Internet Shutdowns During Elections and Their Impact on Public Health: Lessons from Uganda

David Ojut Okello examines how the internet and public health are intertwined, documents the harmful health effects of internet shutdowns, and offers practical recommendations on how to protect essential health connectivity.

Introduction

In recent years, governments across the world have increasingly resorted to temporary internet and social media restrictions during politically sensitive periods, particularly elections. These measures are often justified on grounds of national security, prevention of violence, and control of misinformation. During Uganda's recent presidential and parliamentary general elections, nationwide restrictions on internet access and social media platforms were implemented with similar objectives.

While the security rationale for such actions has been widely articulated, far less attention has been paid to their unintended consequences—particularly on public health and social well-being. In a country where mobile connectivity increasingly underpins access to healthcare, information, and social support, the interruption of digital services carries significant implications. This article examines the health and social impacts of internet shutdowns and offers constructive, forward-looking recommendations for balancing security needs with the protection of population health.[1,2]

The Growing Role of Digital Connectivity in Health Care

Over the past decade, Uganda and many low-and middle-income countries have expanded the use of digital health technologies. Mobile phones and internet-enabled platforms are now used for telemedicine consultations, appointment scheduling, referrals, chronic disease management, mental health counselling, and public health communication.[3,4]

For many patients—particularly those in rural or underserved areas—digital connectivity bridges long-standing gaps in physical access to healthcare facilities. For others, such as people living with chronic illness, disabilities, or mental health conditions, telemedicine and online support are essential components of care rather than optional services.[5]

Impact of Internet Shutdowns on Health Services

Disruption of Telemedicine and Continuity of Care

Internet shutdowns directly interrupt telemedicine services, preventing patients from consulting healthcare providers, sharing test results, or receiving timely medical advice. Evidence from multiple settings shows that disruptions in digital connectivity undermine continuity of care and delay diagnosis and treatment, particularly for chronic and non-communicable diseases.[6,7]

Healthcare providers also face challenges in coordinating referrals, accessing electronic health records, and communicating across facilities. Even short-term disruptions can have cascading effects on patient outcomes, especially in emergency and referral-dependent cases.[8]

Reduced Access to Health Information

Access to reliable health information is a recognized social determinant of health. Internet shutdowns limit access to trusted guidance on medication use, maternal and child health, infectious disease prevention, and emergency alerts.[9]

Studies examining communication disruptions have shown that shutdowns can create information vacuums that increase anxiety, reduce adherence to treatment, and make it harder for public authorities to disseminate accurate health messaging during crises.[10]

Mental Health and Psychosocial Effects

Political uncertainty and social disruption are often associated with increased psychological stress. Internet shutdowns can amplify these effects by isolating individuals from social networks, counselling services, and online peer support communities.[11]

For patients receiving telepsychology or mental health support, abrupt loss of connectivity may interrupt care and exacerbate symptoms of anxiety, depression, and distress, particularly among young people and those with pre-existing mental health conditions.[12]

Broader Social and Economic Determinants of Health

Beyond direct health services, internet shutdowns have indirect effects on health through economic and social pathways. Disruptions to digital commerce, mobile money services, and informal economic activity reduce household income and financial resilience. Evidence from low-income settings shows that economic shocks are closely linked to poorer nutrition, reduced healthcare utilization, and delayed treatment seeking.[13,14]

These effects tend to disproportionately affect already vulnerable populations, widening existing health and social inequities.

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Balancing Security Concerns with Public Health Protection

It is important to recognize that governments have a legitimate responsibility to maintain public order and national security, particularly during elections. However, growing global evidence suggests that blanket internet shutdowns carry significant social and health costs and may undermine essential services without proportionate public safety benefits.[1,15]

A more balanced approach—one that protects essential health functions while addressing security risks—can safeguard both public well-being and national stability.

Policy Considerations and Constructive Recommendations

Protect Essential Health Connectivity

Governments may consider formally designating health services—such as telemedicine platforms, emergency communications, hospital information systems, and public health messaging—as protected services that remain operational during periods of restriction.[5,16]

Use Targeted and Proportionate Measures

Targeted, time-limited restrictions, rather than nationwide shutdowns, can reduce harm while addressing specific security threats. Advances in network management allow for more proportionate interventions.[1,17]

Strengthen Alternative Health Communication Channels

Investment in SMS-based alerts, radio health programming, and community health worker networks can provide redundancy and ensure continuity of health information when internet access is limited.[9]

Engage Health Sector Stakeholders

Early consultation with health professionals, patient groups, and telecommunications providers can help identify critical services and establish practical exemption mechanisms ahead of elections or emergencies.[16]

Promote Transparency and Public Communication

Clear communication regarding the scope, duration, and rationale for restrictions can reduce uncertainty, maintain public trust, and support compliance with both security and health objectives.[1]

Conclusion

Uganda's experience illustrates the deep interdependence between digital connectivity and public health. While security considerations are legitimate, evidence indicates that widespread internet shutdowns can significantly disrupt healthcare delivery, worsen mental health outcomes, and exacerbate social inequities.

Integrating public health considerations into digital governance—through proportionate measures, protected health connectivity, and transparent decision-making—offers a constructive path toward safeguarding both national security and population well-being.



A doctor working on the internet courtesy of FREEPIK

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