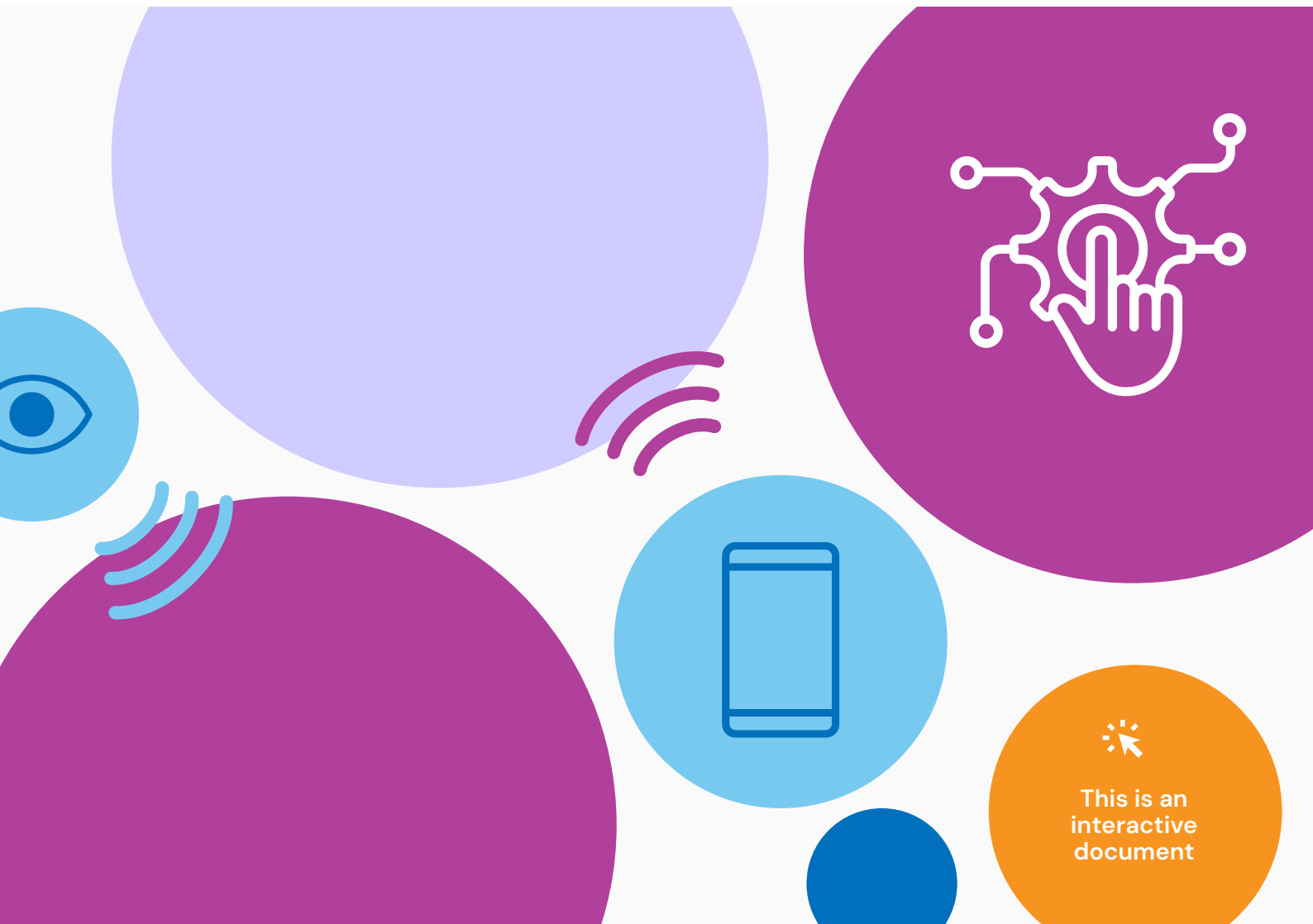




Digital Democracy
Initiative

Overcoming Digital Repression in Senegal

A Case Study of the
2024 Presidential Elections



This is an
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document

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Introduction

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The 2024 presidential elections in Senegal unfolded against a backdrop of legal controversies and civil unrest, underscoring the complex dynamics of democratic governance in the country. The electoral process was characterised by significant challenges, including the former President's efforts to suppress dissent through strategic persecution and arrest of opposition figures, alongside digital repression strategies such as internet shutdowns, censorship and surveillance. The decision made on February 3rd to postpone the elections indefinitely, citing issues related to the integrity of the electoral process, led to widespread condemnation, and triggered protests throughout the country and among Senegalese diaspora communities. The postponement, unprecedented in Senegal's history, raised questions about the government's commitment to democratic principles and electoral transparency.

The involvement of civil society organisations and grassroots movements has been essential in challenging the authoritarian measures imposed by the government and in advocating for the reinstatement of the electoral process. Confronted with significant hurdles, such as repression and intimidation, these groups have demonstrated exceptional resilience and adaptability by effectively utilising digital technologies to engage citizens, spread information, and demand accountability from authorities. The decision by the Senegalese Constitutional Council to overturn the election postponement marked a critical victory for democracy, reinforcing the impact of civil society activism in the country.¹

Against this backdrop, the present case study by CIVICUS seeks to examine how civil society actors navigated the complexities of digital repression during Senegal's 2024 presidential election, with a view to offering insights into strategies, tactics and the impact on the country's democracy. By documenting these experiences and distilling key lessons learned, the case study can inform advocacy efforts, policy development, and capacity-building initiatives aimed at strengthening democratic resilience and digital rights protection across the west Africa sub-region and the African continent at large.

Methodology

This report is primarily based on data elicited from interviews conducted with civil society activists, scholars, human rights defenders and student union leaders drawn from three major cities in Senegal—Dakar, Mbour and St. Louis. Interviews were also conducted with four civil society actors in Gambia and Ghana to gain deeper insight from external observers of political events that have shaped democratic resistance in the context of digital repression in Senegal. Additional data was obtained from the Armed Conflict Event Location Database (ACLED) to understand the trends and pattern of political unrest in Senegal from 2021 to 2024. This is with a view to understanding the nexus between the digital and public spheres. Comprehensive desk research, including a review of relevant legislations, media reports and academic publications on Senegal, was also undertaken to identify, triangulate and synthesise relevant research evidence on the factors that shape digital repression, its impact on society and citizens' response in Senegal. The limitation of the study is inherent in the non-availability of state officials in the security and telecommunication sectors to grant interviews to the researcher and provide government held data on the dynamics of civil unrest in Senegal. However, this was remedied through open sources data gathered from newspapers and academic publications.

A Brief Note on Definitions

Concepts such as civil society and digital repression are central to this study. Therefore, it is pivotal to briefly clarify their meanings for a shared understanding of the central argument.

Civil society

Civil society is commonly defined as the realm that exists beyond the family unit, the market and the state. The concept of civil society has evolved significantly over time, now encompassing a diverse array of organised and grassroots entities. This includes non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trade unions, social movements, community-based organisations, online networks and faith-based groups. Civil society organisations (CSOs) and networks differ in terms of their size, structure and platforms, ranging from large international NGOs and widespread social movements to smaller, localised entities.² Civil society plays a significant role in monitoring government performance and ensuring that citizens receive the services they are entitled to. It is also crucial in fostering political participation, as the success of democracy hinges on active citizen involvement in the political process. This involvement extends beyond merely voting; it encompasses active engagement in political parties and organisations that connect with these parties, advocating for accountability and access.³ For a democratic state to maintain stability, it must be effective and legitimate, garnering the respect and support of its citizens. Civil society plays a significant role as a monitor and check, as well as a vital collaborator in establishing a positive dynamic between the democratic state and its populace.⁴

