Abdi. L. 2017).
- ▶ **Zimbabwe, Burundi, Mali, Chad and Togo** also restricted access to the internet (Talya .P. 2021).

## Uganda's Internet shutdown history.

This is not the first time that authorities in Uganda are blocking access to online communication platforms. On the election eve of 2016, it blocked social media and mobile money services countrywide ( Unwanted witness). Ugandans including journalists then used Virtual Private Network (VPN) to circumvent social media blockage. However, in 2021 again, ahead of general elections, authorities ordered service providers to block internet gateways leaving traditional phone calls and SMS as the only means of communication ( Unwanted Witness 2021).

The choice by authorities in Uganda to shutdown the internet at pre, during and post election period had a compounded effect on the operation and the key role the media plays during elections.

As usual government's justification for the shutdown was to guarantee public order and safety in the face of protests and curb the spread of misinformation. The shutdown occurred in two phases where face book was first switched off on 11 January 2021 and this was after face book closed accounts belonging to government officials. Then later the internet gateway was also switched off on 13th January 2021. This was generally to prevent people from sharing information with others which would allegedly promote violence during and after elections. This meant that internet services were completely blocked including broadband carriers and mobile data services so people couldn't go online on any device ( Unwanted Witness 2021).

For a country that had announced digital political campaigning as a form of movement restriction to contain the spread of the corona virus pandemic, internet disruption came at a high cost to media freedom, citizens' fundamental human rights and

democracy for Uganda. Internet shutdowns are often accompanied by military operations making it difficult for documentation by citizen journalists and reporters. This also led to the emergence of internet refugees as journalists endangered their safety by taking hazardous journeys to areas with internet access. This mainly happened in border districts where journalists crossed to countries like Tanzania, Congo and Kenya to access internet.

Citizens are usually updated on their different social media platforms even before news on either televisions, radios or newspapers. But during the internet shutdown they had to wait for the news

anchored on televisions and radios and that's what they depended on. If you missed news on those platforms then you couldn't get informed any other way which left the public in the dark.

Internet being among the primary channels for journalists to access information, its unavailability made it hard for them to continue to access and disseminate information to the public. The frequent clampdown on internet access prevented them from securely communicating with sources or publishing on time. Most of the journalists that were involved in covering the elections described the shutdown as a dark time for the media and their listenership (Digital Human

Rights Lab 2021). Their right to access information through the internet and then disseminate it to the public was denied.

They resorted to traditional means for example messages, phone calls, physical appearance which complicated their work.

Basing on this background, Unwanted Witness decided to carryout research on the impact of internet shutdown on the work of journalists and media houses who relay information to the citizens.

**"However, in 2021 again, ahead of general elections, authorities ordered service providers to block internet gateways leaving traditional phone calls and SMS as the only means of communication ( Unwanted Witness 2021)."**

## Objectives of the study

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The study sought to explore the impact of the recent internet shutdown to the journalists during the election period.

Specifically;

- How the development in technology specifically internet is complimenting the role of media in Uganda.
- How the recent internet shutdown affected the media's role of covering and relying information to citizens in an electoral process?
- What the specific individual experiences of internet shutdown to journalists both in the city and country-side are.
- Assessing the economic impact of internet shutdown to individual journalists and the media house.





# Executive summary

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## Methodology and sample size

The report presents findings of a preliminary study that sought to establish the impact of internet shutdown on media's role in covering and relaying information to citizens in an electoral process. It further captures specific journalist experiences of internet shutdown to their work both in the city and country-side.

The study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection tools that included conducting in-depth interviews with both journalists and representatives of media houses. A total of 138 respondents were interviewed across 6 regions of Uganda. These were predominantly (64%) field reporters, 30 % were news editors and 6% were station managers. The majority of those interviewed were male and below 40 years of age.

## Importance of internet in journalism work.

While its true that Journalists differ in the degree to which they find the Internet important, the study found out that the common denominator is that the internet simplifies their work in the areas of deepening their research, access, and faster news dissemination. Thus, the majority have internet into their daily routines of news gathering and production.

