A Decade Of
Internet Freedom
In Africa:

Reflections and Insights from 10 Change Makers

A CIPESA Series ———————————————— January, **2024**

CIPESA

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Foreword

This special edition has been produced as part of the commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the publication of the State of Internet Freedom in Africa report and the annual convening of the Forum on Internet Freedom in Africa (FIFAfrica). The first editions of the State of Internet Freedom in Africa and the Forum were published and conducted in 2014, respectively. Since then, the annual State of Internet Freedom in Africa report has been instrumental in complementing the work of state and non-state actors by providing contextual information and generating evidence to inform ICT policymaking and practice, creating awareness on internet freedom issues on the continent, and shaping conversations by digital rights actors across the continent.

Looking back, Africa's journey to achieve internet freedom has not been without challenges. There have been significant threats to internet freedom, evidenced by the rampant state censorship through internet shutdowns, surveillance, blocking and filtering of websites, and the widespread use of repressive laws to suppress the voices of key actors. Furthermore, there remains a significant digital divide as limited access to the internet and digital devices, poor digital infrastructure, high cost of connectivity, and low digital literacy levels and skills continue to plague the capacity of Africans to enjoy the full benefits of the internet. While many of these persist to some degree, new threats, such as disinformation, information manipulation, and cyber attacks, that could potentially be powered by artificial intelligence present new challenges to internet freedom.

In this special edition, CIPESA documents and shares reflections and insights from ten individuals who have been instrumental in shaping Africa's digital and Internet freedom advocacy landscape over the last ten years.

We hope their insights and perspectives will continue inspiring and informing the quest for greater internet freedom in Africa. As more people from around Africa connect to the Internet, we must continue to work to ensure that no one is left behind and no more voices continue to be silenced. As these changemakers have demonstrated by leading the charge from the front, let us all join the path they have illuminated and champion in our various roles:, a more free, secure, and open internet in Africa.

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the rampant state censorship through internet shutdowns, surveillance, blocking and filtering of websites, and the widespread use of repressive laws to suppress the voices of key actors.

'Gbenga Sesan, the Executive Director of Paradigm Initiative, is an eloquent advocate for internet freedom across the continent, leading efforts to push back against repressive laws and promoting digital inclusion while speaking truth to power. He continues to champion the transformative power of technology for social good and to drive positive change in society.

Arthur Gwagwa is a Research Scholar at Utrecht University, Netherlands, and a long-standing advocate for digital rights and justice. His work in the philanthropic sector has been instrumental in supporting various grassroots initiatives to promote internet freedom in Africa. Similarly, his pioneering research work and thought leadership continue to inspire and transform the lives of people in Africa.

Edeten Ojo, the Executive Director of Media Rights Agenda, is a prominent advocate for advancing media rights and internet freedom. Known for his strategic vision and dedication to media freedom, he pioneered the conceptualisation and development of the African Declaration on Internet Rights and has been a key voice in shaping Internet policy-making in Africa.

Emilar Gandhi, the Head of Stakeholder Engagement and Global Strategic Policy Initiatives at Meta, built a strong foundation in civil society as an advocate for Internet freedom. She is a prominent figure in technology policy in Africa whose expertise and dedication have made her a valuable voice for inclusivity and responsible technology development in the region.

Dr. Grace Githaiga, the CEO and Convenor of Kenya ICT Action Network (KICTANet), has been a leading advocate for media freedom and digital rights in Africa. Her tireless advocacy in shaping internet policy has earned her recognition for her pivotal roles in championing internet freedom, digital inclusion, multistakeholderism, and women's rights online.

Julie Owono, the Executive Director of Internet Sans Frontières (Internet Without Borders), is a passionate and respected digital rights advocate and thought leader in the global digital community. She is not only a champion for internet freedom in Africa but is also a symbol of hope for many communities standing at the forefront of the battle for internet freedom and connectivity in Africa.

Neema Iyer, the founder of Pollicy, is well known for her advocacy efforts in bringing feminist perspectives into data and technology policy. Her dynamic and multi-faceted approach to solving social challenges exemplifies the potential of data and technology to advance social justice and promote digital inclusion and internet freedom in Africa.

Dr. Tabani Moyo, the Regional Director of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), is a distinguished media freedom advocate and influential leader in guiding a community of changemakers in Southern Africa. He has played an extensive and formidable role in pushing back against restrictive and repressive laws, supporting journalists under threat, empowering young Africans, and shaping internet governance policies.

Temitope Ogundipe, the Founder and Executive Director of TechSocietal, has been a champion for digital rights and inclusion in Africa. She is an advocate for women's rights online and uses her expertise to contribute to the development of youth and address digital inequalities affecting vulnerable groups across the continent.

