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East Africa

Countries Covered



Kenya



Uganda



Tanzania



South Sudan



Ethiopia

Overview

The first quarter of 2025 brought significant shifts in the digital rights landscape across East Africa, exposing progress and persistent challenges in internet freedoms, data protection, privacy, and content regulation.

In South Sudan, a social media ban stifled public discourse and restricted access to information, while Uganda's misuse of cyber laws to target dissent remained a pressing issue. Meanwhile, Kenya advanced its artificial intelligence (AI) policy agenda but faced major cybersecurity breaches, including a Business Registration Service data breach and a cyber-attack on the Directorate of Criminal Investigations (DCI).

A call to action is for civil society actors, including Paradigm Initiative, to intensify advocacy efforts against restrictive policies and government overreach, starting with a legal challenge at the East African Court of Justice (EACJ) against South Sudan's social media ban.

Internet Shutdowns



South Sudan's government imposed a 90-day social media ban on January 21, 2025, citing security concerns and the need to restrict militia mobilisation. However, no evidence was presented to justify the claim that social media and internet access facilitated insecurity. The shutdown significantly limited access to information, suppressed media freedom, and curtailed democratic engagement. This trend follows similar incidents in Tanzania and Uganda, where governments restricted digital spaces to silence dissent and limit civic engagement in previous years.¹

Ethiopia did not, during the reporting period, experience a nationwide internet shutdown, but intermittent disruptions were reported in parts of the Amhara region due to ongoing security operations. These partial blackouts affected communication and access to information for residents, raising concerns about the use of connectivity restrictions as a control mechanism.²

1 <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/south-sudan-shuts-down-social-media-for-three-months-4898822>

2 <https://www.cipesa.org/digital-rights-ethiopia-2025/>

Freedom of Expression



Ugandan authorities arrested a TikTokker in February 2025 over content deemed to be offensive towards President Museveni. Charged under the Computer Misuse Act, which was passed into law in 2022. The 24-year-old spent weeks in detention before being released on bail. This arrest highlights the increasing use of cyber laws to target online critics in East Africa.³

In **Kenya**, the newly appointed Minister for ICT and Digital Economy publicly warned against the “misuse” of social media in early 2025, particularly targeting those sharing political satire and criticism against the president. Other top government officials also made mention of potential new regulations introduced to tighten content control under the guise of preventing

3 <https://www.citizen.digital/news/ugandan-tiktoker-slapped-with-six-years-in-jail-for-insulting-museveni-n345660>

misinformation.⁴ We will keep monitoring the space and report in subsequent quarters if the minister follows through on his remarks.

4 <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/national/article/2001509807/kenyans-social-media-use-sparks-government-concerns>

Surveillance/ Privacy



Kenya's Business Registration Service (BRS) acknowledged a data breach on the 2nd of February 2025, affecting company registry information and launched an investigation. The breach raised concerns about cybersecurity vulnerabilities within government agencies and the potential exposure of sensitive business data.⁵ A week later, the Directorate of Criminal Investigations (DCI) suffered a cyber-attack on its official digital platforms, including X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook. Attackers took control of the accounts and used the platforms to promote cryptocurrency scams, reportedly making illicit profits of approximately 64.7 Solana (SOL) tokens, which translated to between \$4,000 and \$13,000 in earnings before authorities regained control. The incident underscored ongoing cybersecurity challenges and the need for stronger protective measures in government digital systems.⁶

5 <https://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2025/02/govt-confirms-data-breach-on-main-registry-exposing-millions-of-companies/>

6 <https://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2025/02/dci-scramble-response-after-cyber-attack-on-x-facebook-accounts/>

Policy Developments



Kenya's Ministry of ICT and Digital Economy released the draft Kenya National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2025–2030 in January 2025 for public review and input. The strategy aims to position Kenya as Africa's leading hub for AI innovation, focusing on socio-economic development through AI applications in sectors such as agriculture, healthcare, education, finance, and public service delivery.⁷

7 [https://www.mygov.go.ke/sites/default/files/2025-01/Call%20for%20Comments%20on%20the%20Draft%20Kenya%20National%20Artificial%20Intelligence%20\(AI\)%20Strategy%20\(2025-2030\).pdf](https://www.mygov.go.ke/sites/default/files/2025-01/Call%20for%20Comments%20on%20the%20Draft%20Kenya%20National%20Artificial%20Intelligence%20(AI)%20Strategy%20(2025-2030).pdf)



Francophone Africa

Countries Covered



DRC



Senegal

Overview

Over the past quarter, the West African region has witnessed significant developments impacting digital rights. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), internet shutdowns and restrictions on VPN applications were reported in the North Kivu province. Meanwhile, Senegal introduced the “New Deal Technologique,” aiming to transform the nation into a digital hub, and implemented media regulations that have sparked debates concerning freedom of expression.

Internet SHutdowns



On January 23, 2025, Congolese authorities disrupted⁸ internet access in and around Goma, the capital of North Kivu province, in response to the advancement of M23 rebel forces toward the city. Additionally, social media platforms such as X and TikTok were reportedly blocked nationwide. These actions hindered communication, exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, and impeded efforts to document human rights violations.