## Past experiences

Arbitrary Internet shutdowns aren't new to most journalists. To majority journalists interviewed, this was the second experience working in an environment of internet blackout. However, a sizeable number (37%) were experiencing this for the first time and indicated that it came with new challenges of navigating through news gathering, sharing and production.

## Impact of the shutdown

On the whole, internet shutdown affected the country in many ways, from reducing productivity to causing losses in ways that internet could have served. It generally slowed down the economy and had a negative impact on many other sectors of society.

The role mass media plays of keeping the citizenry abreast with timely information and monitoring the electoral process was crippled. A free and fair election is not all about the freedom to vote and the knowledge of how to cast a vote, but also a participatory process where voters engage in public debate and have adequate information about policies, candidates and the electoral process itself in order to make informed choices.

Indeed a democratic election with no media freedom or stifled media freedom is contradiction, more so after the government announced a digital or scientific electoral process. The net negative effect of internet shutdown was felt more amongst Journalists and media owners. For media houses, it became increasingly hard for them to communicate. For the field reporters, it became increasingly difficult get to send their reports on time. Likewise, online media journalists and businesses couldn't share information. Being that the shutdown was done during times when Covid-19 was ravaging the world, internet had become a safe tool to minimise the spread. Its closure meant that journalists worked in fear as they had to travel physically using public means to deliver their work.

Notably, effective media coverage of the general elections in Uganda was curtailed by the internet shutdown as pointed out by 80% of the respondents. On the whole, the shutdown had negative impact on both the quality and quantity of the news output.

For example, Mobile money services were interrupted, so the means to facilitate journalists with fares, lunch, wages were equally curtailed which impacted greatly on the quality and timeliness of news and information.

Other specific impacts included;

- It made it harder to effectively communicate the news in full.
- Affected timely delivery of the news as they sought other ways that were slower than using the internet channel.
- Made it complicated to research and reference other news items.
- They're not able to share and fully document information.
- Access to news was affected because of the delayed delivery



**Indeed a democratic election with no media freedom or stifled media freedom is contradiction, more so after the government announced a digital or scientific electoral process. The net negative effect of internet shutdown was felt more amongst Journalists and media owners.**

## Alternative channels

Without the internet, journalists that had previously relied on internet to complete their tasks, now switched to alternative means to get their tasks done. For example, the findings show that most journalists and media houses resorted to making calls as the immediate alternative means. However, while this worked well for radio, it became increasingly hard for TV transmission because of the lack of visuals. SMS and physical transport either on foot, use of Boda bodas and Taxis were the other alternative means that were adopted.

While the alternative means served their purpose, they weighed heavily on the effectiveness of information and news delivery. The alternative modes proved expensive, time consuming, compromised accuracy and was difficult to manage.

## Monetary impact to journalists and media houses

Media houses and journalists counted losses during the Internet and social media shutdown. Loss of viewership, advertising and operational costs escalated for media houses while the journalists were laid off and also lost income through non-and delayed submission of news., which media owners would not pay for. It indeed had direct consequence of businesses staying offline.

## Conclusions

Internet can play a vital role in the work of journalists. Journalism work is only possible if the internet is not switched off and if it is necessary for the Government to shutdown internet, then journalists should be considered first before taking on that act.

There must be a dialogue between the government and its citizens. The Government should involve the citizens before taking on some decisions like shutting down the internet. It should put into consideration the people using the internet and how much they would be affected if internet is switched off. Internet shutdown slowed down the economy and had a negative impact on many sectors of society which up to now are still struggling to rise up.

This research indicates that so many journalists and media houses were affected because of the internet shutdown as there was limited research of information and slow delivery of news.

Although they opted for alternative modes of transmitting information, they felt a deep vacuum in the depth and quality of their reporting, it was costly and also delays in disseminating news to the public. This research is a first step to understanding the importance of internet in journalism and how it simplifies their work.

## Recommendations

A number of recommendations were suggested by the journalists to the government.

