FOC Task Force on Internet Shutdowns (TFIS)
Guiding Document (January 2023)

Summary

The United Kingdom (the UK), a founding member of the Freedom Online Coalition (FOC), will chair the Task Force on Internet Shutdowns (TFIS) alongside FOC Advisory Network (FOC-AN) members Access Now and the Global Network Initiative (GNI), welcoming participation from FOC member countries and the FOC Advisory Network. Launched in December 2021 and set to operate until at least December 2023, TFIS will serve as a multi-national and multi-stakeholder coordination and response mechanism on Internet shutdowns.

The Task Force will work to improve coordination among like-minded countries, civil society, and the private sector to anticipate and respond to Internet shutdowns. This work will build on the FOC's thematic and country-specific Joint Statements, including the 2022 Joint Statement on Internet Shutdowns in Iran, and the 2017 Joint Statement on accompanying Good Practices for Governments on State Sponsored Network Disruptions as well as the 2021 G7 Leaders' Communique and Foreign and Development Ministers Communique. In addition to sharing information to help members address and respond to Internet shutdowns as they occur the Task Force will share best practices for diplomatic engagement with countries that impose Internet shutdowns, develop a repository of resources on shutdowns, and coordinate engagement and response by TFIS members, as appropriate, with states that intentionally disrupt their own populations' access to, or dissemination of, information, knowledge, and data online.

TFIS Four Lines of Effort

1. Knowledge Sharing - Resources and Repository

- Share information on Internet shutdowns as they occur, and facilitate information-sharing between stakeholders. Distribute a bimonthly newsletter to TFIS members;
- Coordinate interactive calls every two months to foster inclusive, multi-stakeholder dialogue and share ideas, needs, and best practices;
- Review and update the TFIS repository of existing resources and multilateral statements on Internet shutdowns and network restrictions to build FOC and FOC-AN members' capacity to address Internet shutdowns and understand technical, economic, and human rights impacts. Ensure that such materials have been shared amongst FOC Member States' diplomatic networks;

2. Response - Preventative and Reactive

- Coordinate engagement and response by TFIS members to respond to and counter country-specific internet shutdowns, as appropriate;
- Build on FOC's previous Joint Statement on Network Restrictions and TFIS Best Practices for Diplomatic Engagement, for use in bilateral engagement with governments that are "at-risk" or currently imposing Internet shutdowns;

- Monitor ongoing technical, economic, legal, and human rights concerns regarding the use of Internet shutdowns by states, especially in the context of elections, protests, and ongoing health and humanitarian crises;
- Prepare for potential Internet shutdowns by horizon scanning. This will build on past experience, and draw on the expertise within TFIS and beyond, to anticipate – and mitigate, where possible – potential internet shutdowns before they occur. (e.g. ahead of elections);
- Develop a rolling list of countries and regions "at-risk" of imposing internet shutdowns, as informed by existing resources, to ensure targeted diplomatic outreach ahead of potential internet shutdowns. Share this rolling list, and related information, between governments, including Embassies, on diplomatic engagements;
- Build a network external to the FOC to foster external technical, policy and legal expert guidance.

3. Shift global norms – elevating Internet shutdowns and restrictions up the international policy agenda

- Continue work to raise the political cost to States of using Internet shutdowns and restrictions as a strategy to manipulate and control the online space.
- Encourage and co-ordinate FOC public country and thematic statements to draw attention to this agenda.
- Coordinate engagement at international bodies, agencies, and meetings as well as with the private sector.

4. Improve data collection and presentation tools on internet shutdowns

- Enable those not technically conversant (including policy makers and diplomats) to advocate effectively against Internet shutdowns, drawing on horizon scanning and a base of evidence, including through the US Summit For Democracy Tech Cohort's work on improving access to information through a portal.

Rationale

Internet shutdowns imposed by governments impact all people, especially vulnerable and marginalised groups, including women. Internet shutdowns ramp up censorship, restrict free expression, and limit the dissemination and free flow of information, contributing to social and political disorder, and violence and negatively affecting public safety. Other impacts include lowering labour and capital productivity, as access to email servers and online platforms is vital for many thriving economies; disrupting financial and banking services and preventing payments for salaries, utilities, health, and education; risking foreign direct investment, as a climate of uncertainty can discourage foreign investors; and limiting the ability of journalists and human rights defenders to report on human rights violations or abuses.

Governments have imposed Internet shutdowns (which we define to include many kinds of network disruptions and restrictions) in several ways: a) by blocking specific websites, social media platforms, or messaging apps; b) by slowing down the speed of the Internet connection, also known as "throttling"; or c)

by completely shutting down the Internet. The different ways that governments implement Internet shutdowns continue to grow longer, affect more people, and target vulnerable communities. Partial shutdowns are often less visible, but with greater effect on specific sections of society or regions within a country. According to Access Now and the #KeepItOn coalition — composed of more than 280 organizations from 105 countries — in 2021 the Internet was shut down 182 times in 34 countries, including the longest Internet shutdowns on record. Access Now underscores an apparent correlation between Internet shutdowns and human rights violations, with authoritarian governments often implementing Internet shutdowns to conceal human rights violations, and prevent individuals from accessing information that could assist in their fight against repression or help maintain their security. GNI, whose members include prominent academics, civil society groups, information and communications technology companies and investors, has documented similar human rights and public safety concerns, as well as potential economic and public health risks. These risks have become more acute in the context of the pandemic.