8 https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/keepiton-les-autorites-doivent-retablir-lacces-a-goma-et-dans-toute-la-rdc/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Freedom of Expression



In Senegal, the Ministry of Communication released a list⁹ of media outlets compliant with the provisions of the Press Code. Out of 638 declared media organisations, only 258 were deemed compliant, leaving 380 outlets, including some prominent ones like DakarActu, required to suspend their activities until they achieve compliance. This decision has sparked controversy, with some media actors criticising the move as arbitrary and politically motivated.

9 https://www.voaafrique.com/a/controversie-au-s%C3%A9n%C3%A9gal-apr%C3%A8s-la-publication-de-la-liste-des-m%C3%A9dias-conformes-au-code-de-la-presse/7969047.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Digital Inclusion



Senegal launched the “New Deal Technologique”¹⁰ on February 24, 2025, aiming to enhance digital sovereignty, digitise public services, develop the digital economy, and position the country as a leader in the African digital landscape. This initiative plans to train over 100,000 graduates by 2034 and create an environment conducive to innovation and entrepreneurship.

10 <https://www.newdealtechnologique.sn/>

Censorship/ Content Moderation



The publication of the list¹¹ of media outlets compliant with Senegal's Press Code has been perceived by some as a form of censorship, particularly concerning the exclusion of online media and YouTube channels. This situation raises questions about the transparency of the criteria used and the potential impact on media diversity and freedom of expression.

¹¹ https://www.mctn.sn/actualite/publication-de-la-liste-des-medias-en-conformite-avec-des-dispositions-du-code-de-la-presse?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Recommendations :

To Congolese Authorities: Immediately restore internet access and VPN applications in North Kivu, and refrain from future disruptions that infringe upon citizens' fundamental rights.

To the Senegalese Government: Ensure complete transparency in the media regulation process by publishing the specific criteria used to assess compliance and providing affected media outlets with the opportunity to appeal decisions.

To Regional and International Stakeholders: Closely monitor developments in digital rights within the region and support local initiatives to promote freedom of expression, digital inclusion, and privacy protection.



Southern Africa

Countries Covered



Malawi



Namibia



Zambia



Zimbabwe

Overview

During the first quarter of 2025, the prevailing digital rights challenges centred on threats to freedom of speech. In Zambia and Zimbabwe, Paradigm Initiative (PIN) witnessed the arrests of journalists, politicians and citizens for on charges ranging from sedition, to cybercrime infringements. In Malawi, the regulator took steps to monitor freedom of speech through the acquisition of a social media monitoring system with potential of digital surveillance on individuals and groups online. However, some positive developments were seen in Namibia with the launch of its national AI strategy.

Context Analysis

Malawi

In January 2025, the Malawi Communications Regulatory Authority (MACRA) published in the National Publications Limited a Notice of Intention to Award a Contract for the Supply, Delivery, Installation, Commissioning and Testing of Integrated System to Track Misinformation and Disinformation Trends in Malawi, dated 14 January 2025 under Reference: MACRA/IPDC/ISMDTM/2024/09/01. The Authority later justified this decision, describing it as a “misinformation trend analysis platform,” which it aims to promote public safety, safeguard national interests, and support regulatory compliance.¹²

¹² Capital FM, “MACRA justifies procurement of misinformation tracking system”, (2025) <https://www.capitalradiomalawi.com/2025/01/15/macra-justifies-procurement-of-misinformation-tracking-system/> (accessed on 12 March 2025)

Namibia

In February 2025 the government of Namibia unveiled its national Artificial Intelligence strategy.¹³

¹³ IT News Africa, Nambia Launches National AI Strategy, (2025) <https://www.itnewsafrika.com/2025/02/nambia-launches-national-ai-strategy/>, (accessed on 13 March 2025),

Zambia

In January 2025, Zambian authorities arrested three individuals Daniel Augustine Chitendwe, Abraham Kapya, and Mwale Siliya for allegedly “spreading inflammatory statements about President Hakainde Hichilema’s health”. They were charged under Section 69 of the Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Act (No. 2 of 2021) for Harassment Utilising Means of Electronic Communication.¹⁴

In January 2025, the Zambia Police Service arrested Binwell Mpundu, the Member of Parliament for Nkana on charges on seditious practices constrary

¹⁴ The Zambian Observer, “Three arrested for social media claims on HH’s health”, (2025) <https://zambianobserver.com/threr-3-arrested-for-social-media-claims-on-hhs-health/> (accessed on 31 January 2025)

Zambia

to Section 57(1)(c) as read with Section 60(1)(i) of the Penal Code Act, Chapter 87 of the Laws of Zambia. This was in relation to an article written by Mpundu, titled “Defend Yourselves With Equal Measure”. The charges allege that the article encouraged citizens to arm themselves with weapons for self defense, an act they allege threatens public order in the country.¹⁵

On 24 February, Blessed Mhlanga, a senior journalist with Alpha Media Holdings and head of news at HStv,

15 The Zambian Eye, “Police arrest Binwell Mpundu”, (2025) <https://zambianeye.com/police-arrest-binwell-mpundu/> (accessed on 12 March 2025)