- **There is need for enhanced relationships between social media companies and governments. Many believe that these companies should take effort to understand the "social and political context to prevent the enforcement of their policies playing into the hands of authoritarian governments"**
- **The Government should put into consideration the importance of journalist and value their profession because their work as journalists is connected to internet and it also helps them make research and broadcast news.**
- **The journalists also advised the policy makers to find other means of curbing spread of fake news and also promoting public safety instead of switching off the internet.**
- **The government through the Uganda Communications Commission should sensitize the public on the effective ways of using social media platforms.**
- **The Uganda Communications Commissions should advocate for journalists and media houses to be compensated for the losses they made during internet shutdown.**
- **Service providers should give customers advance notice of internet shutdowns and disclose the government's role and the legal basis for restricting networks and services.**
- **The policy makers should set a law that governs all social media users on what to do and what not do on internet.**

## Methodology of the study

**Data collection methods:** The study used mixed methods of data collection involving both qualitative and quantitative approaches. A questionnaire was designed for this purpose. The data from the two sets of methodologies was analyzed and has been consolidated in this document.

**Interview Approach:** in-depth interviews involving detailed discussions with the selected key informants. An interview was prepared with questions to facilitate the conversation with key informants who were selected for example the news reporters, news editors and station managers.



## Scope of the study

In terms of scope, this was a nationwide survey covering over seven regions of Uganda. In order to reach these respondents, the study used sampling strategies where the country was divided into seven regions- Central, West Nile, Western, Kigezi, Northern, Eastern and Buganda region.



## Sample size and sampling procedure.

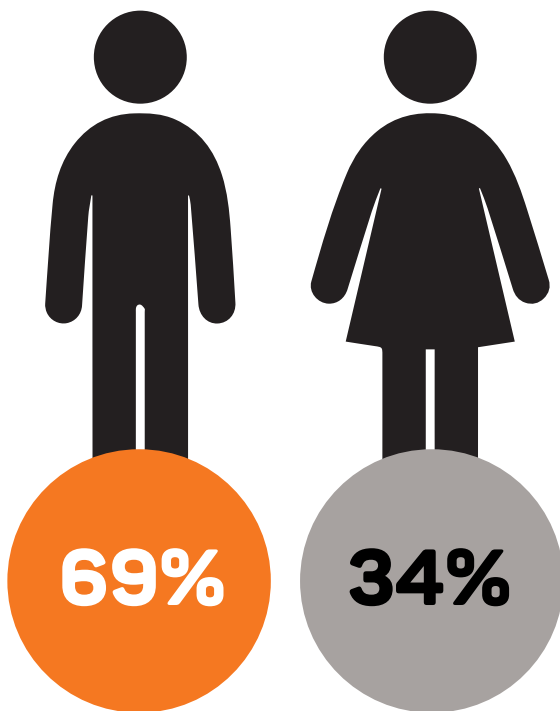
We sampled a total of 138 selected respondents for the interview administered questionnaires.

**138**  Respondents interviewed

## Participant demographics

This section details the description of the participant characteristics to give readers information on the number and type of study participants, as a way of clarifying to whom the study findings apply.

Primary Duty	Count	%
Field Reporter	89	64
News Editor	41	30
Station Manager	8	6
Grand Total	138	



### Primary duty

- In total, a total of 138 participants were interviewed and all these were from the media. Field reporters constituted the highest number of participants. **30%** were news editors. **6%** of the participants were station managers.

### Gender

- Majority of those interviewed were male.

## Participant Age group

Age group	Count	%
20-30 yrs.	86	63%
31-40 yrs	36	26%
41-50 yrs	14	10%
51 and above	1	1%
Grand Total	138	

### Age group

- Majority (89%) of the research participants were youthful, i.e. less than 40 years of age.

## Participant demographics

Locations/Distribution of respondents by regions.

- The central region and Buganda had the highest number of participants sampled. Followed by the Western. The Eastern region had the least number of participants.
- Kampala and Masaka had the highest number of participants in the Central region.
- A substantial number of participants were also sampled from the western region, including the Kigezi region.

