Internet Freedom is the New Press Freedom:

An African Perspective

Executive Summary

With the recent Internet shutdown in Togo adding to the growing list of Internet shutdowns in Africa, with at least 11 in 2016 and 7 this year already, it is easy to see how Internet shutdowns have dominated discussions on digital rights in Africa. In 2017, Internet shutdowns and disruptions have occurred in Ethiopia, Cameroon, Mali, Senegal, Morocco, South Sudan and Togo under the guises of preventing examination malpractices, controlling citizens' protests and others. Using their power as the sole providers of telecommunications services or with the assistance (sometimes under coercion) of private telecommunications companies, these governments totally cut off or disrupted access to the Internet or specific social media applications such as Facebook, Whatsapp and Twitter within their territories. This brief seeks to highlight the impact of Internet shutdown on press freedom while at the same time argues that the media and other stakeholders must see Internet Freedom advocacy as the new Press Freedom advocacy.

While it is easy to see the big picture of Internet shutdowns and disruptions, it might also be easy to lose sight of other digital rights violations within Africa, particularly the surveillance and arrests of journalists, or how Internet shutdowns affect the work of journalists across the continent. Even though there were numerous arrests of citizens and bloggers by governments in 2016, 2017 has seen a severe onslaught on online journalists in Africa. Being an online journalist is fast becoming one of the most dangerous jobs in Africa.

The extensive government mandated surveillance[1] and blocking of news websites in Egypt[2] and the arrests of online journalists covering the Al-hoceima protests[3] in Morocco are highlights which demonstrate how journalists have become the prime target for state-sponsored attacks in 2017.

Furthermore, the clampdown on journalists working digitally also extended to citizen journalists. In the heat of political protests and elections, citizen journalists are often the first on the scene to capture and share pictures of police brutality on social media, actions which have incurred jail time and fines across Africa. Elections and protests also routinely trigger Internet shutdowns in many African countries, a development that hampers the ability of online journalists to do their job.

Freedom of expression is a bellwether for other human rights around the world, because the state of freedom of expression is a good indicator of other human rights. Journalists, because of the nature of their profession, are guardians of freedom of expression and the conscience of society. The numerous attacks on online journalists and citizen journalists this year hit a new high and must be resisted.

The world is still searching for solutions to Internet shutdowns. In Africa in particular, civil society groups have explored avenues such as litigation[4,5] to make governments accountable for Internet disruptions in their territories. The available evidence shows that these efforts are yet to have desired effect on government behaviour.

[1] Marwa Morgan, "How surveillance, trolls, and fear of arrest affect Egypt's journalists". Committee to Protect Journalists, June 12 2017. http://bit.ly/2xxmDnU

[2] Ahmed Aboulenein, "Egypt blocks 21 websites for 'terrorism' and 'fake news'". Reuters, May 24 2017. http://reut.rs/2yL3Fs0

[3] "Morocco obstructs coverage of Rif protests". Reporters without borders, July 23 2017. http://bit.ly/2wqQEp8

[4] "MLDI and Veritas Law bring case before the Constitutional Council of Cameroon challenging Internet shutdown". May 4, 2017. https://t.co/tAa2y52Cjx

[5] "UCC Dragged to Court Over 'Unlawful' Social Media Shutdown in 2016 Elections, Date Set for Case Hearing". March 15, 2017. http://bit.ly/2mWnYyQ

As regards attacks and surveillance of journalists, the impunity of governments across Africa has only being emboldened despite several efforts from human rights organizations and pressures from international partners to stop the abuse. Although much progress has been made in Africa in 2017 for the cause of freedom of expression, with governments in Kenya[6], Ivory Coast[7] and Liberia[8] rolling back laws which were instruments of silencing free speech on the continent, these outcomes seem a drop in the ocean when set against the scale of violations of freedom of expression on the continent.

However, it is important to emphasize that much progress has been made. Some of the successful legal challenges to laws impinging on free speech in Africa in 2017 might have been considered improbable in previous years. Nevertheless, for digital rights to have a solid grounding on the continent, civil society must work together and find innovative ways of challenging the impunity which allows African governments to assent to international human rights codes and have domestic laws which guarantee freedom of expression, yet still execute the most cruel form of digital rights violations. This is a challenge we must embrace as 2017 rolls into 2018.