Wafa Ben-Hassine, the Principal Responsible Technology at Omidyar Network, is a recognised human rights defender and visionary leader dedicated to promoting human rights and responsible technological development. Her relentless advocacy and valuable contributions to defending digital rights, civil liberties, and technology policy continue to inspire many across the continent.

Dr. Wairagala Wakabi, PhD
Executive Director

'Gbenga
Sesan

Executive Director,
Paradigm Initiative

What motivated you to become an advocate for Internet freedom in Africa, and how did you get started?

In 2008, while training some young people on how to use computers, some hinted that they had been exposed to cybercrime but were happy to learn how to do it right. Out of excitement, I shared this at a public event. After my presentation, an officer from Nigeria's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) walked up to me and asked for the venue of our training. I laughed and asked why, and his response was, "To come and arrest the cybercriminals you talked about." I was surprised and asked why he would arrest them instead of being proud of them. He said, "Well, they confessed to a crime and should be punished. If you don't like that, change the law…"

I still believe he was joking, but that chat got me thinking about policymaking in general and ICT policy in particular. Five years later, as Internet access grew across the continent, I realised that many laws were focused on clamping down digital activities and were being used to arrest, intimidate, and prosecute citizens. Acting on the advice from the EFCC officer, I started challenging the respective laws. I was motivated by the officer's challenge and the fear that if Africa continued to focus more on clampdowns instead of innovation, we could miss out on the much-needed opportunities that ICTs provide.

. What progress have you seen in the expansion of Internet freedom in Africa over the past ten years? What are some of the most promising innovations, best practices, and initiatives that are contributing to the expansion of Internet freedom and digital rights in Africa?

We are gradually moving from reacting to violations towards proactively engaging policy processes and demonstrating win-win scenarios for political actors who assumed that hurting rights was not harmful to them. It is great to see the democratisation of training opportunities for various stakeholders — including policymakers and lawmakers — as I believe this will enlighten everyone on the need for rights-respecting policies and practices while also building staying power for digital rights work and advocacy on the continent.

What are some of the emerging threats or pressing challenges to Internet freedom in Africa, and how can we stay ahead of them?

Some of the threats include ignorance and apathy. Ignorance of new tools can lock out advocates from promoting rights. I worry that while we are busy fighting fires in the various corners of our region, new tools and processes are emerging that we cannot engage with because of resource constraints. Apathy sets in when you either work hard on something without seeing progress or when other overwhelming factors set in. Unfortunately, many advocates and organisations are so overwhelmed or bloodied from battles involving tyrants that they are allowing apathy to set it. We must fight ignorance with knowledge, and for apathy, we need to celebrate small wins and connect with other advocates who can inspire us to do more.

How can we build trust, promote partnership, and enhance regional collaboration among different African stakeholders in the Internet governance ecosystem, including governments, inter-governmental bodies, civil society, industry, media, and academia?

When we look at how the COVID-19 pandemic exposed our lack of readiness, I believe that we should be motivated to work together because of the scale of the problems. No single organisation or institution can be so well-resourced to tackle the many challenges that face us. Across various stakeholder groups, we also need to work together because that is the only way to see a complete picture of the problems and be able to tackle them properly. If we work in silos, we stand the risk of tunnel vision and the inability to solve big problems at scale. The way to build trust and promote partnership is to realise that while we are experts in some areas, we need others who see beyond our noses to understand the bigger picture, and we need to maximise the opportunities provided by convenings like the Digital Rights and Inclusion Forum (DRIF) and Forum on Internet Freedom in Africa (FIFA) to catch up on what others are doing, exchange ideas, have difficult conversations and build authentic relationships.

How can we ensure that marginalized communities, such as women, youth, people with disabilities, and marginalised groups, are included in efforts to promote Internet freedom in Africa?