Region	Count
Buganda	21
Central	65
Eastern	1
Kigezi	23
Northern	2
West Nile	7
Western	13
N/A	6
Grand Total	138

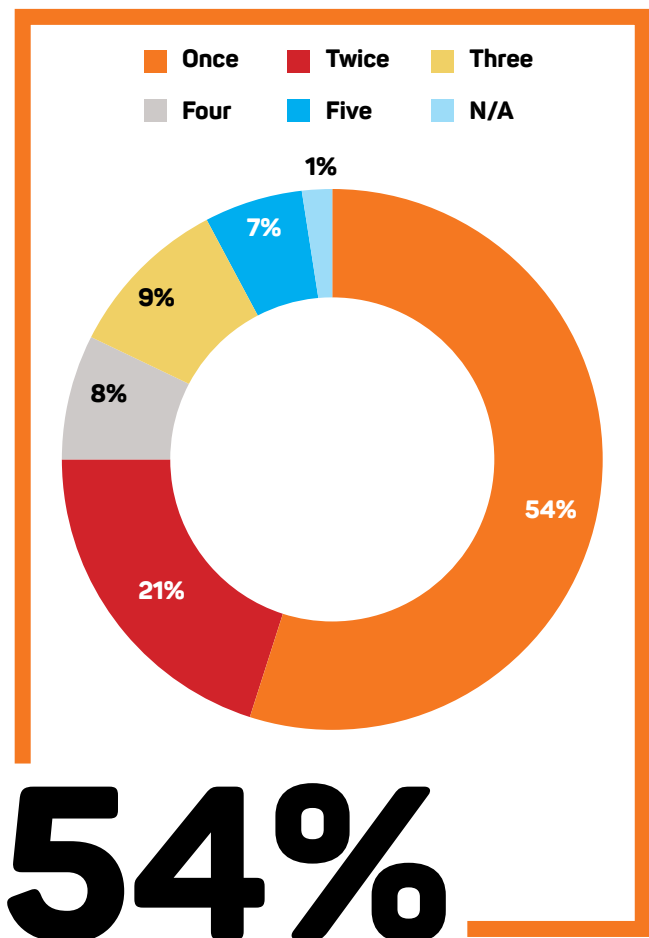
Districts/Locations	Count
Kampala	25
Kabale	23
Masaka	21
Mubende	15
Wakiso	10
Kagadi	9
Mityana	9
Arua	7
Mukono	3
Kakumiro	2
Alebtong	1
Fortportal	1
Kabarole	1
Kampala	1
Mityana	1
Mpigi	1
Soroti	1
Yumbe	1
N/A	6
Grand Total	138

## No of practicing years

Age group	Count	%
20-30 yrs.	86	63%
31-40 yrs	36	26%
41-50 yrs	14	10%
51 and above	1	1%
Grand Total	138	

- Most journalists sampled were pretty young in the field of journalism
- as results indicated most of them having practiced for less than 6
- years. majority of whom have practiced for less than 3 years.

## Number of parliamentary and presidential elections.



**54%**

just over half were first time news journalists in the 2021 presidential and parliamentary election in Uganda.

# Key findings

## Importance of internet to journalists

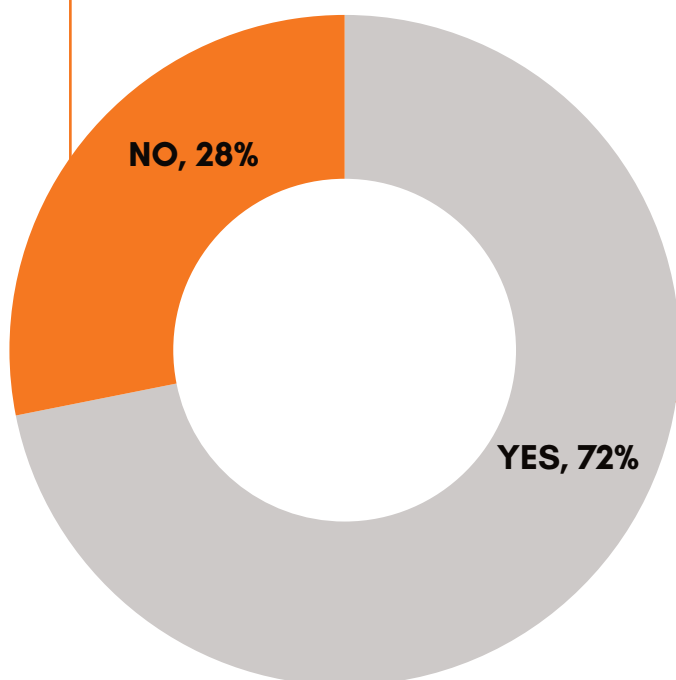
Evidently, journalists differ in the degree to which they find the Internet important and influences how they use it.