Digital repression

A significant transformation brought about by the internet is an increase in the pervasiveness of information. The extent and accessibility of data available to users in real time is unmatched. In instances of political turmoil—such as widespread protests or violent government responses—videos, tweets and posts relating to these occurrences are not only swiftly shared within a country but are also quickly disseminated globally, influencing public perception almost immediately. Users have streamed live broadcasts on Facebook showcasing police violence, uploaded geotagged footage to YouTube depicting barrel bombings, and sparked international reactions to electoral protests or confrontations between students and law enforcement. Authoritarian leaders and their state agents are deploying new digital methods to reinforce their power, shape political narratives, counter dissent, and push back against mass protests through the means of digital repression. Therefore, digital repression is defined as the use of information and communication technology to surveil, coerce or manipulate individuals or groups in order to deter specific activities or beliefs that challenge the state. Digital repression is a growing trend and represents a serious threat to civil society groups and opposition figures around the world.⁵

Among the most notable instances of digital repression in recent times was the crackdown during the Arab Spring pro-democracy demonstrations in December 2010. Authorities in Egypt became aware that activists were leveraging the internet to coordinate and expand their protests. Consequently, they enacted a total internet shutdown, which significantly hindered access to a vital civic space necessary for the rights to protest and free speech. While this was not the first occurrence of an internet blackout, the extensive nature of the Arab Spring protests highlighted the alarming potential for governments to exploit such measures as a means of control.⁶ This has become a common denominator of repression in both democracy and autocratic regimes in Africa.⁷

Brief overview of Senegal’s political landscape

Senegal is a country located on the western coast of Africa, bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the west, Mauritania to the north and northeast, Mali to the east, and Guinea and Guinea-Bissau to the south. It also surrounds The Gambia, a narrow enclave that extends along the Gambia River (see Figure 1 ↓). The official language is French, a legacy of its colonial history, but Wolof is widely spoken as a lingua franca. Other local languages include Pulaar, Serer and Diola. Senegal is a republic with a semi-presidential system, marked by a stable democracy since its independence from France in 1960. Senegal plays an active role in regional and international organisations, including the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).



Figure 1: The maps of West Africa and Senegal

Senegal has long been considered the jewel of electoral democracy in West Africa, an example of steady exchange of power and no military coups.⁸ The story of the country's democracy reverberated globally in the recent time due to a series of authoritarian tendencies exhibited by the country's former president, Macky Sall, who served from 2012 to 2024.⁹ According to CIVICUS, the civic space rating for Senegal was downgraded to "repressed" due to a surge in violations as the country approached its presidential elections scheduled for February 2024. Although President Macky Sall announced in July 2023 that he would not seek a third term, the judicial actions against Ousmane Sonko, which the opposition views as politically motivated, have led to significant protests and unrest. These demonstrations were met with severe repression from authorities and security forces. In this environment, violations of civic space have escalated, characterised by the use of excessive and lethal force against opposition protests, arbitrary detentions of journalists, restrictions on internet and social media access—including the suspension of TikTok—closure of media outlets, and the dissolution of the opposition party PASTEF.¹⁰

President Macky Sall has been accused of significantly diminishing political opposition throughout his twelve-year tenure, attempts to subvert the two-term limit for presidents in the constitution, and changing of the electoral code that made it more difficult for the opposition to compete in elections. These resulted in a growing disconnection with the populace. By failing to appreciate the importance of a robust opposition in a democratic framework and neglecting to facilitate a smooth political transition in Senegal, Sall inadvertently ignited a wave of citizen activism that led to widespread political protests across the West African nation. Following his inauguration, Sall systematically strengthened his grip on power by undermining political rivals and altering established norms concerning the roles of the prime minister, the president of the national assembly, and the constitutional court, all in pursuit of a third term. This strategy was executed with calculated precision, employing legal manoeuvres to prosecute figures such as Khalifa Sall, the Mayor of Dakar, and Karim Wade, the son of former President Wade, who could be considered as potential threats. However, when he targeted Ousmane Sonko, the presidential candidate for the African Patriots of Senegal for Labour, Ethics and Fraternity (PASTEF), who secured third place in the 2019 presidential elections, the public responded with a resounding rejection.¹¹ The trajectory of political protest and civic activism reached its peak when Macky Sall postponed the presidential election slated for February 2024.

While Sall's manipulation of democracy has garnered significant attention and caused unrest within the nation, it is important to note that this is not the first instance of a Senegalese president suppressing free expression or electoral participation. Senegal's first

president, Léopold Sédar Senghor, effectively established a one-party state dominated by his Senegalese Progressive Union (UPS) party, preventing other political parties from engaging in elections until 1976.¹² Senegal's political landscape has been characterised by an ongoing struggle between the state's attempts to curtail democratic practices and the citizens' resolve to counteract these measures. From Senghor to Sall, various governments have sought to stifle criticism and infringe upon electoral rights. However, they have consistently faced resistance and activism from the Senegalese populace, particularly among the youth. In the face of state violence during the elections of 2000, 2012 and 2024, as well as in other situations, the youth have emerged victorious in their endeavours.¹³

The political history of the country illustrates that Senghor had little tolerance for public dissent expressed by the youth.¹⁴ In 1968, a student strike at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, aimed at opposing government cuts to student welfare programmes, resulted in a brutal crackdown by the police— mirroring the responses of Sall's government to the protests that took place in 2023 and 2024 throughout Senegal.¹⁵ Historically, the progress of democracy in Senegal has been largely attributed to the dedication and activism of its citizens. The country has exemplified a model of “democracy from below,” characterised by the populace's resistance to the efforts of leaders seeking to maintain their authority. Following the incidents of state violence in 1968, Senegalese youth remained undeterred in their commitment to advancing democratic principles.¹⁶

In 1981, Senghor passed the reins of power to his Prime Minister, Abdou Diouf, who upheld the tradition of the government by suppressing opposition in order to retain authority. This was notably demonstrated by the prohibition of a coalition movement challenging Diouf in the 1985 elections, serving as a precursor to Sall's subsequent “constitutional coup”.¹⁷ The pursuit of a fourth term by Diouf in the 2000 presidential elections incited a significant grassroots movement, predominantly led by young individuals and musicians, referred to as *Bul faale*, meaning “Don't worry.”¹⁸ Abdoulaye Wade's success in the 2000 election was significantly bolstered by the backing of the youth movement. However, in the years 2011–2012, Wade's administration attempted to entrench its power in the face of public dissent, particularly from the youth demographic. Echoing the circumstances of the 2000 election, the incumbent president confronted a vibrant youth movement, led by musical figures under the banner *Y'en a marre* (“we're fed up”), who rallied against Wade's attempt to secure a third term.¹⁹

Incidents of political violence in Senegal (2021–March 2024)