In the past and just around the advent of the Internet and particularly the social media, there seemed to be an initial aversion to the revolutionary effect of the internet on how media work was done and the conventional media practitioners would rather distance themselves from "online sources" or "online journalism". However, given the unavoidable embrace of Internet technology by all actors, the challenge has become clearer and the need has become more articulated to begin to see Internet Freedom as Press freedom because clearly, a lot of news consumption now happens online. It would be extremely difficult, if not totally impossible in this age to work as a journalist in the face of incessant internet disruptions, censorship and other forms of digital rights violations.

The efforts of some traditional, media focused organisations such as International Freedom of Exchange (IFEX) in support of the work on Digital Rights must be acknowledged. Recently IFEX provided support to the International Press Centre in Nigeria to support Journalist's Internet Rights Initiative[9]. The same organisation through the IFEX Tunisia Monitoring Group (TMG) has been fighting Internet censorship in Tunisia since 2005[10]. The needed conversation however has to be deepened and questions must be asked on the messaging and effectiveness of Internet Freedom advocacy especially in this age of citizen journalism.

Citizen journalism is the reporting of news events by members of the public using the Internet to spread the information. Citizen journalism can be a simple reporting of facts and news that is

[6] "Kenya: Court strikes down criminal defamation laws". Article 19, February 6, 2017. http://bit.ly/2kxMMJ5

[7] "Ivorian Government Withdraws Controversial Press Bill after MFWA Petition". Media Foundation for West Africa, June 8, 2017. http://bit.ly/2x94JFq

[8] "Major Boost for Free Expression as President Sirleaf Submits Anti-Criminal Libel Bill to Parliament". Media Foundation for West Africa, August 4, 2017. http://bit.ly/2hk7ekP

[9] "World Day of Information: IPC launches Nigerian Journalists' Internet Rights Initiative (NJIRI), calls for safety of journalists Online". International Press Centre, September 28 2017. http://bit.ly/2xRlmbT

[10] "Cjfe Joins Ifex to Urge Tunisia to end Internet Censorship". http://bit.ly/2hMRqHr

largely ignored by large media companies[11]. There is a need to situate Internet freedom as the new Press Freedom and this is very important within the African context because the internet revolution has limited the power of African Governments to clampdown on citizens and journalists alike by expanding the space for information flow and democratizing how people access news and information generally. Internet shutdowns, disruptions and censorship represent the different strategies used by African political leaders on to curtail their citizens' ability to share information, mobilize, and share diversity of opinions on the internet. Recent Internet shutdowns in Togo[12] and Cameroon[13] to prevent anti-government movements from protesting, lends credence to this assertion.

Internet clampdowns affect professional journalism as much as it affects citizen journalism and once we marry the two together, the role for the media for Internet Freedom advocacy becomes more pronounced. The media must now work harder with Internet freedom advocates to defend the integrity and openness of the internet. When Paradigm Initiative with support from Gambia Press Union hosted an Internet Policy workshop in July 2017 in Banjul, Gambia, participants identified the following roles for the media in Internet Freedom Advocacy:
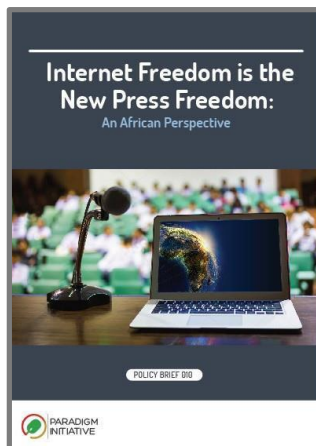
1   Media has responsibility to speak up when violations happen online

2   Advocate reform of media laws to reflect new realities – What are the new realities?

- Citizen journalism.
- Self-regulation at association level.
- Proliferation of online media.
- Self-regulation at individual/platform level.

3   Be at the forefront of approaches to tackle hate speech, fake news and not allow legislation to be subjected to political manipulations.

The list is definitely not exhaustive. The takeaway however is that Internet Freedom advocacy is not a job for only professional Internet Freedom advocates. The media must play a huge role in supporting on-going work by enlisting as Internet Freedom advocates so that the sanctity of press freedom remains protected even as governments across Africa seek to strengthen their grip on the Internet and dominate Internet governance for political ends.

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[11] "Definition - What does *Citizen Journalism* mean?" http://bit.ly/2klfpyq

[12] Khanya Mtshali, "Togo has shut down the internet to counter anti-government protests". Quartz Africa, September 7 2017. http://bit.ly/2wlbdg8

[13] "Cameroon goes offline after Anglophone revolt". CNN, March 23 2017. http://cnn.it/2jKfeHe

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