



**DIGITAL RIGHTS AND INCLUSION IN AFRICA REPORT**

**UGANDA**  
**COUNTRY REPORT**

**2024**



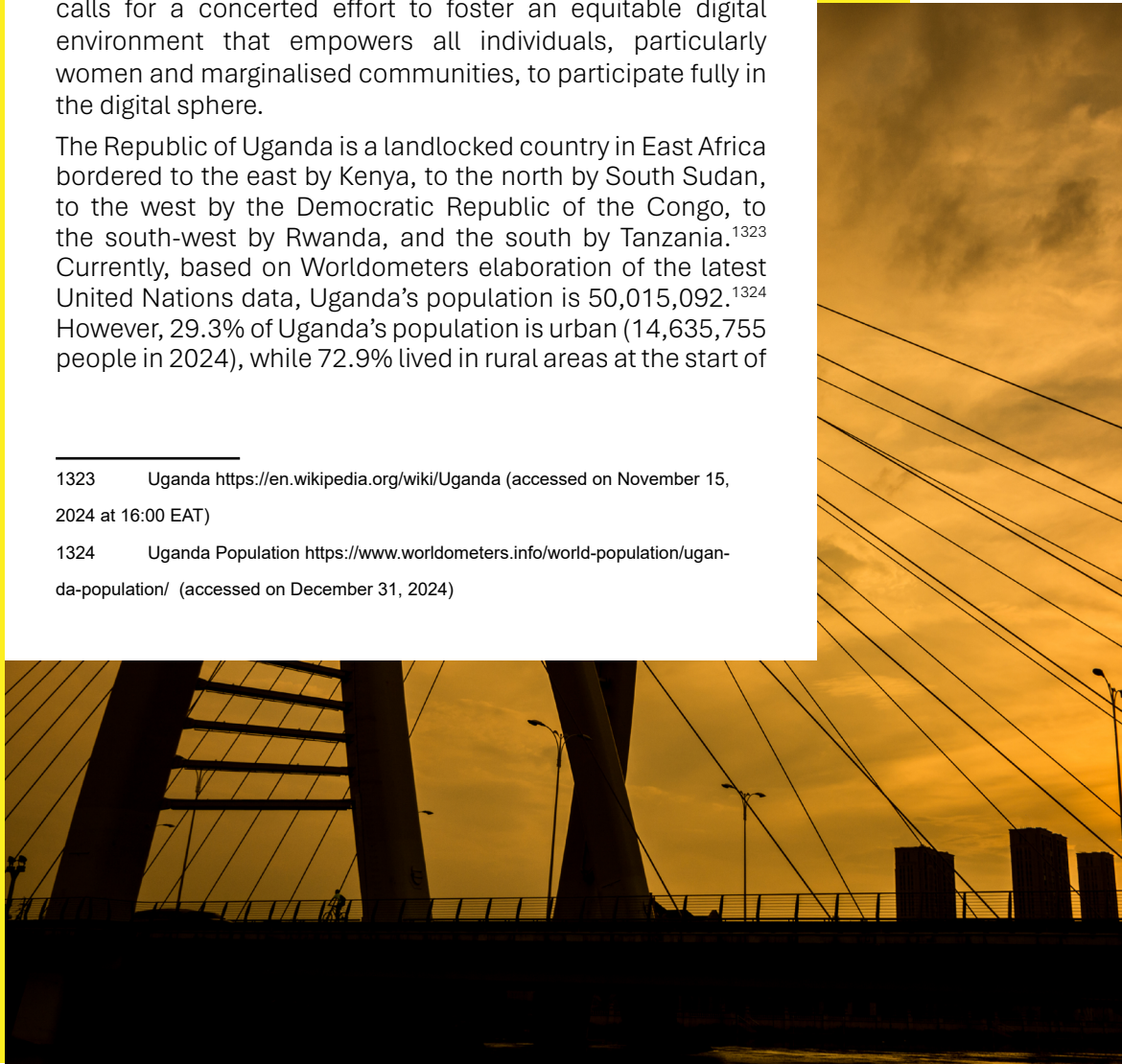
## Executive Summary

This report comprehensively examines Uganda's digital rights and inclusion landscape, highlighting progress and ongoing challenges. The report employs a mixed-methods approach, incorporating quantitative data and case studies to analyse key thematic areas such as Internet access, freedom of expression, media freedoms, online gender-based violence, data protection and privacy, surveillance, censorship, content moderation, and the role of emerging technologies with reliance on the TheScore Index by Paradigm Initiative to measure compliance with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Declaration. Notable findings indicate that while there have been slight improvements in internet freedom and partnerships with civil society, significant barriers persist, particularly for marginalised groups. Issues such as gendered disinformation, low digital literacy, and limited internet access in rural areas are critical concerns that impede the realisation of digital inclusivity. The report also underscores the government's ongoing quest to stifle free speech, mainly through the persecution of critics and the regulation of online platforms. Recommendations include enhancing accountability frameworks, more significant investment in digital literacy initiatives, and strategies to bridge the gender digital divide to ensure compliance with international human rights standards. Ultimately, the report calls for a concerted effort to foster an equitable digital environment that empowers all individuals, particularly women and marginalised communities, to participate fully in the digital sphere.

The Republic of Uganda is a landlocked country in East Africa bordered to the east by Kenya, to the north by South Sudan, to the west by the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to the south-west by Rwanda, and the south by Tanzania.<sup>1323</sup> Currently, based on Worldometers elaboration of the latest United Nations data, Uganda's population is 50,015,092.<sup>1324</sup> However, 29.3% of Uganda's population is urban (14,635,755 people in 2024), while 72.9% lived in rural areas at the start of

<sup>1323</sup> Uganda <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uganda> (accessed on November 15, 2024 at 16:00 EAT)

<sup>1324</sup> Uganda Population <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/uganda-population/> (accessed on December 31, 2024)



2024<sup>1325</sup> with a median age of 16.7 years.<sup>1326</sup> 50.4% of the population is female, while 49.6% is male<sup>1327</sup> and its population increased by 1.3 million, or 2.8%, between early 2023 and the start of 2024.<sup>1328</sup> Since 1986, Uganda's president has remained Yoweri Museveni under the National Resistance Movement (NRM) political party.<sup>1329</sup>

## Introduction

The 2024 Uganda Londa report analyses digital rights and inclusion in Uganda, offering critical recommendations for improvement and compliance with the African Commission on Human and People's Rights' *Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information* using The Score Index developed by Paradigm Initiative. It notes progress in internet freedom and civil society partnerships. Still, it highlights issues like restricted access to information, government repression of free speech, and increased gender-based disinformation and violence online. Limitations on platforms like Facebook impede freedom of expression. While the report acknowledges gender-specific challenges, government actions against critics breach free expression principles. Recommendations include enhanced accountability, more investment in digital literacy, and efforts to close the gender digital divide, highlighting significant gaps in compliance with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) principles.

Overall, internet freedom in Uganda has seen a slight improvement due to better connectivity and the increased use of social media for advocating government accountability. However, the government continues to limit free expression online by manipulating information on social media, targeting digital activists, and trying to implement registration requirements for online media.<sup>1330</sup> 2024 saw an improvement in the implementation and documentation of success stories, increased partnership with civil society and the private sector, and increased awareness of the Universal Service and Access Fund by the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) compared to 2023. This shows a slight improvement by UCC regarding its accountability mechanism to bridge the gender digital divide in the country.

1325 Simon Kemp. (23 February 2024). Digital 2024: Uganda <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-uganda> (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1326 Uganda Population <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/uganda-population/> (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1327 DIGITAL 2024: UGANDA <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-uganda> (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1328 DIGITAL 2023: UGANDA <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-uganda> (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1329 Uganda <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uganda> (accessed on November 15, 2024 at 16:00 EAT)

1330 Freedom House. (2024). Uganda: Freedom on the Net 2024 <https://freedomhouse.org/country/uganda/freedom-net/2024> (Accessed on November 16, 2024)