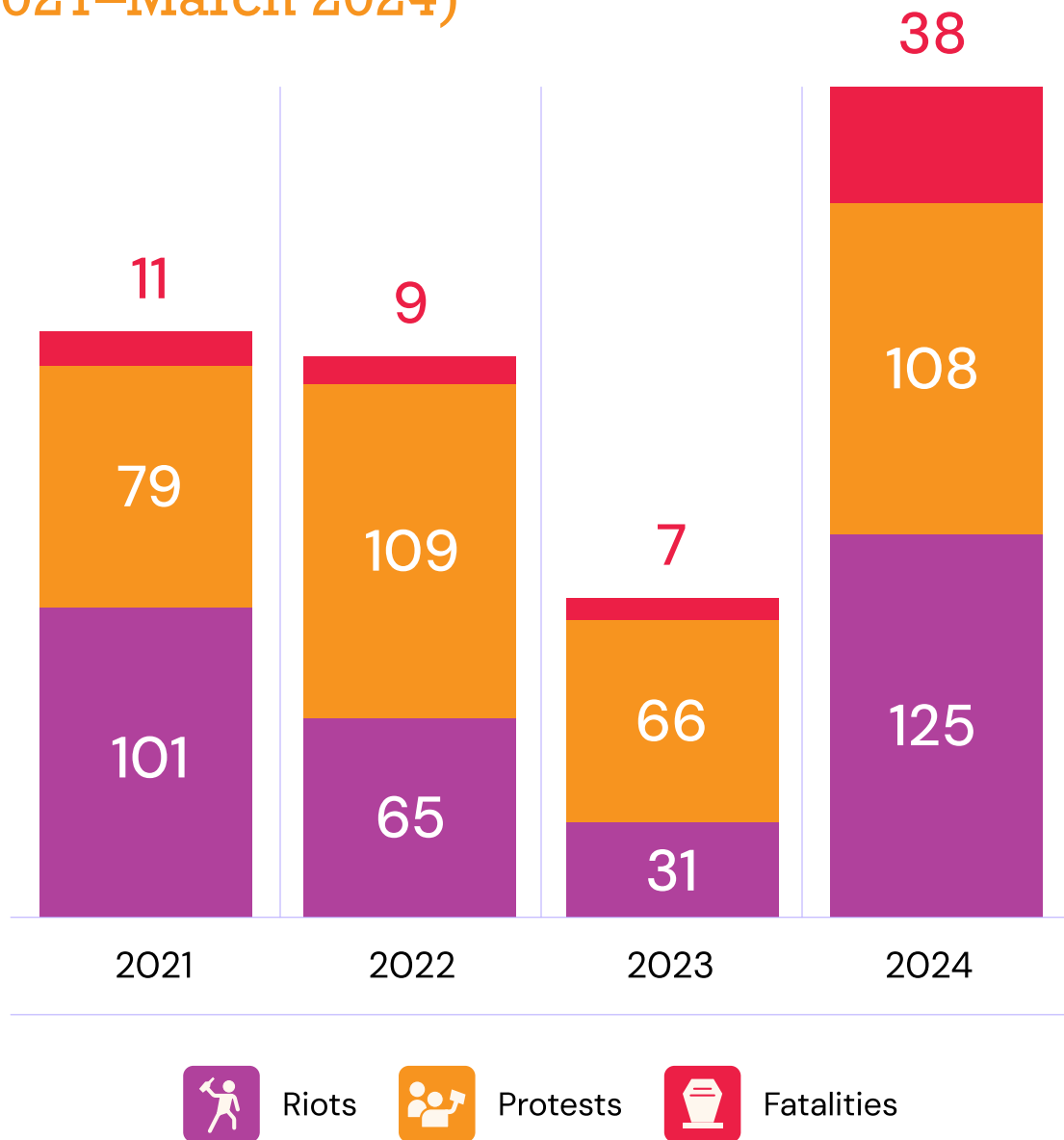


Figure 2: Incidents of political violence in Senegal
 Source: Armed Conflict Events Location Database (ACLED)

By means of civic organisation, non-violent protests despite government repression, urging citizen participation in elections, and leveraging popular music for messaging, the movement was instrumental in advancing democracy at a crucial juncture, which resulted in Macky Sall's triumph in 2012.²⁰ Senegal has continued on the trajectory of resistance in defence of democracy through sustained riots and protest over the years. Recent events have also provoked state repression and unleashing of violence against the citizens. This culminated in 685 incidents of political protest and riots, with 65 deaths, as shown in Figures 2 and 3 .

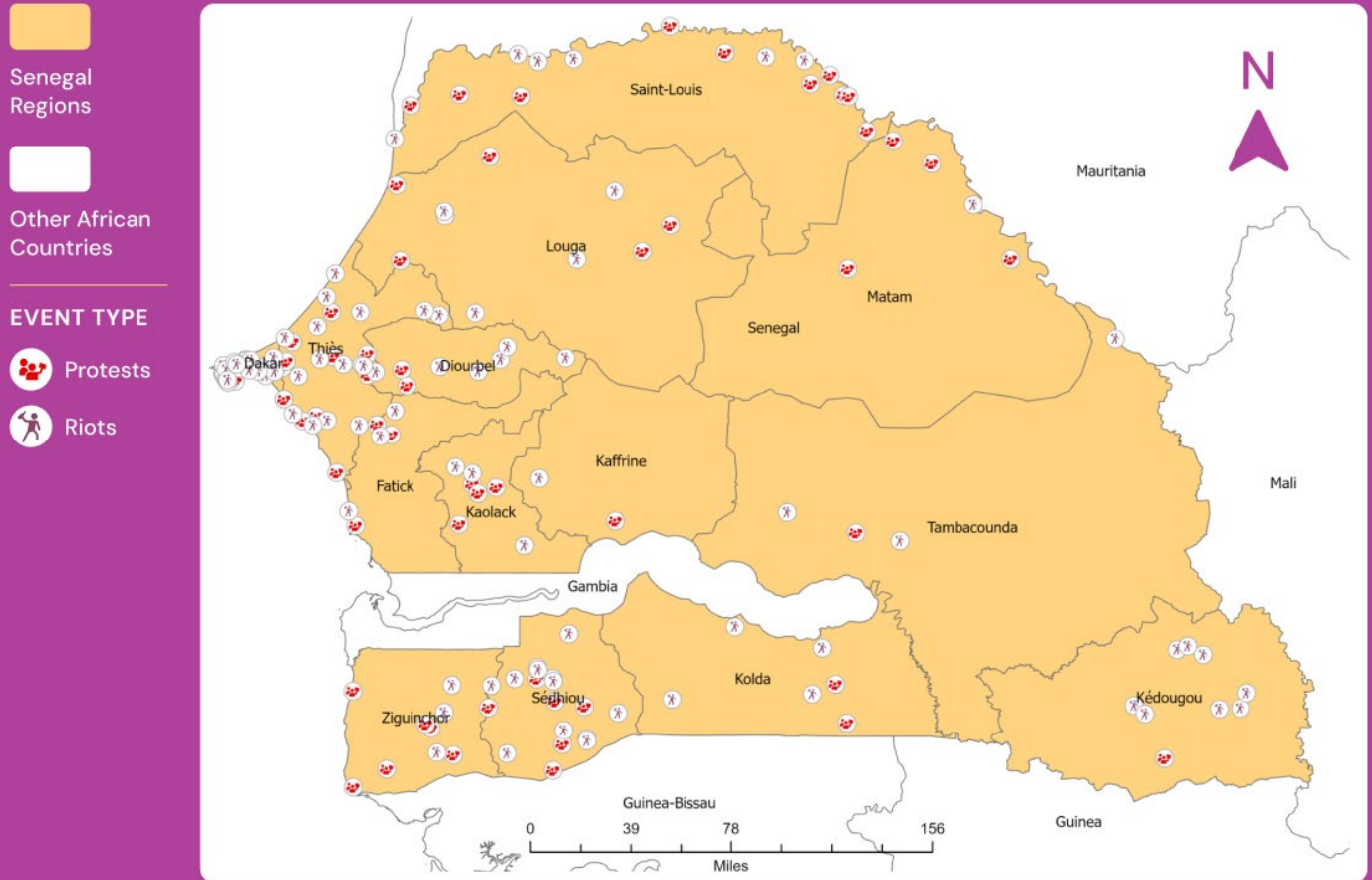


Figure 3: The map of Senegal showing incidents of protest and riots
 Source: Armed Conflict Events Location Database (ACLED) 2021 – March 2024

Context and History of Digital Repression in Senegal: Control as a Double-Edged Sword

In recent years, Senegal has witnessed a decline in internet freedom, attributed to the implementation of various restrictive measures by successive governments since 1999. The introduction of digitalisation, e-government initiatives and digital identity programs compelled citizens to provide comprehensive personal information, including biometric data for voter and identity cards. Additionally, all mobile phone subscribers are required to register their SIM cards. A number of legislative measures have been established to oversee the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) sector, which include Law No. 2008-10 of 25 January 2008 on the Information Society Orientation, Law No. 2008-11 of 25 January 2008 concerning cybercrime, Law No. 2008-12 of 25 January 2008 on personal data protection, Law No. 2008-08 of 25 January 2008 on electronic transactions, Law No. 2011-01 of 27 January 2011 regarding the Telecommunications Code, and the 2018 Law on the new Electronic Communications Code.

