

Ugandans' internet dependency worrisome

When it came, it was not a shock to anyone who has followed the socio-political trends of the last decade. The surprise was in the timing – many wags, while expecting an internet shutdown, were caught with pants down. The wager was that the switch-off would happen on election day or in the short hours between the casting of our ballots and the broadcast of the results.

Coming on the Tuesday before the Thursday, I suddenly found myself among scores of shoppers streaming to retail outlets to stock up. It was quite staggering that in a seven square metre space of the large supermarket at Tank Hill, I would meet numerous familiar faces who ordinarily were not given to Tuesday evening shopping. “Panic-buying” was the unspoken word. Down at the Kabalagala market, the sheepish smiles of vendors smugly announcing that they had run out of this and gone short of that, while merrily taking our shillings, is a memory to take forward from this election. All because of the internet!

With the flick of a switch (I must confess that I do not know what the mechanics of shutting the internet down are – is it click of a button? The snipping of an undersea cable? The twisting of some subterranean line? The shooting down of a satellite? Whatever...), using the power vested in it, the Uganda Communications Commission created millions of digital orphans across our virtual landscape.

In my home, as in millions of others, we went through a cyber detox. As fate would have it, the shutdown coincided with an intense

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bout of spring-cleaning to clear out domestic clutter: suddenly, an old radio was discovered and dusted, and the young generation got a taste of what it is to turn a dial to tune into some scratchy and indeterminate radio station (television having been done away with years ago).

But digital-dependence is cross-generational, and in the ensuing 48 hours, the laptop and the phone looked like the relics of a bygone present. Like body organs such as the liver, the lungs and the intestines will not do without blood (should the blood supply be shut down), so were services like WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, and a whole set of applications rendered dead without the life-giving flow of MBs. The smart dodger, virtual private network, appeared like the bloodshot eyes of a non-viable patient.

Personally, having sold out to Spotify (for the second Christmas

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running, I never played any of my wide collection of gospel CDs), I could not listen to any music, except endure four days of hoary radio DJs, and had to ruefully suspend my reliance on the streaming service which, of course, is internet-driven.

For those used to online prayer – one Kampala church was bang in the middle of a 21-day prayer drive, running online 24/7 – when suddenly fellowship with many people you had never met face-to-face was curtailed. The reader and

researcher could not even consult Mr Google (please dust off the good old dictionary and encyclopaedia), and internet-based retailers like online publications, takeaway meals, clothes shops and so-called influencers were rendered numb.

And yet *Mwami* Google, Madam TikTok and *Bwana* Facebook are relative teenagers in the broad scheme of things. The internet as a popular feature is barely a quarter of a century old, and we did exist – indeed thrive – before the internet and his offspring, the World Wide Web, disrupted our lives.

I am currently reading a book, a most excellent account of the establishment of modern East Africa, that places our lives in greater context.

It is amazing that not too many decades back, the Nandi people of Kenya were treating the (Uganda) railway as an open shelf hardware shop, cheerfully ripping up bits of rail line to use in arms and armour, and that a mere century-and-a-half ago the Sultan of Zanzibar had such extensive territory inland that we all could be Zanzibaris today.

The lesson there, and in the cyber denial of January 2026, is that we live in a world where much about us is fleeting. Here today, gone tomorrow. Being a cyber orphan, however short-lived, should help broaden our perspectives and assist us live more wholesome lives, less dependent on uncontrollable factors, and more focused on what really matters.

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