## Internet access

Internet access remains a fundamental human right in Uganda, according to Uganda's 1995 constitution specifically Article 29(1)(a), which guarantees the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to receive and impart information and ideas through any media of one's choice.<sup>1331</sup> Uganda has seen various efforts, including advocacy by civil society organisations promoting digital rights and legislation aimed at improving access to internet services.<sup>1332</sup> However, challenges remain, including restrictions during social disturbances and issues related to internet censorship. In January 2024, there were 13.30 million internet users in Uganda, with an internet penetration rate of 27% of the total population.<sup>1333</sup> According to the Digital 2024 Uganda report, internet users in Uganda increased by 1.2 million (+10.3%) between January 2023 and January 2024.<sup>1334</sup> This also unveils that 35.95 million people in Uganda did not use the Internet at the start of 2024, suggesting that 73% of the population remained offline at the beginning of the year.<sup>1335</sup> Factors such as limited access to electricity in rural areas, low digital literacy levels, and the high cost of internet-enabled devices such as computers and smartphones are some of the obstacles affecting internet usage.<sup>1336</sup> According to the Inclusive Internet Index, only 31% of the population has access to 4G services.<sup>1337</sup> There was a brief decline in connectivity in February 2024 after significant telecommunications networks were targeted by a cyberattack from the hacking group Anonymous Sudan, as indicated by traffic data.<sup>1338</sup> In August 2023, Uganda reached an ICT infrastructure-sharing agreement with Tanzania, which officials stated would help reduce connectivity costs.<sup>1339</sup> Additionally, Airtel Uganda and MTN Uganda launched 5G networks in July 2023 to enhance internet connectivity.<sup>1340</sup> But connectivity remains a challenge. In the same month, the government announced a reduction in internet costs for government entities connected to the National Backbone Infrastructure (NBI), dropping the price from USD 70 to USD 35 per Mbps per month.<sup>1341</sup> As of April 2024, 28 Internet Service Providers (ISPs) were connected to the Uganda Internet Exchange Point (UIXP).<sup>1342</sup>

While internet access has become more affordable, especially on mobile devices, costs remain high for many Ugandans.<sup>1343</sup> The average price of one gigabyte (GB) of prepaid mobile data is USD 1.11, about Uganda shillings 5,000 per GB. However, Uganda ranked undefined in the world for

1331 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda <https://ulii.org/akn/ug/act/statute/1995/constitution/eng@2018-01-05> (accessed on February 06, 2025 at 2:28 pm South African time)

1332 <https://www.ucc.co.ug/download-category/performance-reports/> (accessed on February 09, 2025)

1333 Simon Kemp. (23 February 2024). Digital 2024: Uganda <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-uganda> (accessed on November 15, 2024)

1334 Simon Kemp. (23 February 2024). Digital 2024: Uganda <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-uganda> (accessed on November 15, 2024)

1335 Simon Kemp. (23 February 2024). Digital 2024: Uganda <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-uganda> (accessed on November 15, 2024)

1336 Gillwald, A., Mothobi, O., Tusubira, F., & Ndiwalana, A. (2019). The State of ICT in Uganda (Policy Paper No. 8; Series 5: After Access – Assessing Digital Inequality in Africa). Research ICT Africa. [https://researchictafrica.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019\\_After-Access-The-State-of-ICT-in-Uganda.pdf](https://researchictafrica.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019_After-Access-The-State-of-ICT-in-Uganda.pdf) (accessed on November 15, 2024)

1337 Economist Impact. (2022). Inclusive Internet Index Uganda <https://impact.economist.com/projects/inclusive-internet-index/2022/country/Uganda> (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1338 Cloudflare Radar.(02 January .2024- 02 October 2024). Traffic in Uganda- <https://radar.cloudflare.com/traffic/ug?date-Start=2024-02-01&dateEnd=2024-02-10> (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1339 Telecom Paper. (21 August 2023.) Uganda and Tanzania reach deal to share ict backbone infrastructure <https://www.telecompaper.com/news/uganda-and-tanzania-reach-deal-to-share-ict-backbone-infrastructure--1473418> (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1340 Abdullah Rabiiba Karim. (Monday, July 31, 2023). 5G network goes live as technology continues to redefine telecom sector <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/business/technology/5g-network-goes-live-as-technology-continues-to-redefine-telecom-sector-4322538> (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1341 <https://www.telecompaper.com/news/uganda-and-tanzania-reach-deal-to-share-ict-backbone-infrastructure--1473418> (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1342 The Uganda Internet eXchange Point <https://www.uixp.co.ug/networks> (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1343 SautiTech Editor. ( February 14, 2019). Monthly internet bundles: A look at what Africell, MTN & Airtel offer [UPDATED] <https://www.sautitech.com/telecom/africell-monthly-internet-bundles/> (accessed on November 16, 2024)



mobile speeds and 127th for fixed broadband speeds during November 2024.<sup>1344</sup> As of 2024, the 5% digital services tax introduced in July 2023 by the Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) still impacts the digital ecosystem because it targets non-resident companies that earn income from providing digital services in Uganda. This continues to raise concerns about its potential effects on affordability and accessibility, hence creating barriers to online publishing.<sup>1345</sup> Civil society groups expressed worries about increased prices for digital services, the impact of the digital divide, and barriers to online publishing and content creation. If digital service providers pass this tax on to consumers, it could hinder access to digital services for persons with disabilities and those in rural communities.<sup>1346</sup>

The government has also continued to enforce a 12% tax on internet data as part of a tax package adopted under the Excise Duty (Amendment) Act 2021.<sup>1347</sup> However, this tax exempts data used for medical and educational services.<sup>1348</sup> Research on the 12% tax found that it disproportionately affected women's access to the Internet.<sup>1349</sup> In 2023, several civil society organisations began lobbying the government to reduce this tax in the 2024 fiscal year. Despite advocacy efforts, the tax was not repealed in the 2024 fiscal year. However, the government budget projection for 2024/2025 continues to include revenue from this tax, indicating ongoing implementation. By early 2024, 37.8% of Uganda's social media users were women, while 62.2% were men.<sup>1350</sup>

Despite these challenges, there were no reported connectivity restrictions or new government-imposed limitations on social media platforms in 2024, although access to Facebook remained restricted, hence partial social media restrictions.<sup>1351</sup> However, some users can still access Facebook using virtual private networks (VPNs) and selected Wi-Fi networks.

As of early 2024, 33.34 million cellular mobile connections were active in Uganda, accounting for 67.7% of the total population. Fixed internet connection speeds in Uganda increased by 2.26 Mbps (+21.1%),<sup>1352</sup> with a median download speed of 13.08 Mbps and a median upload speed of 14.80 Mbps.<sup>1353</sup> These speeds exceed the minimum of 4 Mbps nationwide prescribed by Uganda's National Broadband Policy, adopted in 2018.<sup>1354</sup> Additionally, the median mobile internet connection speed in February 2024 was 32.11 Mbps for downloads and 13.07 Mbps for uploads.<sup>1355</sup>

The Digital 2024 Uganda report indicates that the number of social media users in Uganda rose by 750,000, an increase of 40.5%, between early 2023 and the beginning of 2024. At the start of 2024, social media users made up 5.3% of Uganda's total population.<sup>1356</sup> Additionally, 19.5% of Uganda's internet user base (irrespective of age) utilised at least one social media platform in January 2024.

1344 <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index/uganda> (accessed on January 7, 2025)

1345 Freedom House. (2024). Uganda: Freedom on the Net 2024 <https://freedomhouse.org/country/uganda/freedom-net/2024> (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1346 Brian Oduti. (17 October 2023 4:01 GMT). A look into Uganda's digital services tax <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2023/10/17/a-look-into-ugandas-digital-services-tax/>

1347 Posted at 7:07 PM · Apr 29, 2021 via user: Nemz @AmanyaNemz [https://twitter.com/Parliament\\_Ug/status/1387800653356060672](https://twitter.com/Parliament_Ug/status/1387800653356060672) (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1348 Chimp Reports. (April 2, 2021). Cars, Internet Data, Beer, Minerals Targeted in New Tax Laws <https://chimpreports.com/cars-internet-data-beer-minerals-targeted-in-new-tax-laws/> (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1349 Rehema Kahunde. (February 2, 2023). Taxation, gender, and internet access: lessons from Uganda <https://globaldev.blog/taxation-gender-and-internet-access-lessons-uganda/> (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1350 Michael Malakata. (27 Feb 2023). Civil society lobbies Uganda gov't to reduce internet taxes <https://itweb.africa/content/8OKdWM-DX4nWMbznQ> (accessed on November 17, 2024)

1351 Arthur Arnold Wadero. (Friday, August 12, 2022). Facebook to remain shut as govt talks with tech giant stall <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/facebook-to-remain-shut-as-govt-talks-with-tech-giant-stall-3912172> (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1352 Simon Kemp. (23 February 2024). Digital 2024: Uganda <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-uganda> (accessed on November 15, 2024)

1353 <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-uganda> (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1354 Ministry of Information, Communications Technology and National Guidance. (September 2018). THE NATIONAL BROADBAND POLICY <https://ict.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/National-Broadband-Policy-Booklet.pdf> (accessed on November 17, 2024)

1355 <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-uganda> (accessed on November 15, 2024)

1356 <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-uganda> (accessed on November 15, 2024)