25 JANUARY 2008

Law No. 2008-10
 The Information Society Orientation

Law No. 2008-11
 Concerning cybercrime

Law No. 2008-12
 On personal data protection

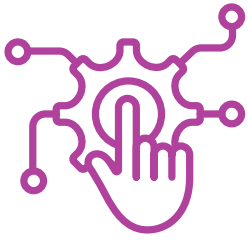
Law No. 2008-08
 On electronic transactions

27 JANUARY 2011

Law No. 2011-01
 The Telecommunications Code

2018

2018 Law
 The new Electronic Communications Code



Digital Senegal 2025

In 2016, Senegal launched its “Digital Senegal 2025” initiative, which seeks to create an inclusive digital society by 2025, supported by a dynamic and innovative private sector. The National Cyber Security Strategy 2022, referred to as SNC2022, was adopted in 2018, detailing Senegal’s vision and strategic objectives for cybersecurity. Although it is the responsibility of governments to uphold the freedom of internet access and usage, the Senegalese government has imposed certain controls on the ICT sector, thereby constraining the enjoyment of internet freedoms. As a result, many provisions within the ICT-related legislation restrict the rights to access information and the freedoms of opinion, speech and expression. In addition, the right to privacy is jeopardised by legal stipulations pertaining to the interception of communications. While the safeguarding of online security and the fight against cybercrime are vital for the protection of human rights, the application of security measures lacking fundamental safeguards threatens the rights that are meant to be defended.²¹

In Senegal, the legal basis for surveillance has been established through the enactment of provisions in various laws that oversee the telecommunications sector. Consequently, these provisions affect the realisation of digital freedoms within the nation. For instance, Article 90-10 of Law No. 22/2016, which modifies Law No. 65-60 of 21 July 1965 related to the criminal code, grants a judicial police officer, with the authorisation and supervision of the public prosecutor, the authority to “employ remote software and install it in the pertinent information technology (IT) system to gather relevant evidence that aids the investigation.” Additionally, Articles 90.4 and 90.17 of the amended Criminal Code empower an investigating judge to mandate a service provider, within the framework of its technical capabilities and in the application of the existing technical means, to collect or record or to assist the competent authorities in collecting or recording such computer data.²²

A Recent History of Internet Shutdowns

In Senegal, social media platforms are widely utilised and have become essential for political discourse and electoral strategies. Over the past few years, there have been various anecdotal accounts regarding the unavailability of these platforms during critical political events. The first significant internet shutdown in Senegal occurred on 23 June 2016, which was linked to the release of Karim Wade from prison. Karim, the son of former President Abdoulaye Wade—considered a key opposition figure to President Sall—was imprisoned for the embezzlement of state funds. Although Dakarposte briefly reported on this social media blockage, it was not covered by major news organisations, digital rights advocacy groups, or network measurement entities.²³

According to a civil society leader working on digital freedom and inclusion in Senegal, “we can say the first time we noticed that there was an issue with internet under the regime of Macky Sall was the day Karim Wade was released from prison and taken out of the country [Senegal]. That night actually we noticed that we couldn’t access internet, we couldn’t access Facebook until afterwards, until he left the country. So we believe that is the [first notable instance], even though they [the government] have never acknowledged it, but this is something that we noticed and many people noticed it. And in the last three years [2021 – 2023] actually, what has changed is the fact that they [government] acknowledged the internet shutdown, because there have been some troubling experience, like reducing the speed, but this time actually they were bold enough to acknowledge that, you know, we are cutting off the internet. And this is something we never expected that would happen”.²⁴

In the lead-up to Senegal’s most recent presidential election on 24 February 2019, a coalition promoting a free and open internet urged internet service providers to guarantee stable connectivity throughout the electoral process. Although there were no significant blocks on internet services, data from OONI Explorer indicates that at least four news media websites—sunubuzzsn.com, theydakar.net, new.sen360.sn and sudfmsenradio.com were inaccessible during this time. Additionally, there were numerous anecdotal accounts of various online media platforms, including well-known outlets like Leral.net and Xibar.net, being unreachable until the election authorities released the final results. Furthermore, according to the network-measurement organisation Netblocks, Senegal experienced an internet shutdown in the early hours of 5 March 2021, coinciding with protests against the arrest of Sonko. The National Audiovisual Regulatory Council (CNRA) subsequently suspended two television stations, SENTV and WALF TV, due to their reporting on the protests. Since March 2021, Walf TV has been systematically targeted with suspensions over its coverage of opposition protests. The broadcaster was suspended for 30 days in June 2023, for 7 days in February 2023 and for 72 hours in March 2021, and finally the withdrawal of its licence.²⁵ Data also revealed that access to Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp and Telegram was restricted on the primary cellular network operator, Orange/Sonatel, for several hours that morning.²⁶

According to metrics from NetBlocks, access to social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube and Telegram was restricted in Senegal on 1 June 2023. On 4 June 2023, the suspension of mobile data further disconnected many users, creating a situation akin to a daily curfew for three days. These measures were implemented amid significant protests triggered by the sentencing of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko. Service was restored on 7 June 2023, but as of Monday, 31 July, mobile data

restrictions were once again enforced following Sonko’s arrest.²⁷ On 2 August, access to the social video platform TikTok was suspended by authorities, who claimed that it was being used to propagate “hateful and subversive messages that threaten the stability of the country”.²⁸ See Figure 4 below ↓ for timelines of internet shut downs, underscoring the complex dynamics of democratic governance in Senegal. These dynamics include the tension between state control of digital infrastructure and civil society resistance, persistent persecution of opposition parties, deployment of police violence to stifle public protests, media suppression, digital repression and turning everything into national security issues in an atmosphere of political conflict.

Timelines of internet shut down in Senegal



JUNE 23, 2016

The first significant internet shutdown in Senegal which was linked to the release of Karim Wade from prison.



JUNE 1, 2023

Restriction of Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram and other social media platforms in Senegal.



JUNE 4, 2023

Mobile data was suspended for three days in a daily curfew-style pattern amid widespread protests over the sentencing of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko.



JULY 31, 2023

Mobile data restricted following the arrest of Sonko.



AUGUST 2, 2023

Authorities restricted access to social video platform TikTok due to the alleged “spread of hateful subversive messages threatening the country”.



FEBRUARY 4, 2024

Senegal shuts down internet as the country’s government, led by President Macky Sall, officially moved elections scheduled this month to the end of the year.



FEBRUARY 13, 2024

Senegal cut mobile internet access ahead of a banned march against the postponement of a presidential election.

Figure 4: Timelines of internet shutdown in Senegal

Source: Compilations from media publications

Government Justification and Public Response to Internet Shutdown

Episodic shutdowns of the internet in Senegal continued under president Macky Sall as he officially moved elections scheduled for February 2024 to the end of the year.²⁹ The move triggered protests and digital activism. The ministry of communications released an order suspending mobile internet, and connectivity watchdogs NetBlocks and CloudFlare confirmed that access was indeed being throttled. The notice “informs the public that due to the dissemination of several hateful and subversive messages relayed on social networks in the context of threats of disturbance to public order, the mobile internet is temporarily suspended. Telephone operators are required to comply with the notice,” the ministry said. Several companies—including one of the largest providers, Tigo/Free—confirmed that they had shut off mobile internet access in compliance with the order.³⁰

Earlier in June 2023, the Senegal government continued curfew-like internet shutdowns to subdue protests, effectively blocking it from 1 p.m to 2 a.m. (from 2 June to 6 June) across the country in an effort to quell dissent over the trial of opposition figure Ousmane Sonko who was convicted of “corrupting youth” and sentenced to two years in prison. In the wake of the announcement of the conviction, more than 500 people were arrested for participating in protests.³¹ Interior Minister Antoine Felix Abdoulaye Diome said in a press conference that the government was limiting internet access to stop “fake news” from spreading on social media and messaging apps. Several organisations and companies monitoring internet access globally confirmed that mobile internet was being intentionally limited in the country at specific times.³²

However, human rights groups denounced the government’s justification for the internet shutdown by positing that the move suppresses human rights and democratic values in the country. The groups stated further that internet shutdown makes it more difficult for people to track abuses, killings and more during nationwide protests.³³ For instance, Felicia Anthonio, a campaign manager at internet access organisation (Access Now), said internet blackouts “deny people their access to critical information, spur the spread of misinformation, and escalate crises.”³⁴ “Millions of people in Senegal have been deliberately disconnected from the rest of the world,” said Nara Omo-Osagie, who is also with Access Now. “In times of heightened political tension, access to the internet is critical and must be upheld at all times to keep people safe and connected with their families and communities”.³⁵

Internet blackouts: Modus Operandi

On a global scale, authoritarian governments practise digital repression, but the approaches they adopt are notably diverse. Certain countries focus on tactics that require minimal technical expertise, such as implementing internet blackouts or arresting individuals for posting critical political content online. It is not unexpected that many of these nations possess lower technological capabilities. In contrast, other countries have devoted extensive resources to establishing advanced surveillance systems and complex censorship strategies. These regimes have invested heavily in facial recognition cameras, predictive analytics tools, and aggressive malware programs. Digital repression strategies employed by autocratic regimes are not uniform. Although advanced societies possess the necessary capabilities and resources to establish and implement sophisticated digital repression systems, few other nations can emulate these measures. Instead, these countries tend to adopt alternative digital approaches that support their repressive objectives while taking into account their limitations in capacity and resources.³⁶ The recent trend of digital repression in Senegal under the leadership of Macky Sall exemplifies this situation.

