



Dear social media butterfly

BY JAN NAPIO

I am writing this from the dark doldrums of a world without the internet. I do not know if, by the time you read this, we will be out of the woods or still groping around in the dark, but I hope you get to read it.

It is often said, and sadly proven, that we do not like to read; that we are all mouth and no brain or muscle.

However, I know you are one of the exceptions. You read. (PS: Reading lips does not count.)

I struggle with how to start this letter because I am unsure of your mental state during the past few days.

For many of us, our social lives consist of our social media followings and our mothers. With the former cut off, life can feel empty and meaningless.

Internet addiction is real, and sudden disconnections can lead to feelings of erratic behaviour, hopelessness, and loss, as if experiencing a withdrawal.

True village colours may start to manifest. If this is you, take heart; you are among friends.

If by the time you read this, the internet has been reinstated, I know the temptation to ignore this message, overwhelmed by events, will be high. But hear me out.

Before you return to your busy online life, let us take a moment to reflect on this internet

shutdown. If only to glean a few lessons. The Bible says that God can turn things

INTERNET SHUTDOWNS BEYOND THE SILENCE

Internet shutdowns are no longer isolated events. Globally, governments increasingly restrict access during elections, protests or conflict, citing security concerns. Digital rights groups warn that such measures disrupt far more than social media: they paralyse small businesses, cut off mobile money, interrupt journalism, and isolate families who rely on digital communication.

The effects are also psychological. Studies increasingly link sudden loss of internet access to anxiety and withdrawal-like symptoms, highlighting how deeply embedded digital connectivity has become in everyday life.

Before constant connectivity, societies relied on radio, landlines, letters and community networks to share information. Shutdowns briefly revive these older systems, but in a far more digitally dependent world, the costs are heavier, the silence louder, and the consequences longer lasting.

meant to harm us into opportunities for good. So, while the internet shutdown may have been a significant inconvenience and disenfranchisement, perhaps there is a way to make something good out of a bad situation.

An internet shutdown is like being told to spend time alone with yourself. We are often encouraged to sit in silence, without distractions, just us and our thoughts.

This is a discipline that many find difficult to manage. They say if you cannot sit with yourself, you will never truly deal with your inner dysfunctions and skeletons tucked away in the back of your soul.

So, when the internet goes dark, and our social lives vanish with the flip of a switch, perhaps it is time to try spending some time alone.

Even after we return to civilisation, taking occasional breaks from the internet might not be a bad idea. Unplug for a day or two, or longer if you can afford it. I promise, you will not die.

Think of it as a way to shut out the noise, find some peace, and face yourself without the distractions of public discourse. If you are still considering New Year's resolutions, unplugging could be a great addition to your list.

The absence of beeps and clicks also gives many of us time to tackle tasks we have been putting off.

Simple things, such as taking a long shower where you actually scrub between your toes and behind your ears, or cleaning your house.

I was busy minding my internet-less life, doing dishes and listening to a physical radio, when I heard my neighbour cleaning his house. It was Tuesday at 11:30pm, but he was cleaning as if it were Saturday at 10am. The cleaning lasted for about three hours, which I know because I was also awake, trying to keep myself busy since sleep had eluded me.

I eventually dozed off, but not before I heard him scrubbing the thin walls of his house. The last time I saw him clean like that was during the internet shutdown in January 2021.

If you have a usually chatty friend who uses big, fancy words in WhatsApp messages or X posts, and suddenly goes silent during the shutdown, it is probably because there was no Google to search for impressive vocabulary.

The lesson here is to learn some new words, so that when the internet takes a hiatus, you will not feel empty. Teach yourself some new words that will stay with you even when you are offline.

Do not let the Uganda Communications Commission control your verbal arsenal.

The internet shutdown also forced us to make voice calls. One potential New Year's resolution might be to consider making more voice calls.

Hearing someone's voice can tell you a lot about them, including their choice of words and tone. Moreover, you will be engaging with a real person, not a faceless character.

Finally, here is a perspective for the road, or just me showing off my limited knowledge. Ethiopia holds the record for the longest internet shutdown, lasting more than two years, from November 2020 to late 2022.