Social media has become a vital platform for demanding social and political justice in Uganda.<sup>1357</sup> Particularly on X (formerly Twitter), Ugandans mobilise against injustices despite government efforts to limit online activism. A significant campaign is the #UgandaParliamentExhibition, aimed at exposing abuse and mismanagement in Parliament, drawing attention to accountability and transparency in governance.<sup>1358</sup> This represents a collective effort by Ugandans to use social media as a tool for activism, showcasing how digital platforms can amplify voices and organise movements against perceived injustices. This movement gained substantial support, leading many to call for an audit of Parliamentary expenditures.<sup>1359</sup> In response, the Ministry of Finance proposed halving Parliament's budget.<sup>1360</sup> However, organisers faced repression, with one activist going into hiding for fear of arrest.<sup>1361</sup> Other recent hashtag movements include #UgandaPotholeExhibition, highlighting poor road conditions,<sup>1362</sup> and #UgandaHealthExhibition, #UgandaNGOExhibition, #UgandaLabourExhibition, and #UgandaSecurityExhibition.<sup>1363</sup> Ugandans are increasingly using online platforms for governance engagement and digital activism. Social media campaigns like #UgandaPotholeExhibition hold officials accountable, while online petitions and discussions with local leaders promote advocacy for change. Blogs and independent news sources educate citizens about their rights, and online tools facilitate public service monitoring. As elections approach, there is a focus on voter education and integrity discussions, fostering a more informed and active citizenry. Therefore, limitations in internet access and blocking platforms like Facebook restrict access to information. This is contrary to the principles encouraging unimpeded access to information. Uganda has made progress in internet access and digital engagement to align with ACHPR Principle 38's stipulations regarding non-interference in the context of media and freedom of expression as part of the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa (2019). Still, it must address government restrictions and economic barriers to align with international human rights standards. Ensuring free access for marginalised groups is essential for a more inclusive digital environment.

## Freedom of Expression

The Ugandan government has increasingly restricted free speech online, targeting those criticising Ugandan President Museveni and his family. In July 2024, TikTok user Edward Awebwa was sentenced to six years in prison for hate speech against the president.<sup>1364</sup> Earlier, in February 2024, Ibrahim Musana, known as Pressure 24/7, was arrested under the Computer Misuse Act for defamation and incitement to violence related to his social media posts about public figures.<sup>1365</sup> Although he was granted bail in April 2024, he faces conditions prohibiting him from discussing certain officials.<sup>1366</sup> The Ugandan government's crackdown on free speech and the safety of journalists starkly contrasts with the ACHPR Declaration, which highlights systemic challenges

1357 Guest Columnists. (Monday, May 01, 2023). Hashtag activism is the future of citizen advocacy <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/oped/letters/hashtag-activism-is-the-future-of-citizen-advocacy-4218838> (accessed on November 17, 2024)

1358 Peter G. Mwesige. ( March 28, 2024). Online Activism is Moving the Dial on Social Accountability in Uganda <https://cipesa.org/2024/03/online-activism-is-moving-the-dial-on-social-accountability-in-uganda/> (accessed on November 17, 2024)

1359 Ronald Odongo. March 6, 2024. Gov't Commends Ugandans Behind Parliamentary Exhibition Social Media Campaign <https://nexusmedia.ug/govt-commends-ugandans-behind-parliamentary-exhibition-social-media-campaign/> (accessed on November 17, 2024)

1360 Christopher Kiiza. (March 28, 2024). Govt moves to Cut Parliament budget by Half <https://chimpanreports.com/govt-moves-to-cut-parliament-budget-by-half/> (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1361 HICGI News Agency. ( February 27, 2024 ) . Activist Jeje Forced to Flee: Police Pursuit Over Uganda Parliament Exhibition Advocacy. <https://hicginewsagency.com/2024/02/27/activist-jeje-forced-to-flee-police-pursuit-over-uganda-parliament-exhibition-advocacy/> (accessed on November 17, 2024)

1362 CIVIC SPACE TV, 'The state of roads in Uganda. #CommunityVoicesUG #KampalaPotholeExhibition' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XtX1fC5EHYo> (accessed on November 17, 2024)

1363 #UgandaPotholeExhibition [https://twitter.com/search?q=%23UgandaPotholeExhibition&src=typed\\_query&f=top](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23UgandaPotholeExhibition&src=typed_query&f=top) (accessed on November 28, 2024)

1364 The Independent. (July 10, 2024). Tiktoker Awebwa jailed for six years for abusing Museveni and family <https://www.independent.co.ug/tiktok-awebwa-jailed-for-six-years-for-abusing-museveni-and-family/> (accessed on November 17, 2024)

1365 Priscilla Maloba. (Monday, February 19, 2024). TikToker detained over trolling Kabaka faces several criminal charges <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/tiktok-awebwa-jailed-for-six-years-for-abusing-museveni-and-family/> (accessed on November 17, 2024)

1366 Samson Waswa. (11 April 2024 at 20:00). Tiktoker "Pressure" remanded back to jail as prosecution stalls <https://www.pulse.ug/entertainment/tiktok-awebwa-jailed-for-six-years-for-abusing-museveni-and-family/> (accessed on November 17, 2024)

for media rights. A thorough reevaluation of laws and practices is urgently needed to protect the fundamental freedoms of expression and ensure journalist safety in Uganda.

Additionally, in January 2024, the BBC uncovered fake social media accounts linked to the Government Citizen Interaction Centre, which spread pro-government propaganda and threatened those who spoke out against the administration.<sup>1367</sup> The Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) has also mandated that online media outlets register or face closure. However, social justice campaigns like the #UgandaParliamentExhibition continue to thrive despite these challenges.<sup>1368</sup> Documented action to stifle free speech infringes on the right to freedom of expression. The persecution of digital activists and the criminalisation of dissenting voices violate this freedom of speech.

In April 2024, the Constitutional Court upheld parts of the 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act, which criminalises the promotion of homosexuality, consequently jeopardising online expression.<sup>1369</sup> This decision has led to increased violence against LGBTQIA+ individuals online, including a troubling incident in January 2024 when a transgender woman was violently attacked in front of her home by an angry mob that gathered following false social media rumours accusing her of forcing hormones on young men.<sup>1370</sup> Concerns remain about the accessibility of information related to the ACHPR's operations and its independence from government influence.<sup>1371</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to increased online engagement, contributing to a rise in technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV).<sup>1372</sup> Many individuals lack awareness of TFGBV, particularly concerning the link between online and offline violence, which disproportionately affects vulnerable groups.<sup>1373</sup> In Uganda, approximately one in three women have encountered online violence, with female journalists facing additional risks such as stalking and cyberbullying.<sup>1374</sup> Frequently, media coverage sensationalises this violence, shifting focus from the perpetrators to the victims.<sup>1375</sup> As digital technologies evolve and internet access expands, the risks of misuse grow.<sup>1376</sup> Almost half of Ugandan women (49%) report experiencing online harassment.<sup>1377</sup> Technology is increasingly employed to intimidate women and marginalised groups, infiltrating various aspects of daily life. Despite the escalating threat, this violence often goes unnoticed by policymakers and society, leading to severe repercussions that hinder the participation of women and girls in civic and political affairs. Existing legislation, such as the Anti-Pornography Act of 2014, can unintentionally criminalise victims, while the 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act may deter LGBTQIA+ individuals from pursuing legal action against TFGBV.<sup>1378</sup> The poor reporting trends on this issue are compounded by fear, inadequate understanding of reporting mechanisms, and weak

1367 Freedom on the Net 2024 Uganda

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/uganda/freedom-net/2024> (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1368 <https://freedomhouse.org/country/uganda/freedom-net/2024> (accessed on November 16, 2024)

1369 Uganda: Court Upholds Anti-Homosexuality Act

Entrenches Discrimination, Enhances Risk of Anti-LGBT Violence, (April 4, 2024 1:15PM EDT)

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/04/uganda-court-upholds-anti-homosexuality-act> (accessed on November 17, 2024)

1370 Sophie Perry, 'Beatings, arrests, fear and broken dreams: Uganda's draconian Anti-Homosexuality Act one year on.. (May 30)

<https://www.thepinknews.com/2024/05/30/uganda-gay-law-anti-homosexuality-bill/> (accessed on November 17, 2024)

1371 Ronald Musoke, 'Uganda: Is UCC Going Rogue?' (5 December 2017) The Independent (Kampala)

<https://allafrica.com/stories/201712050069.html> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

1372 Irene Abalo Otto, 'Digital battlefield: The rise of online violence against Uganda's activists' (Thursday, October 10, 2024) <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/special-reports/digital-battlefield-the-rise-of-online-violence-against-uganda-s-activists-4787918#story> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

1373 Decoding technology-facilitated gender-based violence: a reality check from seven countries <https://rutgers.international/resources/decoding-technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-a-reality-check-from-seven-countries/> (Accessed on November 18, 2024)

1374 Irene Alenga., Collins Otieno., Natalie Apar., 'Addressing Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence' (September 5, 2024) <https://knowledgesuccess.org/2024/09/05/addressing-technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence/> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

1375 Akademie DW, 'Media reporting on online violence against women in East Africa harms victims' (12.09.2023) <https://akademie.dw.com/en/study-east-africa-gender-based-violence-online/a-65625078> (Accessed on November 18, 2024)

1376 Decoding technology-facilitated gender-based violence: a reality check from seven countries <https://rutgers.international/resources/decoding-technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-a-reality-check-from-seven-countries/> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

1377 <https://rutgers.international/resources/decoding-technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-a-reality-check-from-seven-countries/> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

1378 <https://rutgers.international/resources/decoding-technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-a-reality-check-from-seven-countries/> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

legal frameworks.