Under President Macky Sall's regime, the Senegalese government's shutting down of internet access was partial or total during certain periods, and temporary or prolonged on other occasions. The government also targeted specific platforms, regions, or the entire country. There were instances in which government blocked access to platforms such as Twitter and Tik Tok and the authorities also restricted internet in major cities such as Dakar, St. Louis, etc. Grasping the complex technical factors involved in internet blackouts is significant for at least two key reasons. Firstly, understanding the operational mechanics of an internet blackout provides insight into whether it can be bypassed, which is essential for assisting the communities that are impacted. Different shutdown mechanisms demand varying levels of technical acumen, with the more advanced types being particularly difficult to identify and link to a third party. Governments commonly implement two primary strategies to disrupt internet access: routing disruption and packet filtering. More importantly, the government of Senegal has also deployed surveillance as a form of digital repression.

Routing disruptions

Each device that connects to the Internet, including computers, smartphones, and various other devices, is allocated an IP (Internet Protocol) address. This address facilitates the transmission and reception of data across the network. An autonomous system comprises a collection of interconnected IP networks managed by

a single organisation, such as an Internet Service Provider (ISP) or a large corporation. These autonomous systems depend on border gateway protocols to manage routing among themselves. Each system employs these protocols to interact with other systems and share information regarding the Internet routes available for

Cracking down on protests shutting down internet access undermines people's fundamental rights to freedom of expression and assembly. Internet blackouts deny people their access to critical information, spur the spread of misinformation, and escalate crises. The government of Senegal must immediately end repression, offline and online, and uphold people's rights and civil liberties in the country.

Felicia Anthonio

#KEEIPITON CAMPAIGN MANAGER,
ACCESS NOW

accessing various destinations, including websites, servers and services. Consequently, if an autonomous system, like an ISP, abruptly removes its border gateway protocol routes, the block of IP addresses it oversees will vanish from the routing tables. This occurrence renders those IP addresses unreachable by other autonomous systems. As a result, clients utilising the IP addresses from this autonomous system will be unable to connect to the internet, effectively hindering the flow of information. Data cannot reach its intended destination, and internet users are unable to establish connections. Disruptions in border gateway protocols can be readily identified from an external perspective due to modifications in the global routing state. Furthermore, these disruptions may be connected to the Internet Service Provider (ISP) that governs a designated autonomous system.³⁷

Packet filtering

Governments frequently employ packet filtering as a means to target particular content, which entails the selective shutdown of certain segments of the Internet. By utilizing packet filtering techniques, authorities can obstruct or interfere with specific content or services. For instance, Internet Service Providers (ISPs) may restrict access to designated IP addresses linked to websites or services they aim to limit, such as the IP address 15.197.206.217, which is associated with the WhatsApp platform. Additionally, there is a growing trend among governments to utilise deep packet inspection technology as a method for filtering and blocking specific content, which is often employed for surveillance purposes. The infrastructure supporting Deep Packet Inspection allows for the examination of data packets, thereby enabling scrutiny of the content within communications. This approach offers a more individualised method for content blocking and enhances the difficulty of circumvention. In Senegal, it is probable that ISPs have utilised Deep Packet Inspection to inhibit access to services like WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube.³⁸

When Internet outages are implemented via packet filtering, only those within the affected network are able to recognise the disruption. Therefore, the active probe technique is necessary for detecting these outages. This technique is employed by cybersecurity researchers and civil society actors to analyse the breadth and strategies of internet censorship in different areas.³⁹ Cloudflare, a data insight firm tracked three daily internet shutdowns (see Figures 5 and 6 ↓) that took place on Free/Tigo, a mobile carrier within the country, as well as Sudatel Senegal. Free/Tigo seems to be the largest mobile network in the country, so focusing on them makes sense. NetBlocks also collected data illustrating the internet cuts.⁴⁰

Mobile Connectivity Analysis - Senegal - SN



Figure 5: Daily pattern of Internet shut down in Senegal

Online Platform Feature Restrictions by ISP, Senegal - SN, 2023-06-01 UTC

asn	asn_name	isp_name	Feature	Platform	Status	reachability	failure_rate
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Backend	WhatsApp	DOWN	0%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Website	Telegram	DOWN	0%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Web Interface	Telegram	DOWN	0%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	CDN	Facebook	DOWN	0%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Video CDN	Facebook	DOWN	0%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Website	WhatsApp	DOWN	0%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Video CDN	Twitter	DOWN	0%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Video CDN	Google Video	DOWN	0%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Link Shortener	Telegram	DOWN	0%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Backend	Twitter	DOWN	0%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Image CDN	Twitter	DOWN	0%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Web interface	WhatsApp	DOWN	0%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Image CDN	YouTube	DOWN	0%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Static CDN	Instagram	DOWN	0%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Static CDN	Facebook	DOWN	0%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Static CDN	YouTube	DOWN	0%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Redirector backend	Google Video	DOWN	7%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Website	Facebook Messenger	DOWN	7%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Website	Instagram	DOWN	11%	██████████
AS8346	SONATEL SONATEL-AS Autonomous System, EU	Orange	Syndication API	Twitter	DOWN	13%	██████████



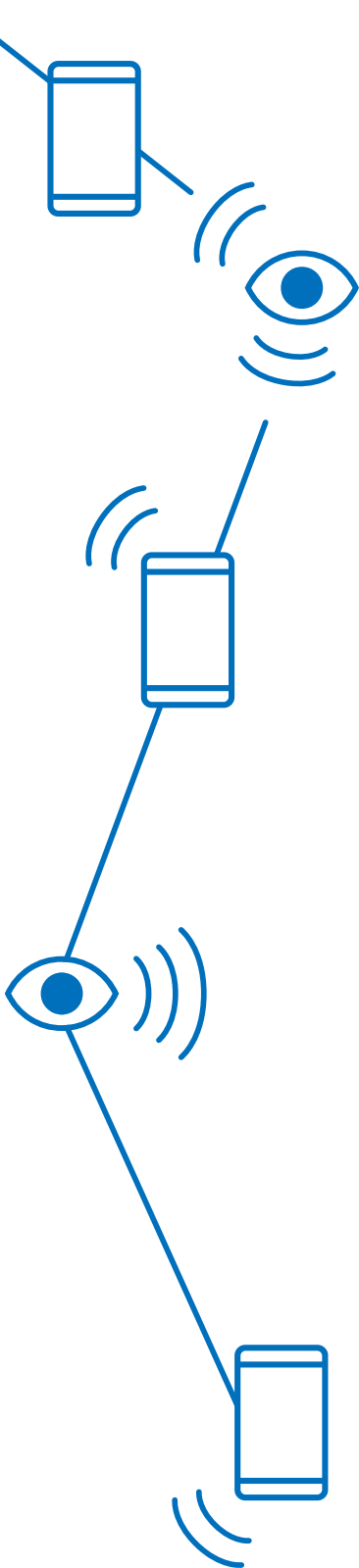
Figure 6: Internet restriction across ISPs and platforms in Senegal