**“Internet is a platform for research since no one knows it all.”** says Journalist

# 28%

have a neutral perspective and think that even without internet, they can still perform their responsibilities through the use of other means like phone calls, messages and physical appearance.



Most journalists interviewed indicated that there is demonstrated evidence that internet is important in their work because they are able to;

**a. Research, which simplifies their work, improves depth and validation of their reporting.**

**b. They are able to relay news and information timely.**

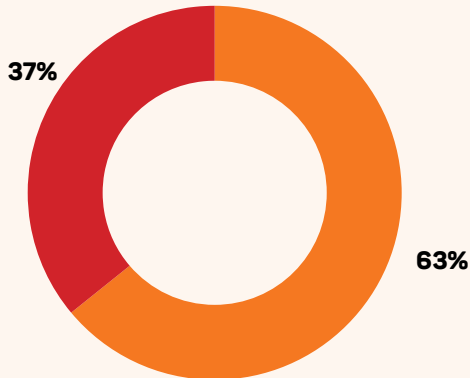
**28%** said internet is not as important because whether they have the internet or not, they can still perform their tasks and responsibilities effectively. So, internet is not an encumbrance to their work.

# 72%

acknowledgement of importance of internet is evidence that most journalists have fused the Internet into their daily routines of news gathering and production as well as research, heightened by an increasing need for speedy delivery and access to information

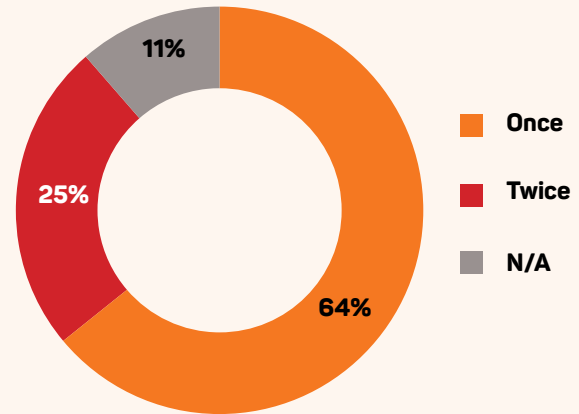
## Past experience with internet shutdown

Internet outages aren't new to most journalists



**63%** of journalists had experienced internet shutdown before.

**37%** of journalists indicated experiencing the shutdown for the first time in their career as journalists, and found it hard and difficult to navigate. This is because internet had simplified their work but they had to look for alternative means of transmitting information which was time consuming and inaccurate.