Zimbabwe

was detained by authorities after he interviewed war veteran and ZANU-PF central committee member, Blessed Geza, an open critic of President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s leadership.¹⁶ On 12 March, Mhlanga’s case was adjourned at the Zimbabwe High Court, and his bail application was denied, with Justice Gibson Mandaza saying more time was needed to review the case.¹⁷

16 Committee to Protect Journalists, “Zimbabwean journalist Blessed Mhlanga jailed over interviews with war veteran”, (2025) <https://cpj.org/2025/02/zimbabwe-an-journalist-blessed-mhlanga-jailed-over-interviews-with-war-veteran/> (accessed on 12 March 2025)

17 Global South World, “Zimbabwe Roundup: Journalist arrested, ZiG downgrade, Trump-induced unemployment”, <https://www.msn.com/en-au/news/other/zimbabwe-roundup-journalist-arrested-zig-downgrade-trump-induced-unemployment/ar-AA1AR8ba?ocid=BingNewsSerp> (accessed on 12 March 2025)

Recommendations

Malawi

- Refrain from procuring targeted mass communications surveillance tools against international human rights standards without judicial oversight and due diligence.
- Engage critical stakeholders on the challenges they seek to address and undertake a human rights impact assessment of the human rights impacts of procuring such services listed in the procurement notice.
- Facilitate awareness campaigns in collaboration with key stakeholders to address misinformation and disinformation.
- Collaborate with key stakeholders and civil society actors to address challenges faced.
- Openly give assurances that MACRA will not issue any broad notices calling on internet shutdowns in the upcoming elections, as a commitment to human rights.

Zambia and Zimbabwe

Governments are urged to refrain from harassment and arbitrary arrests of the media. The governments should repeal overly broad legislation that targets journalists.



Anglophone West Africa

Countries Covered



Ghana



Sierra Leone



Liberia

Overview

In early 2025, digital rights monitors in Anglophone West Africa recorded key incidents highlighting both progress and concerns. Arrests and harassment of individuals for online expression, including a social media influencer and a foreign journalist, underscored ongoing threats to freedom of expression. In contrast, digital inclusion advanced through a regional free-roaming agreement and Liberia's push for improved internet infrastructure. Meanwhile, a major cybersecurity breach involving a former Ghanaian president's social media account highlighted rising cyber threats and the need for stronger digital protections. These events reflect the region's evolving digital landscape and the importance of rights-respecting policies.

Context Analysis

Freedom of Expression



Two recent incidents in Sierra Leone have raised significant concerns regarding the protection of freedom of expression:

- **Hawa Hunt's Detention and Release:**¹⁸ Social media influencer Hawa Hunt was detained for over two months, allegedly in retaliation for a viral video critical of the President and First Lady. Her arrest, under the Cybersecurity and Crime Act and Public Order Act, reflects potential misuse of laws to stifle dissent. Though acquitted, her prolonged detention, denial of bail, and the political undertones of her case indicate systemic issues regarding the suppression of critical voices.
- **Detention of Journalist Sophie Van Leeuwen:**¹⁹ A foreign journalist, despite being accredited, was detained and interrogated by police. This incident highlights the lack of procedural clarity and inter-agency coordination regarding the treatment of accredited media professionals, especially foreigners. The situation could have been diffused with better verification mechanisms.

Both incidents underline a troubling trend of state actions to suppress or intimidate critical voices, thereby infringing on freedom of expression.

18 <https://allafrica.com/stories/202503130013.html>

19 <https://mfwa.org/country-highlights/sierra-leone-authorities-should-end-harassment-of-journalist-sophie-van-leeuwen/>

Digital Inclusion and Connectivity

- **Free-Roaming Agreement:**²⁰ Liberia, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia signed a landmark agreement eliminating roaming charges, boosting regional digital integration and

20 <https://www.ecofinagency.com/telecom/0402-46398-liberia-sierra-leone-and-the-gambia-sign-free-roaming-agreement-to-boost-regional-connectivity>

Context Analysis

Digital Inclusion and Connectivity



economic cooperation. This aligns with ECOWAS initiatives and promises to enhance cross-border communication, benefiting citizens, businesses, and governments alike.

- **Liberia's Second Submarine Cable:**²¹ To improve internet resilience, Liberia is investing in the Amílcar Cabral Cable project, following a significant 2024 blackout due to damage to its only existing cable. Supported by ECOWAS and the World Bank, this initiative will fortify Liberia's digital infrastructure, stimulate economic growth, and expand access to the global digital economy.

²¹ <https://gnnliberia.com/liberia-takes-a-giant-leap-towards-digital-resilience-with-second-submarine-cable/>

Cybersecurity



Hacking of Former Ghanaian President's Social Media Account:²² The hijacking of John Dramani Mahama's official X account to promote a crypto scam underscores rising cybersecurity threats to public figures. The scam led to financial losses and continues to pose risks as unauthorised content remains online. Ghana's Cyber Security Authority is actively investigating the breach and advising the public to disregard any posts from the compromised account.

²² <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/cyber-security-authority-investigates-hack-of-mahamas-x-account.html>