Surveillance

The government of Senegal during Macky Sall's regime also deployed extensive surveillance through various social media platforms to arrest, prosecute or persecute those perceived to oppose Senegal's slide towards authoritarianism under his watch. This development has a fairly recent history, particularly relating to those who have come under the radar of state surveillance through social media monitoring, as explained by a journalist affiliated with the Dakar-based West Africa Democracy Radio (WADR). *"So what happened was that the government severely suspended wireless data access to homes and offices as well as data suspension on mobile phones or digital devices and that's the way they did it most and also too many creative content producers who would produce and broadcast their content on Facebook, some on YouTube. So some of these people were also followed, monitored, and I can say for a fact that a few people had come out to say that they suspect that the government was monitoring them [in the digital space and offline]"*.⁴¹

On 12 April 2023, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, the current President of Senegal, posted a message on Facebook that hinted at the alleged complicity of Senegalese judicial officials in the defamation trial involving Ousmane Sonko, the leader of PASTEF, and Mame Mbaye Niang. This post is thought to have been a catalyst for his arrest. Faye voiced concerns about the politicisation of the judicial system to eliminate a political rival like Ousmane Sonko and to secure Sall's hold on power.⁴²

Furthermore, the police arrested Senegalese journalist Pape Ale Niang on 29 July 2023 subsequent to his live-streamed commentary on YouTube concerning the detention of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko.⁴³ On 20 December 2023, authorities apprehended four journalists associated with the online news platform Allô Sénégal, on charges of defamation and incitement.⁴⁴ Fadillou Kéita, a member of the PASTEF party, was arrested on 7 December 2022, following an order from the public prosecutor related to a post made on Facebook. In a similar vein, Ndeye Fatou Fall, known as Falla Fleur, a web activist, was apprehended on 30 May 2023 at her workplace by personnel from the Criminal Investigation Division (DIC) and was later remanded in custody. These events serve as a reflection of the censorship that pervaded Senegalese cyberspace, with such arrests as the new norm in the latter days of President Macky Sall.⁴⁵ According to a civil society leader at AfricTivistes, *"...most of the journalists that have been arrested have had issues because of Facebook posts or Facebook emojis actually. Just because they liked or shared posts they were arrested and detained"*.⁴⁶



Impacts of Digital Repression on Society

Social Impact

Economic Impact

Legal and Human Rights Impact

The right to Internet access, often referred to as the right to broadband or the freedom to connect, posits that every individual should have the ability to access the Internet to fully exercise and enjoy their rights to freedom of expression, opinion, and other essential human rights. It is the duty of states to guarantee that internet access is widely available, and they must refrain from imposing unreasonable restrictions on an individual's ability to connect to the Internet. In December 2003, the United Nations held the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Following extensive deliberations among various stakeholders, including government entities, businesses and civil society, the WSIS Declaration of Principles was established, reaffirming the vital role of the Information Society in safeguarding and advancing human rights. The opening declaration reads as follows.

We, the representatives of the peoples of the world, assembled in Geneva from 10–12 December 2003 for the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society, declare our common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.⁴⁷

The impact of digital repression by the state has reverberated in Senegal at least in three domains. These are social, economic and legal. The social impact reflects in the breakdown of communication among the citizens in the country (including the ability to mobilise themselves for protests) and communicate with the international community. To put this in proper perspective, the key statistics regarding digital adoption and utilisation in Senegal at the beginning of 2023 showed that Senegal recorded 10.19 million internet users, resulting in an internet penetration rate of 58.1 percent. Additionally, there were 3.05 million social media users as at January 2023, representing 17.4 percent of the overall population. Furthermore, the number of active cellular mobile connections reached 20.13 million, which corresponds to 114.8 percent of the total population.⁴⁸



Social Impact

Economic Impact

Legal and Human Rights Impact

Social Impact of Digital Repression

As state authorities implemented draconian measures to cut internet access in the country, the first node where the impact became evident is in the interpersonal communication among citizens who use platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter for direct messaging and data calls. This is inimical to human interaction. Furthermore, it became difficult to record and broadcast live transmissions of state brutality measured out against protesters in public squares across the major cities in Senegal. A senior official from the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) provided a most poignant description of the intention of state authorities to cut internet access in most cases, even as witnessed in Senegal. *“What switching off the internet does is not to dissuade the people from protesting. It is to ensure that what is happening does not go outside real time. That is what bothers repressive governments. It’s not for you not to gather. They just don’t want it real time outside. So, they want something that they can use to contain the narrative. That’s what digital repression does. It’s not for you not to convey”*.⁴⁹ However, the people rose up against the digital repression. They circumvented the process and still got the message out to the global audience. The social and mental implications of an internet shutdown are apparent. On how to deal with such occurrences, the immediate solutions are: downloading offline versions of websites of interest, using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and staying informed. These measures often require being proactive in anticipation of a likely network disruption, even though shutdowns often come unexpectedly.⁵⁰

A civil society activist in Mbour, Senegal noted that the internet shutdown affected communication and mobilisation within their movement: *...“we no longer had means of communication between activists, citizen movements and the population. So these internet shutdown really impacted the movement and even at one point, our actions because we could no longer coordinate the different actions, whether on the ground or online mobilization actions, it was almost no longer possible to mobilize. So it [internet shutdown] had a big impact [temporarily] in the sense that it completely blocked us in our actions and our initiatives. We could no longer demonstrate. Because to demonstrate, you have to organize yourself. And in general, it’s the internets that make it possible to mobilize people and get them out”*.⁵¹

How to deal with internet shutdowns:

- ✔ Download offline versions of websites of interest
- ✔ Use Virtual Private Networks (VPNs)
- ✔ Stay informed

Social
Impact

Economic
Impact

Legal and
Human Rights
Impact

Economic Impact of Digital Repression

In today's world, the Internet has become an inherent part of human life. It is the primary source of communication, information and entertainment. The recent curfew-style mobile internet shutdowns implemented by the authorities in Senegal caused significant economic losses to corporations, and small and medium businesses in particular. The economic implications of such decisions and the financial consequences of the internet shutdown are quite concerning. NetBlocks have devised measurement tools to evaluate the impact. According to that system, the cost of the shutdown in Senegal is approximately \$9,967,774, and these numbers do not include the loss in financial transactions through online banking and mobile money.⁵²

Legal and Human Rights Impact of Digital Repression

Lastly, it is widely accepted that internet blackouts through digital repression are a violation of fundamental rights such as freedom of expression by the citizens.⁵³ Numerous governments, including Senegal in recent times, have implemented shutdowns, often without fully recognising the severe consequences of these actions or believing that the reasons for the shutdowns justify the associated harms. The significant real-world repercussions of such shutdowns on the lives and human rights of individuals are frequently underestimated and warrant far more consideration from governments, international bodies, corporations, and civil society. Internet shutdowns severely compromise a range of human rights, with the most direct effects observed in the areas of freedom of expression and access to information. These rights serve as cornerstones of free and democratic societies. The freedom of information is undeniably a cornerstone of democracy, with press freedom serving as its essential foundation. This important right not only allows for the oversight of government and political leaders but also guarantees transparency and accountability at multiple levels of society. Moreover, it creates opportunities for public engagement in governance by encouraging discussions on key issues that affect the polity⁵⁴. A journalist with WADR posited that *"because the repression is digital, it was very easy for the authorities to control how journalists operate. We saw internet restriction. It was very difficult for journalists who broadcast online to stream. You are either closed down or your staff are arrested. The shutdown is a deliberate act by the government to make sure that people who were supposed to stream certain meetings, certain protests are not able to do that"*.⁵⁵



Key Strategies and Successes in Countering Digital Repression

The key civil society strategies deployed to halt digital repression in Senegal include circumvention of digital repression tactics by the government, capacity building for the citizens, sustained social media campaigns, diaspora support, and international solidarity. While these strategies worked well in Senegal, their success in other contexts will depend on adapting them to the local political, cultural and technological environment. Providing training on how to use VPNs, encrypted messaging, and other circumvention tools can empower citizens to resist digital repression in other contexts. This approach is especially useful in countries with similar digital repression tactics. Strategic engagement and mobilisation of the diaspora becomes pivotal, and other movements can replicate this strategy by creating targeted social media campaigns that resonate with both local and international audiences. The involvement of diaspora communities and influential figures can be crucial in maximising the impact of campaigns against digital repression.