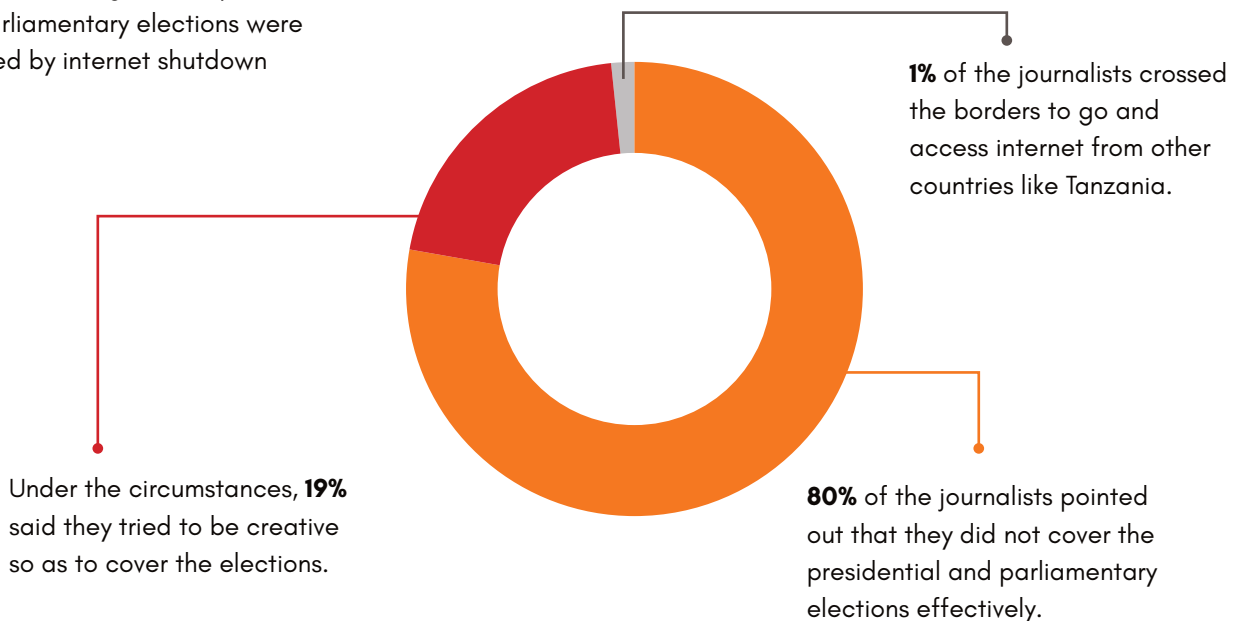


Uganda has experienced multiple internet shutdowns especially during the electioneering period.

Results show that Prior to the 2021 shutdown, majority (**64%**) of the journalists had experienced internet shutdown only once in the past although it wasn't for a long period like the one of 2021 which disrupted their work.

## If journalists effectively covered presidential and parliamentary voting and tallying election results without internet?

Effective coverage of the presidential and parliamentary elections were curtailed by internet shutdown



Under the circumstances, **19%** said they tried to be creative so as to cover the elections.

**80%** of the journalists pointed out that they did not cover the presidential and parliamentary elections effectively.



## If journalists effectively covered presidential and parliamentary elections.

80% of the journalists pointed out that they did not cover the presidential and parliamentary elections effectively. Elections are important because the people are able to choose their representatives and they should have the necessary information to decide the right kind of people who will provide democratic leadership. It is the cardinal role of the media to provide such information which didn't happen because of the internet shutdown.

This denied citizens the right to access the much needed information at a time when Uganda was conducting digital/scientific campaigns, as a measure to contain the spread of COVID-19. The information seizure most likely had an effect on how decisions made by the citizens and the general credibility of the election.

Under the circumstances, 19% said they tried to be creative so as to cover the elections. They used traditional means of relaying information which was costly and time consuming. The media had to spend more on delivering information about elections than it had budgeted and set targets were not fulfilled as well since more time was spent in transporting information from the field to the media houses. This denied the citizens access to timely and spot on information about the elections rendering the media ineffective.

1% of the journalists crossed the borders to go and access internet from other countries like Tanzania so as to effectively cover the elections which put their safety at risk. Although they weren't able to send information as fast as they used to before the internet shutdown.