Lived experience is very important in finding lasting solutions, and nobody can frame issues and understand challenges like those who live through the problems we seek to tackle. As it becomes more popular to attempt solving problems for marginalised groups, we must be humble to admit that our knowledge is limited and allow those with such lived experiences — as women, youth, people living with disabilities, etc. — to take the lead in framing the issues and walking us towards solving the problems that these marginalised groups are confronted with. If we don't include marginalised communities in promoting Internet Freedom that works for them, then we are on a hypocritical journey that will end in failed projects. One way to ensure inclusion is to support marginalised community leaders who are already doing the work to build staying power and show us how to collectively solve the problem.
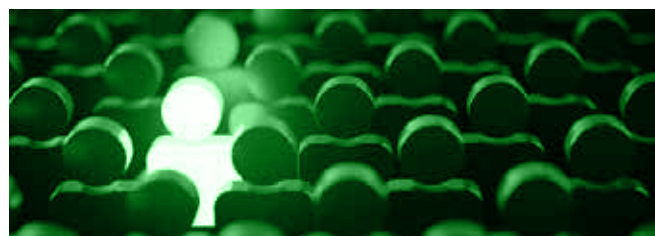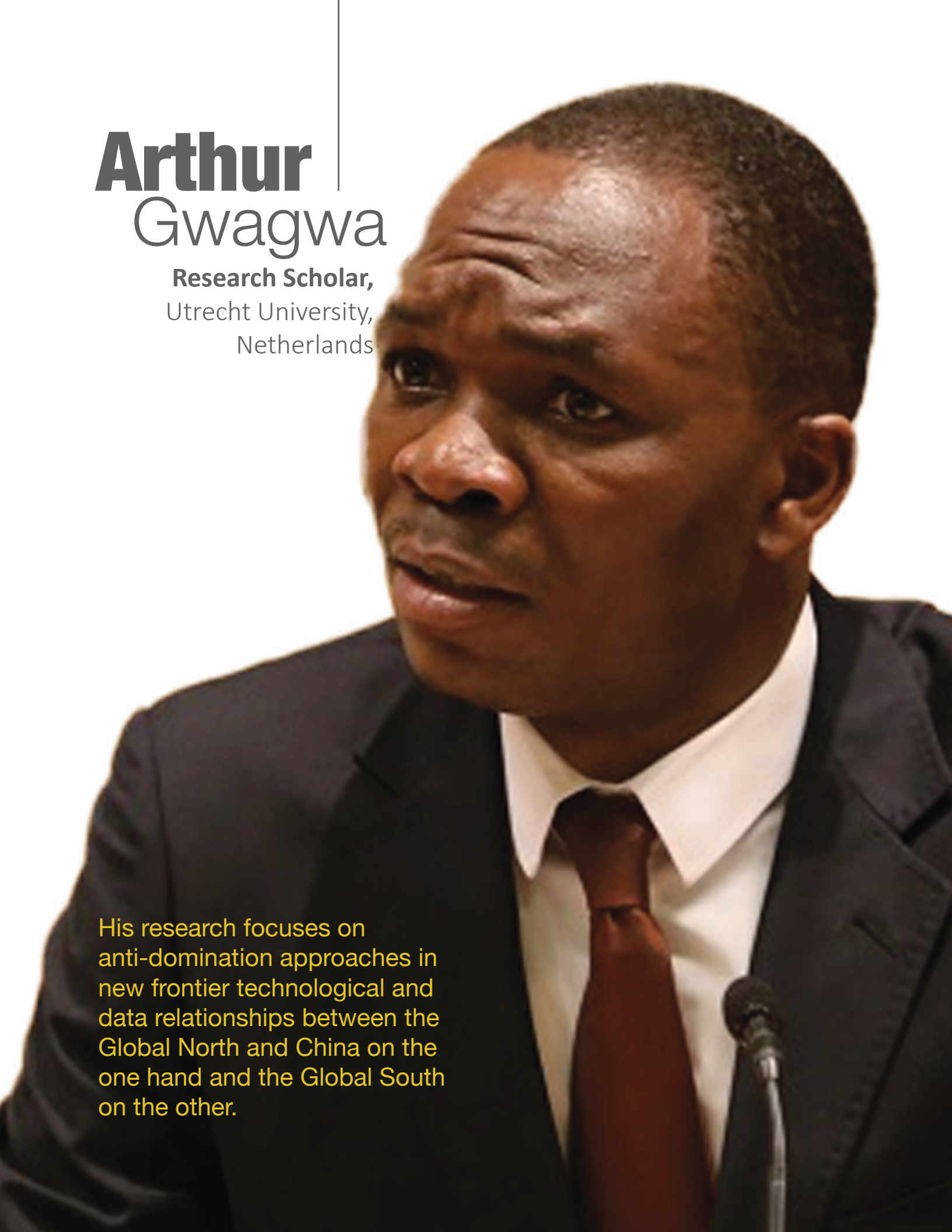

"Well, they confessed to a crime and should be punished. If you don't like that, change the law…"

Arthur
Gwagwa

Research Scholar,
Utrecht University,
Netherlands

His research focuses on anti-domination approaches in new frontier technological and data relationships between the Global North and China on the one hand and the Global South on the other.

What motivated you to become an advocate for Internet freedom in Africa, and how did you get started?

When I graduated from law school, I decided to specialize in Civil Liberties at a time when the Zimbabwean Government was becoming increasingly autocratic and arbitrary in its treatment of those who were critical of its excesses. Lawyers were not spared from this intense brutality. On various occasions, I was harassed by politically connected parties.