The primary tools and techniques such as VPNs, encrypted messaging apps, and anonymous accounts help activists evade surveillance and censorship. As noted by a digital technology expert and online activist in Senegal, they [social media platforms] also helped them to record and upload real-time events pertaining to protest and associated police violence in major cities of Senegal.⁵⁶ He noted, *“people succeeded to connect... People used the VPN to go online. Tik Tok was a catalyst they [the authorities] didn’t plan for. Because TikTok possess immense viral possibilities to communicate with a global audience. People had the reflex every time for everything happening to just get out their phone, take video and post it online. So that’s the reason why they shut down TikTok also. People use VPN to go on TikTok and also using YouTube and all the other video platforms to upload the data. And they [government] saw that for everything they do the young people already know the tools to use to go above that restriction, so they just decided to cut internet”*.⁵⁷ The utilisation of these tools by civil society in Senegal bears evidence of how social media amplifies the voices of protesters, bringing attention to issues that might be overlooked by traditional media.

Digital training that teaches citizens how to circumvent digital repression has also become a vital strategy deployed by civil society in Senegal. The African League of Cyber-Activists and Bloggers for Democracy, commonly known as AfricTivistes leads on this initiative in Senegal. AfricTivistes is the union of bloggers and web-activists from Africa and the diaspora who promote and defend democratic values, human rights and good governance through digital means.⁵⁸

Prior to the era of digital repression in Senegal, AfricTivistes had been training citizens, journalists, bloggers and civil society actors on cyber security. The goal was for everyone to understand what it actually means to navigate the internet or use digital technologies and platforms without compromising their safety. The organisation trains citizens on how to circumvent censorship through open-source tools like Tor and VPN, and that has raised awareness on the topic. They have also facilitated regional trainings in other West African countries to promote what they describe as “digital hygiene” among almost 600 participants. The training programme has now been upgraded to reflect new realities, and it is accessible online, with 450 people registered.⁵⁹ *“Because we can’t go everywhere, it requires resources, so we have made it available online. The training curriculum centers on privacy protection on the various digital platforms bordering on issues of how to circumvent censorship, what’s the browser to use, how users can control risks and what information is to be provided online and how to ensure platform providers and other intruders poised to undermine citizens democratic rights to privacy do not have undue access to their data. We see internet as a tool, we see digital revolution as an opportunity for the continent actually to catch up on many areas where we are lagging behind, and to be able to catch up, each individual actually should be able to use internet responsibly.”⁶⁰*

These trainings yielded multiplier effects and became extremely useful to citizens as the country slid into digital repression in the last three years. The organisers noted, *“most people in Senegal had earlier concluded they will never need the digital skills acquired to circumvent digital repression, some years back they would say we don’t need this [training], we are in Senegal. But people who never thought that they would use VPN sent us messages saying, I thank you so much because when you invited me for this training, I never thought that I’ll be in this situation. And those people we train were sharing the information with others.”⁶¹*

As digital repression threatens fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and privacy, these trainings by AfricTivistes empower citizens to safeguard these rights by

providing them with the skills to communicate, organise, and access information freely. Notably, digital repression manifests through misinformation and online censorship in Senegal. The former manifests through state-controlled narratives and partisan citizens. The state has been accused of spreading its own version of events through official channels and state-affiliated media. This involved downplaying the scale of protests, and discrediting opposition figures. During periods of protests, the government's restriction of internet access and targeting of specific platforms to control the flow of information, created an environment where rumours and unverified reports filled the void. Some citizens with partisan posture and opposition groups also spread misinformation in their efforts to mobilise support or draw attention to their cause. This includes exaggerating incidents of violence or misreporting the actions of security forces.⁶² Thus, through the training in digital literacy, citizens have become more adept at discerning credible sources and verifying information, which is crucial for informed decision-making and fostering a more engaged and participatory society.⁶³

International Solidarity

International support played a crucial role in combating digital repression by providing a united front against efforts by the Macky Sall regime to restrict online freedom and privacy in Senegal. Again, leading civil society voices and their counterparts outside Senegal undertook initiatives to implement solidarity strategies aimed at countering digital repression. *“There’s a network, a world coalition of organizations working on digital security and digital rights, which is called Keep It On. We are part of that coalition. So there was constant solidarity from around the world. They issued statements and sent some letters directly to the authorities to call their attention to the consequences of internet cuts during critical times of political unrest. There was direct support to organizations in Senegal [that] work on digital rights. Actually, we did issue statements on this and we did coordinate a lot of work in supporting civil society actors on the ground [in Senegal]”.*⁶⁴

On 31 January 2024, AfricTivistes and Senegalese journalists Moussa Ngom and Ayoba Faye petitioned the ECOWAS Court of Justice (ECOWAS Court) by challenging the Senegalese authorities' shutdown of the Internet in June, July and August 2023. The action was filed in collaboration with Media Defence and Stanford Law School's Rule of Law Impact Lab. The complainants argue that blackouts on mobile internet data violate the rights to freedom of expression and the right of journalists to operate, while significantly undermining freedom of the press and freedom of expression in Senegal.

“AfricTivistes stands firm against internet shutdowns as they not only infringe upon the fundamental rights of citizens but also pose a direct threat to democracy and human rights. The case filed at the ECOWAS Court challenges Senegal’s actions, emphasising the detrimental impact on freedom of expression, media freedom, and the right to work. During political unrest, access to information is crucial, and internet shutdowns only worsens the situation, hindering the flow of vital news and endangering the safety of citizens. We believe in an open and connected Africa, where the right to express, share, and access information is safeguarded for the greater good of society,” said Cheikh Fall, president of AfricTivistes. The case sought interim measures to shield the Senegalese public from further shutdowns ahead of the presidential election scheduled for 25 February 2024. According to Stanford Law School Professor, Amrit Singh, who is also Executive Director of the Rule of Law Impact Lab, *“Access to the Internet is a crucial aspect of the right to freedom of expression, and Senegal has an obligation to protect that right. We call on the ECOWAS court to hold the Senegalese government accountable for violating this right and to issue interim measures to ensure that there is no shutdown”*.⁶⁵

A significant addition to the layer of international solidarity is the role of the Senegalese diaspora in countering digital repression. The government’s repeated attempts to control digital spaces and suppress dissent prompted reactions from the diaspora communities. The online activism of the Senegalese diaspora against digital repression became a critical component of the broader democratic resistance in Senegal. By leveraging digital tools and international networks, the Senegalese diaspora played a significant role in challenging government repression and advocating for change. The diaspora consists of an army of youths who live in France, Belgium, United Kingdom, United States of America, etc. They opted for digital activism to achieve three goals— defence of democracy in the homeland, solidarity with domestic activists, and the need to raise global awareness as the country was sliding towards authoritarianism. Many Senegalese living abroad are motivated by a desire to protect democratic values and human rights in their homeland. The diaspora felt a strong connection to activists in Senegal and sought to support their efforts to counter repression and advocate for change. By leveraging their positions in different countries, diaspora members brought international attention to the situation in Senegal and pressured their host countries to respond.⁶⁶

Using platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, diaspora activists amplified the voices of those in Senegal, shared information about protests and human rights violations, and mobilised support. The diaspora also organised petitions and wrote open letters to international organisations and foreign governments, calling for intervention and support for Senegalese activists. In response to



restrictions on physical gatherings, the diaspora organised virtual events to discuss issues related to, among others, digital repression and strategies for resistance. The efforts of the diaspora helped to raise awareness about digital repression in Senegal, both within the country and internationally. By mobilising international attention and support, the diaspora put pressure on the Senegalese government to reconsider its repressive measures.