Addressing gendered disinformation is crucial for ensuring a fair electoral landscape and combating gender inequality in Uganda.<sup>1379</sup> Disinformation often manifests through the manipulation of information, demonisation of gender equality ideals, and various forms of abuse, including trolling and body shaming. Women, specifically women in leadership, journalists and human rights defenders, are frequently the primary targets of gendered disinformation, which marginalises their decision-making participation. The impact of gendered disinformation extends beyond individual harm; it undermines public discourse and diminishes women's credibility, discouraging their political engagement. Many women withdraw from political processes due to intimidation tactics, while those with multiple identities often face heightened discrimination and hate speech. The civic space for women journalists is shrinking due to gender-based violence, affecting their well-being and press freedom.<sup>1380</sup> In Uganda, fear of attacks often prevents critical reporting.

Misinformation also politicises gender equality efforts, silencing women and perpetuating negative perceptions of their roles. Gender stereotypes and hypersexualisation in politics aim to discredit women, causing many to withdraw from public life. Women candidates encounter more negative and sexist messaging than men, focusing on character rather than policies. Although laws like the Computer Misuse Act exist, there is a lack of specific policies addressing gendered disinformation in Uganda.<sup>1381</sup> The issue of the gender digital divide and TFGBV indicates the need for awareness and recognition of gender-specific challenges, which aligns with the declaration's emphasis on inclusive access to information. There is a need for significant reforms to align digital rights practices with the ACHPR principle on privacy and personal information protection. The government must enhance accountability, secure privacy rights, uphold protections against surveillance, and create a legal framework for personal information in the digital space. Compliance with these principles is essential for promoting an inclusive digital environment that safeguards the rights of all individuals, especially those in marginalised communities.

## Data Protection and Privacy

Activists are concerned that the government has recently intensified its surveillance of social media and online platforms. While Article 27 of the Constitution protects individuals' privacy,<sup>1382</sup> The Data Protection and Privacy Act of 2019, effective April 2021, faces challenges in enforcement.<sup>1383</sup> Critics have pointed out that NITA-U, under the ICT Ministry, did not issue guidelines for the collection and processing of COVID-19 data.<sup>1384</sup> Additionally, a July 2018 raid by the Internal Security Organization on MTN Uganda raised alarms about user data security.<sup>1385</sup>

Concerns about rising cyberattacks have increased, affecting both private entities and service providers in Uganda. In the 2023/2024 financial year, police reported 245 cybercrime cases, a 14.3% decrease from 286 cases in 2022.<sup>1386</sup> However, these crimes resulted in significant

1379 Muhamadi Matovu, 'How gender focused misinformation impacts women in Ugandan politics' (WED 10 JUL, 2024 12:35) <https://nilepost.co.ug/politics/206987/how-gender-focused-misinformation-impacts-women-in-ugandan-politics> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

1380 Examining the gendered dimensions of Journalists safety based on Unesco's JSI on IN Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda <https://www.africafoicentre.org/examining-the-gendered-dimensions-of-journalists-safety-based-on-unescos-jsi-on-in-kenya-tanzania-and-uganda/> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

1381 <https://nilepost.co.ug/politics/206987/how-gender-focused-misinformation-impacts-women-in-ugandan-politics> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

1382 CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF UGANDA, 1995. [https://www.ngobureau.go.ug/sites/default/files/laws\\_regulations/2020/12/Uganda%20Constitution%201995.pdf](https://www.ngobureau.go.ug/sites/default/files/laws_regulations/2020/12/Uganda%20Constitution%201995.pdf) (accessed on November 28, 2024)

1383 Privacy Scorecard Report 2021 <https://www.unwantedwitness.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Privacy-Scorecard-Report-2021.pdf> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

1384 ARTICLE 19 Eastern Africa, the Kenya ICT Action Network and Pollicy, 'Unseen Eyes, Unheard Stories' (2021) <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ADRF-Surveillance-Report-1.pdf> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

1385 Elias Biryabarema, 'MTN Uganda says government security personnel raided its data center' (July 6, 2018 5:21 PM GMT+3) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uganda-mtn-group/mtn-uganda-says-government-security-personnel-raided-its-data-center-idUSKBN1JW1Q5> (accessed on November 19, 2024)

1386 Financial Intelligence Authority (FIA), 'Strengthening Cyber Safety and Ransomware Response' (July 19, 2024) <https://www.fia.go.ug/strengthening-cyber-safety-and-ransomware-response> (accessed on November 19, 2024)



economic losses amounting to UGX 1,543,292,161, with only UGX 377,441,465 recovered.<sup>1387</sup>

On February 6, 2024, the hacking group Anonymous Sudan claimed responsibility for a cyberattack on major Ugandan telecommunications networks—MTN, Airtel, and Uganda Telecom—shortly after the head of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces visited Uganda.<sup>1388</sup> The attack was allegedly described as retaliation for Uganda “hosting” an alleged war criminal, Hemedti.<sup>1389</sup>

Telecommunications companies experienced a brief dip in connectivity during the attack but returned to normal afterwards.<sup>1390</sup> Marginalised communities, particularly the LGBTQIA+ community, have faced targeted cyberattacks. The government's 2019 requirement for “data communicators” to register with the UCC has also been criticised for promoting online self-censorship. This mandatory SIM card registration using national identification cards still poses significant concerns regarding anonymous communication, especially since government surveillance disproportionately targets vulnerable groups. The implications of this policy continue to be felt, impacting privacy and freedom of expression today.

As Smart City initiatives emerge as a critical focus of urban development, their cybersecurity challenges warrant careful attention. The interconnectedness of devices and systems creates a vast attack surface, making them vulnerable to various cyber threats. A cyber-attack on one component can disrupt essential services across multiple interdependent systems.<sup>1391</sup> These cities collect extensive sensitive data, raising privacy concerns and necessitating public trust in data security and service resilience. Without this trust, the success of Smart Cities and confidence in digital governance is at risk. Uganda has been focusing on several initiatives, such as urban planning, transportation and digital services, to advance its smart city goals in 2024. However, it faces challenges such as inadequate digital infrastructure, integration issues with legacy systems, data privacy risks, a lack of community engagement, and difficulties securing consistent funding. Despite these challenges, the initiatives significantly advance the country in 2024.

Kampala is harnessing the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) technologies to enhance efficiency and digitise public services, improving citizens' lives. Key initiatives include a new traffic control centre, upgraded traffic signals, and the installation of smart poles with LED lights and telecommunications infrastructure to boost connectivity.<sup>1392</sup> However, minimal attention is given to the privacy and security of data.<sup>1393</sup> These reveal serious violations. There is a worrying trend toward increasing surveillance, inadequate legal frameworks to protect privacy, and insufficient safeguards against arbitrary actions by the state. Upholding these measures is essential for protecting individual rights, fostering trust in digital communications, and ensuring the responsible development of Smart Cities prioritising personal data privacy and security.

