Selected Papers of #AoIR2024:
The 25th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Sheffield, UK / 30 Oct - 2 Nov 2024

POLICY AT ODDS- DIGITAL INDIA VERSUS INTERNET SHUTDOWNS

Manisha Madapathi[1]
University of Hyderabad

Digital policy in India

The government of India, in 2014, through the Department of Electronics and Information Technology launched a flagship programme called Digital India, with a vision to transform India into a 'digitally empowered society and knowledge economy'. The official press release on the announcement of this programme states that "Even though India is known as a powerhouse of software, the availability of electronic government services to citizens is still comparatively low". That this programme would ensure that government services are available to citizens electronically. That this is intended to bring public accountability through mandated delivery of government's services electronically.

A similar intention is reflected in another initiative by the government of India called BharatNet (formerly known as National Optical Fibre Network). In 2012, this project was undertaken by a government statutory body called the Universal Service Obligation Fund, under the Department of Telecommunications (DoT), Ministry of Communications. The USO Fund was established with the fundamental objective of providing access to telegraph services, including mobile services, broadband connectivity and ICT infrastructure creation in rural and remote areas. The USOF website says that BharatNet is one of the biggest rural telecom project in the world.

Objective is to enable access providers like mobile operators, Internet Service Providers (ISPs), Cable TV operators, content providers to launch various services such as applications like e-health, e-education and e-governance in rural and remote India. So far, 207,989 Gram Panchayats are connected through the BharatNet project and 669,751 Km of OFC has been laid. Additionally, 782,366 Fibre-To-The-Home (FTTH) connections are commissioned and 104,675 Wi-Fi hotspots are installed to ensure last-mile connectivity.

While policies and projects involving massive communication infrastructure are encouraged by the regime, it is done primarily for the purpose of efficient governance. Establishing digital networks to remote rural India serve very defined goals for the project of Digital India. The vision areas outlined by this project attempts the following:

---

[1] Suggested citation: Madapathi, M. (2024, October). *Policy at odds- Digital India versus Internet Shutdowns*. Paper presented at AoIR 2024: The 25th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Sheffield, UK: AoIR. Retrieved from: http://spir.aoir.org.

Firstly, it states that digital infrastructure is a core utility to every citizen. Every citizen should have access to high speed internet for the delivery of services. Every citizen should have a “cradle to grave digital identity that is unique, lifelong, online and ‘authenticable’ to every citizen”. Through mobile phones and online banking, citizen is enabled to participate in digital and financial life. And there would be easy access to Common Service Centre. These are access points for delivery of government to citizen e-services, to make service delivery mechanism transparent and to reduce citizens’ effort in visiting government offices.

Second, to disburse services on demand for efficacy of governance. To seamlessly integrate services across departments or jurisdictions. To ensure all citizen entitlements to be portable and available on cloud. To make services available in real time from online and mobile platforms. To make financial transactions electronic and cashless. They also intend to leverage GIS (geospatial information systems) to help make decisions for support systems and development.

Thirdly, to digitally empower citizens. Their objective is to achieve digital literacy, and to provide universally accessible digital resources, and to make these available in Indian languages.

Internet shutdowns during civil protests

One can see from these initiatives that there is a lot of encouragement from the state for the citizens to go digital. However, it is interesting to note that India has been notorious at shutting down the internet, at minor inconveniences and also to control violent unrest. Some of these shutdowns were placed to avoid cheating during government examinations. And many of these have been during citizen protests and during instances of anticipated violence or dissent.

Using internet shutdowns as a reaction to civil unrest is not uncommon in India. In the year 2020, India ranked no.1 in the total number of hours spent 1,655 hours in internet blackouts, and four times more spent in throttling networks. In 2021, ranking in the order or the total cost of internet shutdowns- India ranked no.3 with 1,157 hours of blackout; and in 2022 in ranks no.6 with 1,533 hours in shutdowns. (Top10VPN, 2022, 2023, 2024) Several state and central governments have used this tactic to suspend the flow of information either to curtail the ability of citizens to organise through social media networks or to dominate discourse around the event, or both. Several of these instances have been instances of violation of the right to peaceful assembly. In Access Now’s report (2021), however, India has consistently raked number one, in the total number of hours spent under internet shutdown. Protest communication networks have been fragile, even more so, ever since they have become digitalised. The earliest movement that was aided by digital networks was the Egypt revolution in early 2010s, that overthrew the then president Hosni Mubarak, occurred through Twitter. Since the Arab Spring, regimes have been wary of citizens using digital networks to collectivise.

More recently, it has become frequent for governments to clampdown on the internet during social unrest. Historically across the world, communication blackout is not a new tactic (Tufekci, 2016; Article 19, 2020). In India, the anti- CAA protests in late 2020, and early 2021, was one such period that saw many shutdowns across multiple cities, simultaneously. This severe crackdown on internet was criticised by many international watchdogs (Amnesty International, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020). Later that year, we saw the Farmers Protest, where a majority of farmers in the northern part of India

dissented to the unconstitutionally introduced farm laws, through a sit-in protest near the national capital, Delhi.

When we look at these two actions by the government- one, to digitise governance (as seen with initiatives such as Digital India, and BharatNet) and provide connectivity to all citizens to digitally empower them allow for the participation in networked economy; and two, to disrupt these very connections when citizens use networks to express dissent. Placed together, these look like opposing forces, incompatible with each other. The Indian state's impetus for the digital is to achieve efficient governance, and to provide each of its citizen with a digital identity. However when citizens use the internet to collectivise or mobilise against a democratic government, these same networks are shutdown.

In this paper I take a closer look at the policy documents and the building of information infrastructure that is written into it. These massive projects embed infrastructure into policy, and promote the building of industry around this "common" communication good. While also studying how infrastructure gets suspended during dissenting movements led by citizens. I use the case of two events- the anti-CAA movement, and the Framers Protest to understand this disruption. Using newspaper analysis and interviews, I examine how infrastructure gets denied and disrupted to citizens when digital networks are used in ways that are unintended by the government.

References

Article 19. (2020). (rep.). *Iran: Tightening the Net 2020 After Blood and Shutdowns.* (pp. 23–24). London, UK: Article 19.

Digital India. (2023). Retrieved from https://digitalindia.gov.in/

India: International community must condemn crimes against peaceful protesters. Amnesty International Australia. (2020, March 3). https://www.amnesty.org.au/india-states-must-condemn-human-rights-violations-against-peaceful-protesters/

India: Protests, attacks over New Citizenship Law. Human Rights Watch. (2020, April 9). https:// www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/09/india-protests-attacks-over-new-citizenship-law

KeepItOn. (2021) *Shattered Dreams and Lost Opportunities: A Year in The Fight to KeepItOn.* Access Now. https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2021/03/KeepItOn-report-on-the-2020-data_Mar-2021_3.pdf

Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and Tear Gas*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

USOF ongoing schemes - advancing telecom connectivity in India. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://usof.gov.in/en/ongoing-schemes

Woodhams, S., Migliano, S., (2022) *The Global Cost of Internet Shutdowns 2021 report*. Top10VPN. https://www.top10vpn.com/cost-of-internet-shutdowns/

Woodhams, S., Migliano, S., (2023)*The global cost of internet shutdowns 2022 report*. Top10VPN. https://www.top10vpn.com/research/cost-of-internet-shutdowns/2022/

Woodhams, S., Migliano, S., (2024) *The global cost of internet shutdowns 2023 report*. Top10VPN. https://www.top10vpn.com/research/cost-of-internet-shutdowns/2023/