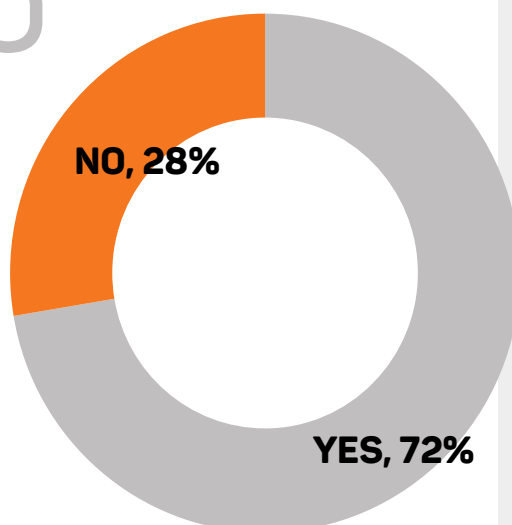
# Impact of internet shutdown on the work of journalists.

## Shutdown Impact

# 72%

Of the journalists indicated that they had been affected by the internet shutdown during the presidential and parliamentary elections.

Field reporters reporting further away from their stations were most affected because they had to incur more costs in delivering the information to their respective media houses.



Only a few of them (28%) indicated having a low impact. Those within their localities were less affected because they would just walk to their stations and deliver the news.

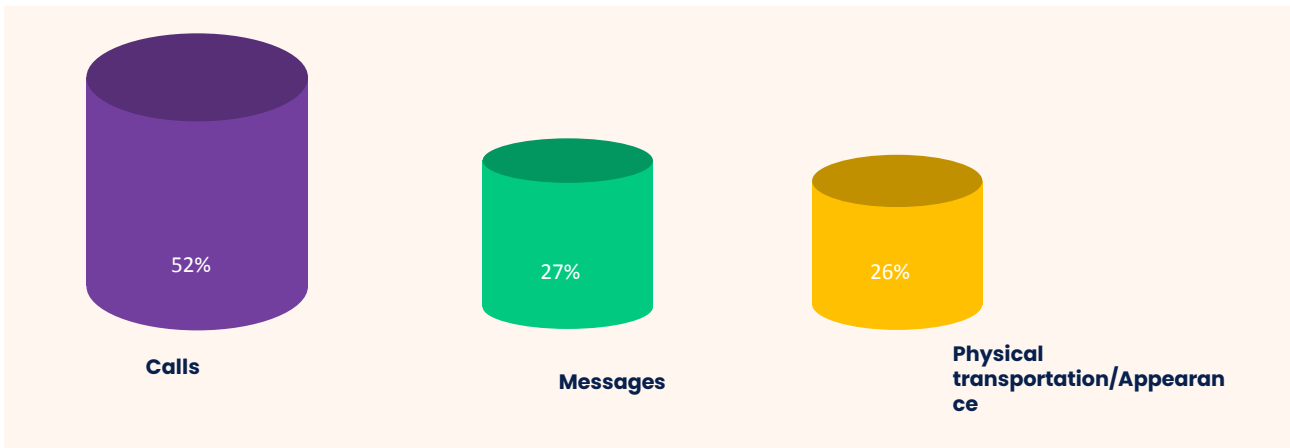
## How shutdown impacted journalists

A shutdown of the internet meant that most journalists were incapable of doing their work;

- It made it harder to effectively communicate the news in full.
- Affected timely delivery of the news as they sought other ways that were slower than using the internet channel.
- Made it complicated to research and reference other news items.
- They're not able to share and fully document information.

## Alternative Modes used to transport information and level of effectiveness

In the absence of internet, journalists resorted to alternative delivery mode for information and news which costly and time consuming. Its evident that they used a multiplicity of channels. Majority of them(52%) are said to have made calls, used messages services(SMS) while others made physical appearances at designated news stations.



### Alternative Modes used to transport information and level of effectiveness

**52%**



**of the journalists used phone calls** to transmit information to their respective media houses. Phone calls were used commonly because they gave immediate feedback and during the shutdown it was the fastest means of communication. This helped media to deliver information on time however, these calls were often disrupted either because of high network traffic or the low network connectivity which led to delivery of incomplete information.

**27%**



**of the journalists used SMS** to send messages to their respective media houses. A few journalists used text messages. This mode of communication was equally ineffective since its was slow and would not provide instant feedback. Text messages would not share full documented stories so they had to be used alongside phone calls. This was time consuming and it left out a lot of important information leading to denial of timely information to the general public at a time was vital for life saving.