### ***Censorship and Content Moderation***

In 2024, Uganda's regulatory environment concerning online content has raised concerns about its alignment with the principles outlined in the ACHPR, particularly the rights to freedom of expression and access to information. In recent years, the Ugandan government has implemented stringent measures to control online discourse, often justifying these actions under the guise of national security and public order. This has included regulations of social media usage, along

<sup>1387</sup> Financial Intelligence Authority (FIA), ‘Strengthening Cyber Safety and Ransomware Response’ ( July 19, 2024)

<https://www.fia.go.ug/strengthening-cyber-safety-and-ransomware-response> (accessed on November 19, 2024)

<sup>1388</sup> Mat Nashed, ‘Sudan's Hemedti embraced abroad as he terrorises civilians at home’ (24 Jan 2024|Updated: 25 Jan 2024 07:23 AM (GMT)) <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/1/24/sudans-hemedti-embraced-abroad-as-he-terrorises-civilians-back-home> (accessed on November 19, 2024)

<sup>1389</sup> Savious Parker Kwinika, ‘Anonymous Sudan attacks again, this time in Uganda’ ( 09 Feb 2024) <https://itweb.africa/content/Wnx-pEv4YRKE7V8XL> Leonard Sengere, ‘Sudan hacker group cyber attacks Djibouti, Kenya and Uganda telecoms companies over politics’ (8 February 2024) <https://www.techzim.co.zw/2024/02/sudan-hacker-group-cyber-attacks-djibouti-kenya-uganda-telecoms-companies-over-politics/> (accessed on November 19, 2024)

<sup>1390</sup> <https://radar.cloudflare.com/traffic/ug?dateStart=2024-02-01&dateEnd=2024-02-10> (Accessed on November 16, 2024)

<sup>1391</sup> Islam Ahmad Ibrahim Ahmad., Anthony Anyanwu., Shedrack Onwusinkwue., ‘CYBERSECURITY CHALLENGES IN SMART CITIES: A CASE REVIEW OF AFRICAN METROPOLISES (February 2024) [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/377963080\\_CYBERSECURITY\\_CHALLENGES\\_IN\\_SMART\\_CITIES\\_A\\_CASE\\_REVIEW\\_OF\\_AFRICAN\\_METROPOLISES](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/377963080_CYBERSECURITY_CHALLENGES_IN_SMART_CITIES_A_CASE_REVIEW_OF_AFRICAN_METROPOLISES) (accessible on November 28, 2024)

<sup>1392</sup> Watchdog Uganda, ‘PATRICK NDEGWA: Uganda's first smart city: Using digital services to make Kampala smarter’ (2023) <https://www.watchdoguganda.com/op-ed/20230709/156431/patrick-ndegwa-ugandas-first-smart-city-using-digital-services-to-make-kampala-smarter.html> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

<sup>1393</sup> Ayang Macdonald, ‘Uganda suspends over 1.4M SIM cards not linked to users' biometrics’ (Nov 29, 2023, 8:02 am EST) <https://www.biometricupdate.com/202311/uganda-suspends-over-1-4m-sim-cards-not-linked-to-users-biometrics> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

with the monitoring and potential removal of content deemed inappropriate by authorities. For instance, on December 13, 2024, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) directed all broadcasters and online service providers in Uganda to immediately stop airing and discussing specific songs deemed vulgar.<sup>1394</sup> This included banning “Enkudi” and “Okwepiicha” by artists Gravity Omutujju and Lil Pazo as part of efforts to protect Ugandan society’s moral and cultural fabric. The UCC cited the Uganda Communications Act and 2019 Content Regulations, raising concerns about the impact on artistic freedom and expression.<sup>1395</sup> On November 18, 2024, a 21-year-old TikTok creator was sentenced to 32 months in jail for insulting Uganda’s president, Yoweri Museveni, through comedic content shared with his 20,000 followers. He faced charges of hate speech and spreading malicious information after staging a mock trial that called for Museveni’s public flogging.

The court, led by Chief Magistrate Stellah Maris Amabilis, deemed him unremorseful, stating the sentence would deter social media attacks. This conviction stemmed from a controversial 2022 amendment to the Computer Misuse Act, which the US State Department linked to government intimidation of critics. Rights groups have repeatedly condemned Uganda for human rights violations and restrictions on freedom of expression.<sup>1396</sup> Additionally, Ibrahim Musana, a 27-year-old Ugandan TikTok creator known for his Pressure Pressure pages, was arrested on November 16, 2024. He faced charges of defamation, hate speech, and incitement to violence for allegedly attacking the Kabaka and other Buganda officials in his videos.<sup>1397</sup> Authorities claim he misused social media platforms like TikTok and Facebook, prompting local outrage over his disrespectful remarks.<sup>1398</sup> Such practices have led to accusations of censorship aimed at stifling dissent and suppressing critical voices, which are crucial for a healthy democratic society. The ACHPR emphasises the importance of freedom of expression inherent to democratic governance. Article 9 of the charter states explicitly that every individual shall have the right to express and disseminate their opinions within the law. Uganda’s current approach to content moderation and censorship could be evaluated as inconsistent with these commitments, as it significantly limits citizens’ ability to engage freely in public discourse. Moreover, enforcing content moderation policies often lacks transparency and due process, further complicating the situation. Reports of arbitrary arrests and harassment of journalists, bloggers, and activists have highlighted the risks faced by those who seek to express dissenting opinions or share information that counters government narratives.<sup>1399</sup> Uganda’s censorship and content moderation practices will likely continue to be assessed against the principles of the ACHPR. Advocacy groups and human rights organisations will likely keep pressuring the government to uphold its obligations to protect freedom of expression and ensure that all citizens can participate fully in the digital public sphere without fear of reprisal. Such efforts are vital in promoting a more open and accountable governance framework in an increasingly connected world.

## Access to Information

Uganda was one of the first African countries to establish a right-to-information law with the Access to Information Act (ATIA) in 2005, followed by the Access to Information Regulations in 2011, which aligns with the principle of guaranteeing legal rights to access information held by public bodies.<sup>1400</sup> This legislation aims to promote access to information, foster government transparency, and encourage citizen participation in decision-making. Since the enactment of ATIA, the Ugandan government has initiated several programs to enhance access to information, including the Ministry of ICT and National Guidance, which is responsible for formulating ICT

1394 Josh Ruby, ‘UCC Officially Suspends Gravity Omutujju, Lil Pazo’s Songs’ (December 17, 2024) <https://mbu.ug/2024/12/17/uganda-communications-commission-suspends-gravity-omutujju-songs/> (accessed on January 15, 2025)

1395 Jackie Namatovu, ‘UCC Bans ‘Enkudi’, ‘Okwepiicha’ in New Crackdown on ‘Vulgar’ Music’ (December 13, 2024) <https://chimpreports.com/ucc-bans-enkudi-okwepiicha-in-new-crackdown-on-vulgar-music/> (accessed on January 15, 2025)

1396 Swaibu Ibrahim, ‘TikToker jailed for 32 months for insulting Uganda’s president’ (18 November 2024) <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd7njyyvwn5o.amp> (accessed on January 15, 2025)

1397 Dennis Musau, ‘TikToker arrested for trolling Uganda’s King Kabaka’ (February 19, 2024 05:53 (EAT)) <https://www.citizen.digital/news/tiktok-arrested-for-trolling-ugandas-king-kabaka-n337002> (accessed on January 15, 2025)

1398 Dennis Musau, ‘TikToker arrested for trolling Uganda’s King Kabaka’ (February 19, 2024 05:53 (EAT)) <https://www.citizen.digital/news/tiktok-arrested-for-trolling-ugandas-king-kabaka-n337002> (accessed on January 15, 2025)

1399 Brian Byaruhanga, ‘Navigating the Threats To Journalism in Uganda’ (June 30, 2023) <https://cipesa.org/2023/06/navigating-the-threats-to-journalism-in-uganda/> (accessed on January 14, 2025)

1400 CIPESA, ‘The State of Access to Information in Uganda’ <https://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/briefs/report/Position-Paper-The-State-of-Access-to-Information-in-Uganda.pdf> (accessed on November 19, 2024)

policies and managing national infrastructure; Government Communication Strategy whose aims are to create a coordinated communication system between the government and the public, Public Education Airtime provided on local radio stations to inform citizens about service delivery and development issues, and Government Citizens Interaction Centre (GCIC) to enhance monitoring of service delivery and facilitates citizen feedback.<sup>1401</sup> These efforts are positive but insufficient when considered against the legal rights guaranteed. Increased efforts in public education are necessary to bridge the gap between legislation and practical application.

Additionally, Uganda's 1995 Constitution guarantees citizens the right to access information held by the state, with some limitations for security and privacy.<sup>1402</sup> This right is also recognised by international frameworks, including Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.<sup>1403</sup> Furthermore, the United Nations has emphasised the importance of internet access as a critical element in promoting the right to information, with UNESCO designating September 28 as the International Day for Universal Access to Information. This legislative structure advances the right to access information held by public bodies, but its effectiveness relies on implementation and practice.

The Access to Information Act of 2005 grants citizens the right to access information, but in practice, many face challenges.<sup>1404</sup> Numerous Ugandans, including information officers and government officials, often must be made aware of the law, hindering its implementation. Section 3(d) of the Act mandates that citizens access information easily and within 21 days. However, delays caused by fear and bureaucracy often make this right challenging to exercise, especially for journalists and human rights enforcement; these barriers hinder residents' access to information, contradicting the principle of expeditious access outlined in ACPHR. While the Act should allow public access to information affecting citizens, Article 41 of the Constitution and other sections limit this right to information held by public bodies, excluding private companies and civil society, because it is the duty of state actors to provide information necessary for protecting human rights.