The activism of the diaspora has strengthened solidarity among Senegalese activists and provided a platform for them to share their experiences and strategies. Diaspora activism has contributed to the withdrawal of repressive measures, although these outcomes require ongoing vigilance considering the recent news blackout described as shrinking media freedom under the new government in Senegal.⁶⁷ On Tuesday, 13 August 2024, media organisations in Senegal observed a day of blackout in response to what they describe as a government crackdown specifically targeting them, which they believe is intended to restrict press freedoms in the country. Major television networks, including TFM, ITV and 7 TV, displayed blank screens, while radio stations such as RFM and iradio remained silent. Most daily newspapers refrained from publishing their Tuesday editions, with the exception of the government-owned *Le Soleil* and the privately-owned pro-government outlets *WalfQuotidien* and *Yoor Yoor Bi*. This action occurred amid escalating tensions between media entities and the government, raising international alarm regarding the state of press freedoms in the country.⁶⁸

Furthermore, the interventions by the diaspora communities highlight the need for sustained efforts and collaboration to protect digital freedoms and support activists on the ground. A civil society leader in Mbour noted, *“the diaspora made its contribution and it was a catalyst for our actions. The diaspora played an important role because when we had certain information, for fear of being arrested, we sent it to them and they published it on the internet until we got to the episodes of internet cuts. The diaspora played a crucial role both in terms of mobilization and financially. They continued to promote the hashtags including the popular one – #FreeSenegal; inform local and international media, influential people, the UN, donors. It is the diaspora that supported the substantive actions. Without them this mobilization would not have succeeded”*.⁶⁹

Drawing from the foregoing analysis, international solidarity was vital in creating a unified and effective response to digital repression in Senegal. By leveraging collective resources, expertise and influence, the domestic and international stakeholders played a critical role in protecting digital rights during the period of political unrest, engendering open and free digital spaces through democratic solidarity in the country.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study presents evidence regarding digital repression in Senegal in recent years; and how the administration of former President Macky Sall weaponised digital control to suppress human rights, and alter the trajectory of democracy in the country. It relies on first-hand perspectives gathered from leading officials of the civil society organisations, citizens, journalists, student union leaders in Senegal, and movement and coalition members in West Africa. It highlights the overlapping drivers of digital repression and its impact on the social, economic and political outcomes in Senegal. The findings of the study contribute to contemporary understanding of digital repression, and provide practical guidance on policy measures to address the associated challenges. The study highlights the importance of adopting a multi-faceted approach to combat digital repression, by incorporating capacity building for citizens on digital rights, strengthening the rule of law and accountability, promoting inclusive governance and leveraging international solidarity. In concrete terms, the next sections present recommendations for the various actors and critical stakeholders in Senegal and West Africa at large.



Civil society

- Public awareness campaigns: Launch campaigns to educate citizens about the importance of digital rights, data privacy, and the risks of surveillance.
- Strengthen digital literacy and security by conducting regular workshops and training sessions for activists, journalists and the general public on digital security practices such as using VPNs, secure communication apps, and best practices for password management.
- Multi-stakeholder engagement: Engage with other stakeholders, including tech companies, policymakers and academia, to advocate for policies that protect digital rights.
- Advocacy campaigns: Conduct targeted advocacy campaigns to influence policymakers and legislators, urging them to adopt laws that protect internet freedom and oppose repressive measures.

Government

- Adopt and implement a digital rights charter: Create and adopt a national charter that clearly outlines the digital rights of citizens, including freedom of expression, privacy, and access to information.
- Legal safeguards: Enact laws that protect individuals from unwarranted surveillance, censorship, and data breaches. Ensure these laws are aligned with international human rights standards, and reflect technological advancements and evolving human rights standards.
- Judicial oversight: Ensure that any surveillance or data collection activities are subject to judicial oversight, requiring court orders and providing avenues for legal challenge.
- Parliamentary scrutiny: Increase the role of parliament in overseeing digital policies, including the power to review and approve any measures that may impact digital rights.

International development partners

- Capacity building: Offer technical assistance and funding to civil society organisations (CSOs), journalists and human rights defenders to strengthen their capacity to advocate for digital rights and monitor digital repression.
- Infrastructure development: Invest in digital infrastructure projects that prioritise open access and internet freedom, ensuring that technological advancements benefit all segments of society.
- Bilateral and multilateral advocacy: Use diplomatic channels to advocate for the protection of digital rights in Senegal, raising concerns about digital repression during bilateral talks and within multilateral forums.
- Facilitate forums and dialogues: Organise and facilitate forums, dialogues and workshops that bring together government officials, CSOs, tech companies and other stakeholders to discuss and address digital rights issues.

By implementing these recommendations, civil society organisations, the government of Senegal and international development partners can build a robust and coordinated response to digital repression, protecting the digital rights of citizens and ensuring that activists can continue their work without fear of censorship or retaliation.

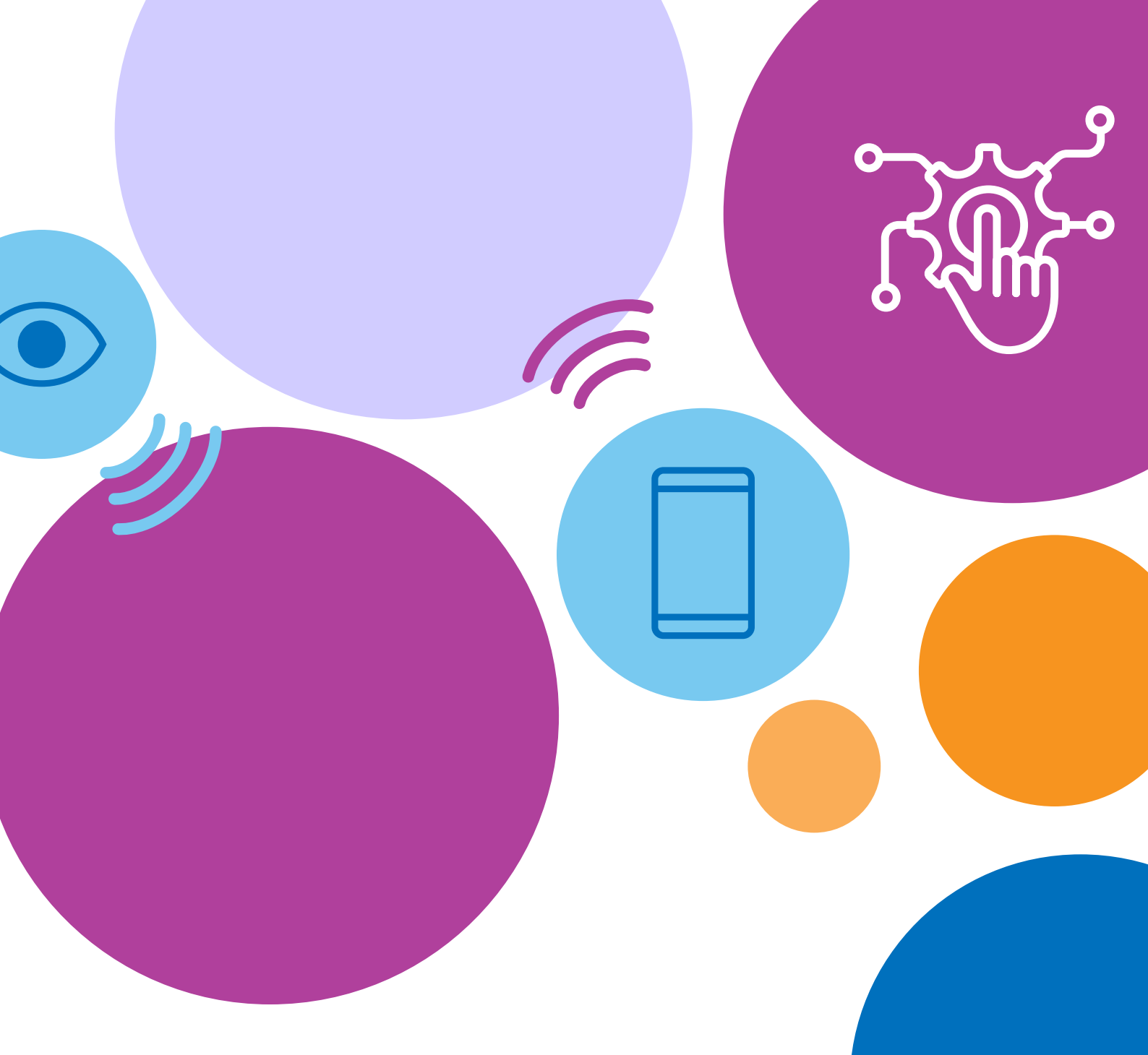
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