

## Blackout!: Kashmir and Network Shutdowns

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Since July 2016, Kashmir has seen one of the longest, largest and unified movements against the human rights violations by the military, along with demands for demilitarization and autonomy for the region. This movement was seeded in misfortune after a local rebel Burhan Wani was killed in an encounter. His funeral saw people in the hundreds and thousands coming out onto the streets, the very day that Kashmir saw the beginning of the 2016 uprising. With 87 deaths and 15,000 injured, this protest is recorded to be one of the largest and most violent in the history of the region.<sup>i</sup>

However, this isn't the first time such an action has been taken by the state, Kashmir, as many other conflict stricken areas is prone to network shutdowns and curfews. The past shutdowns have been imposed on independence day or on the occasion of the Prime Minister's visit, though those shutdowns have been far shorter in duration.

One of the tactics used by the state to contain the violence has been a massive internet and mobile network shutdown, which at the time of writing has been in effect for 72 days. This virtual curfew was accompanied initially with a 3-day ban on the print press in the middle of the night after reports of a rape of an 80-year-old woman by para-military forces.<sup>ii</sup>

The network shutdown was primarily put into effect to quell the spreading of information about protests; however, the chilling effect has not just affected the protestors but citizens as a whole, and has served to increase the distrust and apathy towards the government. The shutdowns have crippled communication in the state and have affected Kashmiris living outside Kashmir as well, due to the inability of being aware of the wellbeing of their relatives. Local newspapers' internet pages saw many queries regarding the situation in particular areas along with non-residents of Kashmir appealing to the government to lift the ban so that they can contact people living in the area.

Legitimate forms of communications have been markedly affected the most with added issues with the disruption of essential communication in the valley which now has a large number of citizens injured in the hospitals. The Kashmir Valley has also borne witness to an increase in the number of emergency deaths due to the barrier in communication to essential services.

It is thus evident that network shutdowns not only affect freedom of expression and information they also can and do impact the very right to life so preciously guarded by the Constitution. As in times of disaster management, ICTs can play a crucial role in saving lives and mitigating circumstances, which the government of India must into account. Livelihood and education have also been affected as a result of these arbitrary and prolonged network shutdowns. Also, these shutdowns take away the precious space for counter speech and the ability of the government and civil society to prevent the spread of misinformation. The importance of ensuring access to emergency services at all times is a pre-requisite of any government, especially in a state which is prone to natural calamities such as earthquakes, floods and landslides, these can happen at any time. As the life of these shutdowns prolong,

the legal backing the authorities have behind such blockades is discretionary in nature causing the government to use it as it pleases.

The narrative surrounding the blackout in the online space is, as the issue, contentious and divisive. A cursory glance at the comments section of any article or video online regarding Kashmir increases the relevance of an Indian-ised version of Godwins' Law; *"As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Pakistan or being Pakistani approaches 1"*.

These sections are incubators for racism, discrimination, hatred and personal attacks. Fervent nationalism easily crosses the barrier into bigotry and bilious attacks on any individual who "dares" disagree with the mainstream narrative. Individuals attempting to reach a "middle-ground" between the two dominant narratives are, at times, at greater risk, invoking the ire of both factions.

It seems at first that the polarisation in the online space mimics the mainstream discourse. However, given the nebulous, ever-changing and increasing importance of the internet, it may be that mainstream positions may be eventually informed by the factions online.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Pakistan-fomenting-trouble-but-Modi-will-solve-Kashmir-issue-Mehbooba-Mufti/articleshow/53886822.cms>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.thehoot.org/free-speech/media-freedom/local-media-gagged-national-news-channels-promoted-9495>