This Task Force on Internet Shutdowns (TFIS) seeks to encourage and support the commitment made under the UK's G7 Presidency to improve member state coordination, together with like-minded countries, civil society and the private sector, to address and respond to Internet shutdowns as they occur.

Scope of Work and Key Deliverables

The scope of TFIS's work is defined by the impact of Internet shutdowns on human rights. At times the technical and economic impacts of Internet shutdowns may also be addressed. The Task Force will uphold and maintain the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion as encompassed by the FOC's Task Force on Digital Equality's guiding document terms of reference. Areas of focus for TFIS include the impact of shutdowns on the ability of people to express themselves, access information including, but not limited to, news services, healthcare and emergency services, and the ability of journalists and human rights defenders to report on human rights violations or abuses. TFIS will also monitor the use of Internet shutdowns during elections and protests, and their impact on the exercise of human rights. In accordance with the May 2022 amendments to the FOC Stockholm Terms of Reference (ToR), TFIS may issue country-specific statements Internet shutdowns, on an exceptional basis, as coordinated by the United Kingdom, Access Now, and GNI and shared with the FOC and FOC-AN for the standard approval process.

TFIS will add value to ongoing international discussions by promoting a coherent human rights perspective on behalf of a wide range of geographically diverse stakeholders. TFIS will strengthen FOC capacity to ensure that Internet freedom issues are on the international agenda as a way to drive concrete policy changes and outcomes. TFIS will focus on promoting the application of and compliance with the existing international human rights framework in the context of Internet

shutdowns by engaging in traditional FOC processes as well as pursuing new means of foreign policy elaboration and advocacy.

Specific forums and processes where TFIS can engage:

- G7

- G20

- U.S. Summit for Democracy

- Denmark Tech for Democracy Summit

- Trade and Technology Council (TTC) Working Group on Misuse of Technology

- United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)

- United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC), specifically the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process

- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

- United Nations Forum on Business and Human Rights

- Regional bodies and events (OAS, OSCE, AU, APEC, ASEAN)

- United Nations Internet Governance Forum (IGF)

- National and Regional IGFs

- United Nations Office of the Envoy on Technology (UN Tech Envoy)

- United Nations Global Digital Compact

- World Economic Forum (WEF)

- RightsCon

Period of Activity

The Task Force officially launched in December 2021. Its mandate has been extended until December 2023. As per the Stockholm ToR, FOC sub-entities' mandates, including the Task Force, need to be renewed and approved by the Friends at each FOC conference.

Membership

Chair – The UK. will chair TFIS from the FOC and Access Now and GNI will chair TFIS from the FOC-AN, with overall support from the FOC Support Unit (Global Partners Digital, GPD).

Membership - Membership of TFIS is open to any FOC member country or member of the Advisory Network.

External consultees – TFIS will build a network of experts external to the FOC in the field of Internet shutdowns and human rights who are interested in, or are already working to achieve, TFIS's objectives. External consultees will provide specialized knowledge as needed, as well as amplify TFIS's dissemination

and advocacy strategy (such as flagging opportunities for TFIS engagement). Moreover, TFIS will encourage external consultees to circulate and promote final drafts of its products. External consultees are invited to attend bimonthly TFIS calls.

Accountability

TFIS is a collaborative initiative initiated by the United States, Access Now and GNI with support from GPD. The Guiding Document for TFIS will be reviewed and updated by the current TFIS Chairs – the UK, Access Now and GNI – as required. TFIS will adhere to the guidelines under the FOC Stockholm ToR for all actions, including the issuance of country-specific and thematic joint statements. The Chairs will strive to reach consensus on important decisions regarding TFIS. Where consensus is not possible, the Chairs reserve the right to make a final decision that takes into account as many perspectives as possible across member countries, civil society, academia, and industry.

Meetings

The Chairs will convene TFIS virtual and hybrid meetings every two months as of January 2023 and accommodate the time zones of all members as best as possible. The Chairs will set the agenda and circulate it prior to each meeting. Each call will feature a combination of presentations by TFIS members, external consultees, or other experts and structured opportunities for interaction between stakeholders (e.g., "ask me anything" sessions with experts). Topics discussed will include relevant updates and developments on Internet shutdowns and human rights worldwide, ways of increasing local, regional, and international attention, and possible activities for TFIS, its members, or its consultees to undertake to combat shutdowns. All TFIS members are welcome to bring forward initiatives on specific topics related to Internet shutdowns and human rights to the rest of the Task Force. Initiatives should be communicated to the Chairs so they can be added to the agenda for the next every other month call.

The Chairs will ensure they do not coincide with FOC calls (FotC, FOC-AN, or other meetings). Following monthly meetings, the FOC Support Unit will circulate minutes to TFIS members who are unable to participate. However, at minimum all TFIS members should participate in the bimonthly meetings.

Contact

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