In contrast, non-state actors do not have the same obligations. However, this exclusion of other entities raises concerns regarding the practicality and efficiency of accessing information, which is critical for compliance with Principle 26(a) of ACPHR. The ATIA mainly covers information from public bodies, excluding private entities and limiting access to crucial information for rights protection. However, despite these obstacles, radio is still the primary information source, though its usage has dropped from 79% in 2017 to 56% in 2024. Television usage rose from 9% to 17% but decreased to 16% in 2024. Internet use increased from 0.3% to 4%, while social media use declined from 4% to 3%. Word of mouth as a source of information rose significantly from 4% to 16%, highlighting concerns about misinformation.<sup>1405</sup>

## Artificial Intelligence and Emerging Technologies

Concerns about artificial intelligence (AI) are growing as computer scientists predict that intelligent systems will increasingly take over decision-making tasks from humans.<sup>1406</sup> A notable 78% of Ugandans, according to the 2022 global survey published on December 8, 2024, by a UK-based digital safety charity, Lloyd's Register Foundation, noted feeling unsafe in cars driven without a human driver.<sup>1407</sup> According to the 2024 Government AI Readiness Index report by Oxford Insights, Uganda ranks 132 out of 193 countries in AI development based on government, technology, and infrastructure.<sup>1408</sup> Despite this low ranking, local AI experts and organisations have trained 2,567 individuals to train one million Ugandans by 2030 to improve perceptions of generative AI.<sup>1409</sup> The

1401 <https://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/briefs/report/Position-Paper-The-State-of-Access-to-Information-in-Uganda.pdf> (accessed on November 11, 2024)

1402 <https://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/briefs/report/Position-Paper-The-State-of-Access-to-Information-in-Uganda.pdf> (accessed on November 11, 2024)

1403 <https://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/briefs/report/Position-Paper-The-State-of-Access-to-Information-in-Uganda.pdf> (accessed on November 11, 2024)

1404 <https://chapterfouruganda.org/sites/default/files/downloads/The-Access-to-Information-Act-2005.pdf> (accessed on November 11, 2024)

1405 <https://www.independent.co.ug/radio-still-most-popular-media-in-uganda/> (accessed on November 11, 2024)

1406 <https://www.independent.co.ug/ugandans-fear-artificial-intelligence/> (accessed on November 9, 2024)

1407 <https://www.independent.co.ug/ugandans-fear-artificial-intelligence/> (accessed on November 9, 2024)

1408 Government AI Readiness Index 2024 <https://oxfordinsights.com/ai-readiness/ai-readiness-index/> (accessed on January 8, 2024)

1409 [https://www.ntv.co.ug/news/business/uganda-ranks-low-on-global-ai-index-as-experts-aim-to-train-1-million-4824128#google\\_vignette](https://www.ntv.co.ug/news/business/uganda-ranks-low-on-global-ai-index-as-experts-aim-to-train-1-million-4824128#google_vignette) (accessed on November 16, 2024)

Ugandan government is also deploying AI technologies in various agencies to enhance efficiency, improve accuracy, address environmental challenges, bolster security, and provide personalised services to citizens.<sup>1410</sup>

In Uganda, the government partnered with Chinese firm Huawei in 2019 to create an AI-powered facial recognition surveillance system supposedly for crime prevention. However, AI trained on biased data can reinforce gender stereotypes, making it crucial to document threats against marginalised groups.<sup>1411</sup> This partnership raises essential questions about compatibility with international human rights laws. The transparency issues surrounding the partnership make evaluating its adherence to international human rights laws challenging, raising concerns about possible ethical conflicts. Understanding the partnership's motivations and details is essential for ensuring compliance with human rights principles. Using AI for surveillance may violate individuals' rights to privacy and freedom of expression under the ACPHR, making it essential to ensure these technologies uphold fundamental rights. Deepfake technology, which produces realistic but false audio and video content, is increasingly used to undermine journalists.<sup>1412</sup> For example, the deepfake audio of Denník N journalist offers a worrying example of AI abuse.<sup>1413</sup> While creating deepfakes is relatively easy, detecting them remains challenging, as reliable detection tools still need improvement. Advanced AI surveillance tools, including facial recognition, are also being deployed to monitor citizens under the guise of enhancing security.<sup>1414</sup> This raises concerns, especially about the harassment of Ugandan climate activists in 2024 by fake social media accounts.<sup>1415</sup> A BBC investigation in January 2024 uncovered a network of such accounts in Uganda, utilising low-tech methods similar to traditional photoshopping.<sup>1416</sup> As the use of large language models like ChatGPT grows, there's an urgent need to reassess data collection laws to protect citizens' rights. Policymakers fear deepfakes could mislead and divide society, making them a powerful tool for disinformation.

The technological development raises questions about the applicability of Article 27 of the 1995 Constitution, which guarantees the 'right to privacy.' Following the Regulation of Interception of Communications Act (RICA) of 2010, this right must be adequately addressed due to technological advancements. Therefore, there is a need to outline the government's efforts in drafting an AI Act and policy to regulate AI use, particularly to combat misinformation on digital platforms.<sup>1417</sup> Collaboration with the legal community, academia, and the United Nations aims to establish necessary regulations. It is also essential to consider AI adoption's ethical concerns and social implications, including data privacy, security risks, the digital divide, and job displacement. Addressing these issues is vital for achieving sustainable outcomes in Uganda. The integration of AI technologies in Uganda offers the potential for improved efficiency and security, but it must align with the principles of the ACPHR, such as principle 39. Ongoing efforts are essential to ensure these technologies respect fundamental rights, fostering a safe and just digital environment for all Ugandans.

## Digital Inclusion

### *Inclusive Digital ID systems*

The Uganda National ID system is a crucial component of governance and identification in the country, facilitating millions' access to public services and financial inclusion. In 2024, a mass enrollment and ID renewal exercise will update expired IDs and register unlisted citizens. A

1410 <https://apsdpr.org/index.php/apsdpr/article/view/770>

1411 Artificial Intelligence and Emerging Technologies and Their Impact on Civic Space in Africa <https://wougnet.org/artificial-intelligence-and-emerging-technologies-and-their-impact-on-civic-space-in-africa/> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

1412 <https://cipesa.org/2023/06/navigating-the-threats-to-journalism-in-uganda/> (accessed on November 10, 2024)

1413 <https://ipi.media/slovakia-deepfake-audio-of-dennik-n-journalist-offers-worrying-example-of-ai-abuse/> (accessed on January 8, 2025)

1414 Misinformation woes could multiply with 'deepfake' videos (Monday, January 28, 2019 — updated on September 28, 2020) <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/misinformation-woes-could-multiply-with-deepfake-videos-1803256> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

1415 Crude fakes in Uganda Trending: A BBC Trending investigation exposes a sprawling network of fake social media accounts operating in Uganda. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3ct5d9f> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

1416 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3ct5d9f> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

1417 Atuhaire, Edna, 'Artificial intelligence and the right to privacy in Uganda' (2021-12) <https://dissertations.mak.ac.ug/handle/20.500.12281/11955> (accessed on November 18, 2024)



significant update will be the introduction of iris biometrics, which will address the issue of approximately one million unreadable fingerprint records due to ageing or injury. Iris patterns, unique to each individual and permanent over time, will enhance security and accuracy in identity verification.

The National Identification and Registration Authority (NIRA) aims to register 17.2 million unregistered Ugandans while renewing many expiring IDs. However, concerns arise over the tight timeframe for this initiative, especially with the upcoming 2026 general election requiring IDs for voters. A rushed enrollment could disenfranchise many, particularly first-time and remote voters, impacting their access to essential services and participation in democracy. However, this delay also presents an opportunity to gather stakeholder input to improve the process, ensuring a more inclusive, equitable, and privacy-respecting digital ID system. By doing so, the Government can align its efforts with international best practices for digital public infrastructure. However, while the Uganda National ID system aims to improve governance and inclusion through innovations like iris biometrics, the implementation must protect privacy, data security, informed consent, transparency, accountability and oversight, and purpose limitation. This adherence to principle 42 of ACHPR on privacy and protection of personal data will ultimately reinforce democratic participation and public trust.