**26%**



**of the journalists delivered the Information physically** either by public transport i.e. Boda bodas and taxis or physically walking to the media stations. This became costly for both the journalists and the media houses. It was also difficult for the journalists to get enough stories since they had to hurry back to the work stations to present the stories for editing. Some of the information could get lost along the way or was delayed by traffic jam rendering the journalists ineffective and not able to deliver the information on time.



## level of effectiveness of alternative modes

The internet shutdown weighed heavily on the effectiveness of information and news delivery. The alternative modes proved expensive, time consuming, inaccurate and difficult.

Impact	Count	Percentages
Some media houses temporarily closed	95	69%
Some workers were laid off	36	26%
Delayed payment	7	5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>100</b>

69% of the journalists noted that the modes of transmitting information were ineffective because they were;

- costly,
- time consuming,
- inaccurate,
- difficult.

*“The applied mode delayed news delivery and accuracy was compromised. It was slower, less available and considerably more expensive.” Journalist*

## level of effectiveness of alternative modes

**69%** of journalists and media houses indicated that most alternative modes **were not as effective** as the use of internet. This is mainly because the modes were costly, time consuming, inaccurate and difficult to use in terms of relaying information. Modes like messages could not collect a lot of information which affected the media’s role in conveying timely and spot on news about the entire electoral process hence making it impossible for journalists to fully monitor the elections and for the citizens to make timely and informed choices.

**26%** of the journalists who acknowledged effectiveness of the alternative channels attributed it to the strictness of time keeping as they had to physically present their stories at the media house. These mainly used physical appearance. However the mode became costly for their media houses compared to when they used internet.

## Economic impact to journalists and media houses

Many businesses in both the formal and informal sector that rely on the internet and other digital platforms to relay news and information were hugely impacted by the internet shutdown in Uganda.

Evidently, Media houses were not spared either. It was observed that some media houses were not able to effectively broadcast their stories. There was noticeably dropped/low viewership and advertising which reduced on the media’s revenue since they could not broadcast information that would capture the citizens’ attention for them to watch or listen. Some companies that advertise online also made some losses because of the reduction of customers. As a result, some could not sustain keeping their workers.

Impact	Count
Some media houses temporarily closed	8
Some workers were laid off	2
Delayed payment	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>

Notably;

- Closure: 8 media houses were said to have experienced temporarily closure. Closure was evident for most of those whose works are entirely online for example the Kigezi News Network. This means that journalists were not able to earn during that time.
- Staff lay offs: in 2 media houses, staff were said to have been laid off as management could not afford to pay them. This led to some journalists losing jobs and not able to play their role in disseminating information to the public during that critical time.
- Delayed payments: in 20 media houses, journalists were not paid in time and facilitations like transport allowances were not paid. This demotivated the journalists hence not doing their work effectively.



**“A journalist is an individual trained to collect/gather information in form of text, audio or pictures, processes them to a news-worthy form and disseminates it to public .”**

## Economic impact to journalists and media houses

Media houses and journalists counted losses during the Internet and social media shutdown because they had to incur more costs in making phone calls, writing messages and also transporting themselves from the field to the stations. This caused financial problems for both the journalists and the media houses leading to closure and pay cuts which made it difficult for the journalists to earn and also work effectively.



**“I lost money because I was not able to submit stories on time”**

Journalist

**“They pay us per story, during that time, I submitted less stories, and that means I earned less than usual”**

Journalist

Amount	Count	%
Over Ugx 1,000,000	2	7%
Between Ugx 100,000-900,000	13	45%
Between Ugx 10,000-90,000	5	17%
Don't know	9	31%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>100</b>

Because they did not collect any stories, journalists lost a lot of money since some are paid according to the number of stories collected.

- 7% lost in excess of 1 million shilling.
- 45% of the journalists lost between 100,000shs to 900,000shs
- 17% lost between 10,000shs to 90,000 shs.
- 31% of the journalists stated that they could not estimate how much they lost and the media house at large.

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