### ***Universal Service Fund***

As of 2023, only 27% of Ugandans lived in urban areas, resulting in limited access to electricity and internet in rural areas.<sup>1418</sup> There is a significant gender gap in internet access, with the 2022 Inclusive Internet Index reporting a 23.5% disparity, up ten percentage points from 2021.<sup>1419</sup> The Universal Service Fund, known as the Uganda Communications Universal Service and Access Fund (UCUSAF), aims to expand telecommunications access in unserved and underserved areas that are not commercially viable for licensed operators. This initiative supports several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 9, which promotes resilient infrastructure, and SDG 10, which seeks to reduce inequalities in access to resources. By extending telecommunications access, UCUSAF helps bridge the digital divide and improve equity while supporting SDG 11 for sustainable cities.<sup>1420</sup> UCUSAF receives annual contributions from licensed telecom operators, who pay a 2% levy on their gross revenues, ensuring that underserved populations gain access to essential communication services.<sup>1421</sup>

In May 2024, MTN Uganda announced a contribution of UGX 42.5 billion to the UCC's Universal Service and Access Fund, up from UGX 36 billion the previous year.<sup>1422</sup> This investment underscores MTN Uganda's commitment to bridging the digital divide and aligns with its 2025 strategy for digital solutions in Africa.<sup>1423</sup> Similarly, Airtel Uganda contributed UGX 34.8 billion to the rural communications development fund, which has funded ICT training centres in schools and internet towers in underserved communities over the past five years.<sup>1424</sup>

In 2024, notable advancements were made in telecommunications, particularly with a solar-powered telecom site inaugurated in Lapono, Agago district, led by the Uganda Communications Commission's Universal Service and Access Fund (UCUSAF). This project aims to enhance network access in underserved areas while promoting sustainability. UCC plans to establish 63 additional sites with Towerco Africa, with seven already constructed and four operational in

1418 World Bank, 'Urban population (% of total population) - Uganda' <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?locations=UG> (accessed on November 17, 2024)

1419 Economist Impact, 'Inclusive Internet Index 2022 Uganda' <https://impact.economist.com/projects/inclusive-internet-index/2022/country/Uganda> (accessed on November 17, 2024)

1420 UCUSAF -Access Infrastructure Program <https://www.ucc.co.ug/ucusaf/access-infrastructure-program/> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

1421 JAVIRA SSEBWAMI, 'Airtel pays UGX 34.8Billion to rural telecom fund' (April 4, 2024) <https://www.pmldaily.com/business/2024/04/airtel-pays-ugx-34-8billion-to-rural-telecom-fund.html> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

1422 Mtn Uganda (24 May 2024). MTN Uganda announces UGX 42.5 billion contribution to UCC's Universal Service and Access Fund <https://www.mtn.co.ug/mtn-uganda-announces-ugx-42-5-billion-contribution-to-uccs-universal-service-and-access-fund/> (accessed on November 19, 2024)

1423 MTN Uganda, 'MTN Uganda announces UGX 42.5 billion contribution to UCC's Universal Service and Access Fund' (24 May 2024) <https://www.mtn.co.ug/mtn-uganda-announces-ugx-42-5-billion-contribution-to-uccs-universal-service-and-access-fund/> (accessed on November 19, 2024)

1424 <https://www.pmldaily.com/business/2024/04/airtel-pays-ugx-34-8billion-to-rural-telecom-fund.html> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

locations like Kasimbi, Nyambigha, and Kyazirimu. The estimated subsidy for these initiatives is 12 billion Ugandan shillings.<sup>1425</sup> Additionally, 1,400 underserved households in eight sub-counties received solar-powered tablets pre-loaded with data, aiding connectivity.<sup>1426</sup> UCUSAF aims to complete 200 sites over the next five years, targeting 42% coverage in 117 identified sub-counties to empower communities and foster economic development.<sup>1427</sup>

In late 2023, GDIP conducted an impact assessment of the Rural Household Devices Project, initiated by the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) under the Uganda Communications Universal Service Access Fund (UCUSAF). This project aims to provide information and communication technology (ICT) to underserved communities in Uganda. UCC distributes grid and solar-powered tablets, preloaded with six months of data bundles, to low-income households in villages. The main goals are to enhance connectivity, digital literacy, and access to information, ultimately bridging the digital divide. By December 2023, the project had completed two pilot phases and implemented a third phase, reaching 54 districts and benefiting 10,706 households. The project has significantly improved the socioeconomic landscape by addressing challenges like low literacy, affordability issues, and limited network coverage. The distributed devices are primarily used for education, income generation, and communication. Two-thirds of participants reported increased income from using the devices for business activities and time and money savings.<sup>1428</sup>

UCUSAF has partnered with NUDIPU and Eight Tech Consults to improve digital skills for persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Uganda. They recently completed a needs assessment to address the digital divide for PWDs as part of a three-year program focused on enhancing ICT skills and access to e-services.<sup>1429</sup> Studies show that over 60% of PWDs need more basic ICT skills, and ownership of internet-enabled devices is low. Only 24.7% of PWDs have smartphones, 4.7% own laptops, and even fewer possess tablets or desktops. Most use these devices primarily for entertainment rather than education or accessing critical information, highlighting the need for tailored digital literacy training.<sup>1430</sup> NUDIPU, in collaboration with UCC, Eight Tech Consults, and other stakeholders, is also working to enhance ICT adoption and access to e-services for PWDs. By 2024, over 54,339 individuals have joined the program.<sup>1431</sup>

The UCC-funded e-booster program aims to enhance financial inclusion in Uganda's underserved fishing communities by digitising Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations (SACCOs).<sup>1432</sup> An assessment revealed that while 90% of respondents own a phone (38% have smartphones), only 10% have reliable internet access, and 62.4% have yet to experience the Internet. Over 80% of those surveyed earn less than 500,000 Ugandan shillings monthly. Despite this, 77% are members of savings groups, primarily relying on paper-based ledgers for record-keeping, which poses challenges like fraud and delays—only 3% use automated systems, signalling a need for improvement.

On a positive note, the Uganda Communications Commission is expanding mobile networks, with 600,000 new mobile subscriptions in Q2 2023, resulting in a penetration rate of 77 active mobile

1425 Mary Gorret Nakiganda, 'UCC unveils solar telecom site in Agago District' (February 13, 2024) <https://ideashouse.news/ucc-unveils-solar-telecom-site-in-agago-district/> (accessed on November 19, 2024)

1426 1,400 households in Uganda get solar-powered tablets <https://sun-connect.org/1400-households-in-uganda-get-solar-powered-tablets/> (accessed on November 19, 2024)

1427 Roger Bambino, 'UCUSAF: Why is UCC rolling out own telecom network?' (February 6, 2024) <https://techjaja.com/ucsaf-why-is-ucc-still-rolling-out-own-telecom-network/> (accessed on November 19, 2024)

1428 Global Digital Inclusion Partnership, 'Connecting the underserved and unserved: What can we learn from Uganda' (January 24, 2024) <https://globaldigitalinclusion.org/2024/01/24/connecting-the-underserved-and-unserved-what-can-we-learn-from-uganda/> (accessed on November 19, 2024)

1429 <https://guru8.net/2024/06/ucc-ucsaf-partner-with-nudipu-and-eight-tech-consults-to-boost-digital-skills-for-persons-with-disabilities-in-uganda/> (accessed on November 20, 2024)

1430 Davis Kawalya, 'UCC, UCUSAF Partner With NUDIPU and Eight Tech Consults to Boost Digital Skills for Persons with Disabilities in Uganda' (Jun 14, 2024) <https://guru8.net/2024/06/ucc-ucsaf-partner-with-nudipu-and-eight-tech-consults-to-boost-digital-skills-for-persons-with-disabilities-in-uganda/> (accessed on November 19, 2024)

1431 ICT for Persons With Disabilities App <https://app.ict4personswithdisabilities.org/> (accessed on November 19, 2024)

1432 Cinnamon News, 'UCC funded e-booster program moves to bring financial inclusion through digitization of SACCOS amongst Uganda's underserved fishing communities' (July 15, 2024) <https://cinnamonclubs.com/ucc-funded-e-booster-program-moves-to-bring-financial-inclusion-through-digitization-of-saccos-amongst-ugandas-underserved-fishing-communities/> (accessed on November 19, 2024)

phone subscriptions per 100 Ugandans.<sup>1433</sup><sup>1434</sup> The number of active mobile internet users reached 12.5 million, driven by smartphone usage. In education, 85% of government secondary schools have computer labs with internet access.<sup>1435</sup> To address the lack of technology at the primary level, UCC will provide internet services to 50 primary schools and having held a pre-bid meeting on December 19, 2023, to discuss the initiative. The subsequent stages of the procurement process are ongoing.<sup>1436</sup> In the coming months, an update will be provided regarding the section of service providers and timelines for distributing internet services to 50 primary schools.

In March 2024, TowerCo of Africa Uganda, partnering with the European Investment Bank, announced plans to install 506 new telecom towers to improve rural connectivity.<sup>1437</sup> Meanwhile, the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology launched a five-year National Digital Transformation Roadmap in 2023 to expand the National Backbone Infrastructure (NBI) to 73 additional districts and 20 towns by 2028, aiming for connectivity in 3,000 government units at speeds of 20 Gbps.<sup>1438</sup> As of August 2023, 1,466 government sites were connected.<sup>1439</sup> In 2024, the government's roadmap was to extend an additional 800 Wi-Fi hotspots in underserved areas.<sup>1440</sup> However, it may extend beyond 2024 because the government plans to connect at least 90 percent of households to internet access by 2040.<sup>1441</sup>

UCUSAF runs various programs to bridge the digital divide and promote inclusive growth. These initiatives include Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Education, ICT for Persons with Disabilities, Digital Skilling, and Internet Connectivity. The Access Infrastructure Program focuses on improving connectivity in economically challenging areas by constructing strategically located sites.<sup>1442</sup> With a comprehensive approach and ambitious plans, UCUSAF aims to enhance access to ICTs in Uganda's unserved and underserved communities.

1433 <https://cinnamonclubs.com/ucc-funded-e-booster-program-moves-to-bring-financial-inclusion-through-digitization-of-sac-cos-amongst-ugandas-underserved-fishing-communities/> (accessed on November 19, 2024)

1434 MTN Uganda announces UGX 42.5 billion contribution to UCC's Universal Service and Access Fund <https://www.mtn.co.ug/mtn-uganda-announces-ugx-42-5-billion-contribution-to-uccs-universal-service-and-access-fund/> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

1435 <https://www.mtn.co.ug/mtn-uganda-announces-ugx-42-5-billion-contribution-to-uccs-universal-service-and-access-fund/> (accessed on November 19, 2024)

1436 <https://www.newvision.co.ug/opportunities/tenders-1208> (accessed on January 7, 2025)

1437 EIB Publications, 'Uganda: US\$40 million European backing for Uganda rural telecom expansion' (7 March 2024) <https://www.eib.org/en/press/all/2024-097-usd40-million-european-backing-for-uganda-rural-telecom-expansion> (accessed on November 19, 2024)

1438 DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION ROADMAP 2023/2024 - 2027/2028 <https://ict.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Digital-Transformation-Roadmap.pdf> (accessed on November 19, 2024)

1439 National Backbone Infrastructure Project (NBI/EGI) <https://www.nita.go.ug/projects-service-portfolio/national-backbone-infrastructure-project-nbiegi> (accessed on November 28, 2024)

1440 MYUG WiFi <https://www.nita.go.ug/MYUG%20WiFi> (accessed on November 28, 2024)

1441 <https://tnnuganda.com/2023/08/17/govt-to-connect-90-of-ugandan-households-to-internet/> (accessed on January 7, 2025)

1442 <https://techjaja.com/ucusaf-why-is-ucc-still-rolling-out-own-telecom-network/> (accessed on November 18, 2024)

## Uganda Score Index

The scorecard below reflects significant challenges in ensuring rights related to freedom of expression, access to information, and data protection. Many areas require urgent attention and reform.

TheScore Indicator	ACHPR Declaration  <i>(P stands for Principle)</i>	Score	Justisification
Internet Shutdowns	P38(2)	3	Internet shutdowns significantly hinder access to information and limit communication, demonstrating a serious breach of rights.
Inexistent laws, policies and other measures to promote universal, equitable, affordable and meaningful access to the internet	P37	2	The absence of adequate laws to ensure internet access highlights a critical gap that impedes equity and inclusivity.
False News Criminalisation	P22(2)	1	While there are regulations that might address misinformation, they often fail and undermine the protection of freedom of expression. They can be misused against dissent, especially given the reference to arrests related to false news.
Sedition Legislation	P22(2)	1	Sedition laws restrict free expression and are used to silence criticism, posing a serious threat to democratic norms.
Arbitrary Arrests and Harassments of the Media, HRDs and Citizens	P20(1) & (2)	1	The prevalence of arbitrary arrests creates an atmosphere of fear and inhibits free speech and civil liberties.
Data Protection Legislation.	P42	4	While some data protection measures and regulations exist, there is a lack of an independent Data Protection Authority; their implementation remains inconsistent and insufficient to safeguard personal privacy effectively.
States interfere and require the removal of online content by internet intermediaries.	P38 and P39(4)	2	State interference in online content removal undermines free expression and indicates censorship practices that severely restrict access to information and limit the diversity of online viewpoints.
Invasion of Privacy of Communications	P41	2	Continuous invasion of privacy represents a significant violation of personal rights and undercuts trust in digital communications



Failure by the government to proactively disclose and disseminate information digital technologies.	P29(3)	3	Limited proactive information dissemination limits public awareness and engagement, contravening principles of transparency and accountability.
AI and Emerging Technologies National strategies	P39(6)	3	While some strategies may exist, their effectiveness and alignment with international standards require further evaluation and enhancement.
11. Adoption of specific child laws, policies and measures promoting children's digital safety and privacy online	P37(5)	3	The current status of child digital safety and privacy in Uganda remains insufficient. While there are some existing frameworks, they lack specific provisions targeting the online safety of children. More comprehensive policies and laws are needed to adequately address the unique risks children face in the digital environment, including online harassment and exploitation. Additionally, efforts to raise awareness and educate parents, guardians, and children about digital privacy are still limited. There's a pressing need for collaborative initiatives involving government, civil society, and tech companies to create a safer online experience for children. The African Union's recent establishment of a Child Online Safety and Empowerment Policy may have an impact on upcoming initiatives in Uganda regarding this issue.
12. Digital Inclusion	P37(3)	3	There are efforts to improve digital inclusion, but disparities in access and utilisation indicate a need for more extensive initiatives.
TOTAL SCORE (up to 60)		28	

What does the above score of 28 mean for Uganda? A total score of 28 highlights significant challenges in Uganda regarding rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and data protection, which shows that Uganda is mildly compliant. Although some positive aspects exist, such as existing data protection measures and AI strategies, the overall performance remains poor. Key issues include freedom of expression, with low scores related to sedition laws and arbitrary arrests indicating a repressive environment for media and dissent; access to information, which illustrates how internet shutdowns and inadequate disclosure practices hinder public access to essential information, undermining democratic values; data protection, where existing measures are inconsistent and inadequate, suggesting a need for stronger frameworks to protect personal data and privacy; and digital inclusion, which indicates that efforts are necessary to improve internet access across different demographics. In a nutshell, the score of 28 underscores the urgent need for reform in Uganda to address these systemic issues, promote human rights, and create an inclusive digital environment for all citizens.

## Conclusion

The Uganda Digital Rights and Inclusion 2024 report underscores the need for a multi-stakeholder approach to address the country's complex digital rights challenges. While progress has been made, particularly in internet access and civic engagement, significant barriers to freedom of expression and access to information still exist, particularly concerning government restrictions and the protection of marginalised groups. Moving forward, coordinated efforts among media, civil society, government, and the private sector are essential to ensure that Uganda's digital landscape becomes a space that champions freedom of expression, safeguards privacy, and promotes inclusivity. Therefore, while the report acknowledges the principles articulated in the ACHPR Declaration, it also reveals gaps in their implementation that must be addressed for full compliance. By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can work together to bridge the digital divide and uphold the rights and dignity of all Ugandans in the digital era.

## Recommendations

### *The government should:*

- Develop and implement comprehensive policies that align with international human rights standards and protect freedom of expression and the rights of individuals in the digital space.
- Establish clear guidelines for regulating online content that respects citizens' rights while addressing misinformation and hate speech.
- Increase investment in digital infrastructure to expand internet access in rural areas and ensure equitable connectivity for all citizens.

### *The Media should:*

- Foster a culture of responsible reporting that prioritises accuracy and context, particularly regarding gender-related issues, to combat gendered disinformation.
- Enhance collaborative efforts among media organisations to share resources and best practices in combating online gender-based violence and harassment.
- Train journalists on data protection, privacy rights, and the ethical use of technology to safeguard sources and sensitive information.

### *The Civil Society should:*

- Strengthen sensitisation efforts to raise awareness about digital rights and inclusion, especially in rural communities and marginalised groups.
- Promote digital literacy programs that empower individuals, particularly women, to navigate online spaces safely and effectively.
- Collaborate with grassroots organisations to address the unique challenges women and other vulnerable populations face in the digital landscape.
- Strengthen advocacy efforts for specific policies, such as the in-country Artificial Intelligence policy, and repeal problematic laws, such as the Regulatory Framework for Online Platforms, Public Order Management Act (2013), Telecommunications Act, and Media Council Act, among others, to enhance freedom of expression and online rights.
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### *The Private Sector should:*

- Promote corporate social responsibility initiatives that enhance internet accessibility and digital literacy in underserved communities.
- Collaborate with civil society and government to create safer online environments by

enhancing content moderation practices and protecting user privacy.

- Invest in technologies and platforms that prioritise user rights and facilitate greater engagement in online spaces, especially for marginalised groups.
- Develop community standards for content moderation that promote rights and address technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV).