Given Zimbabwe's descent into further chaos following the controversial land reform exercise, I migrated to the United Kingdom in 2002, where I held several important legal and other positions, including with the Refugee Legal Centre. Around 2012, the former United States National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden gripped the world's attention spotlighted the world's most powerful signals intelligence (SIGINT) agencies: the NSA, GCHQ, and their allies. I joined Carly Kind (Nyst), who was then the head of Legal at Privacy International, subsequently led the Ada Lovelace Institute, and now Australia's Privacy Commissioner, to form a strong global alliance, not just to fight surveillance but to push for international standards and a United Nations (UN) mandate on the right to privacy.

I then moved to Washington, DC, and through the support of Lindsay Beck, got a grant at the Open Technology Fund. Collaborating with Moses Karanja at Strathmore University, I was the first to run OONI probes in more than 15 African countries and visit some of the most dangerous ones, like Cameron, Sudan, and Djibouti. In the blog *Ethical Roots and Routes to My Career Choices*, I write about the ethical considerations that shaped my career choices.

What progress have you seen in the expansion of Internet freedom in Africa over the past ten years?

My work with the support of international and regional actors such as Privacy International, the Open Technology Fund (OTF), Citizen Lab, Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), and Paradigm Initiative, brought about critical attention to freedom of expression and privacy in the digital environment. For example, with the support of Amnesty International Kenya, Defend the Defenders, and others, we introduced the privacy discourse at the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) in Angola in 2014 and The Gambia in 2015. Civil society has become more aware of how rights violations now happen and offline, and both spaces have to be defended.

During my tenure in the OTF Advisory Council, we gave more funding than ever to African grassroots organizations, enabling them to expand their work and increase training. We began to witness an opening up in Ethiopia. There was increasing solidarity among grassroots organizations like CIPESA and Paradigm Initiative through online collaborative tools, which even improved during COVID-19. OONI's mobile app probes also ensured we could take remote technical measurements without getting into harm's way. I also witnessed the increase of younger advocates, especially girls and women, which is a plus. It pushed us, the older generation, from activism, which is a plus too. Also, the collaborations with the industry ensured that we got to get our voices to them, for example, collaborating with Ebele Okobi at Facebook on zero-rated issues made them rethink the issues of access and connectivity as a matter of human rights.

I also witnessed the increase of younger advocates, especially girls and women, which is a plus.

What are some of the most promising innovations, best practices, and initiatives that are contributing to the expansion of Internet freedom and digital rights in Africa?

I think tying Internet freedom to wider democratic governance concerns makes Internet freedom more relevant. The work I did with Internet Without Borders and that CIPESA and others are doing is necessary to appreciate how the digital realm is now so connected to promoting and violation of rights. Also, pro-democracy innovations and organizations like Human Rights Information and Documentation Systems (HURIDOCS), a truly global organization, with a majority of staff in the Global South), Mnemonic, Ushahidi, and Engine Room are doing great work. CIPESA and PI's multistakeholder forums also help create safe spaces for critical discussions. They are the new public sphere for deliberation.

What are some of the emerging threats or pressing challenges to Internet freedom in Africa, and how can we stay ahead of them?

How foreign state and non-state actors enter into collaborations to acquire, use, and control personal data in Africa and how this threatens the citizens' security and human rights. There is not much research on this due to logistical challenges. Therefore, local researchers must foster international collaborations to move the field forward and must agree on key questions and the methodologies that can be used to address these questions. Although network disruptions are still on the rise, there are significant information security breaches of voters' data ahead of and during elections.

As I *argued* five years ago, "As a several African countries embrace biometric technology-driven elections, the community needs to adopt a broader approach to information controls that address all information security breaches. This is even though some of these technologies do not exclusively rely on Internet transmission control protocols to transmit and store data. This article argues that such a broader approach accords with The Citizen Lab's conceptualisation of information controls: a broad term used to define all actions that governments, the private sector, and other actors take through the Internet and other information communications technologies, for example, to secure (e.g., encryption) information for political ends.' An acceptance of this view will lead to more evidence-based and broader election threat modelling. Such modelling, based on revised indicators, would consider a wide range of adversaries that potentially exploit vulnerabilities in decentralized technologies and data regardless of the medium or whether such data is in transit, cloud, storage, or at rest."

> **"As a number of African countries embrace biometric technology-driven elections, the community needs to adopt a broader approach to information controls that address all information security breaches. This is regardless of the fact that some of ..."**

How can we build trust, promote partnership, and enhance regional collaboration among different African stakeholders in the Internet governance ecosystem, including governments, inter-governmental bodies, civil society, industry, media, and academia?industry, media, and academia?

I point out in my forthcoming paper, Authoritarian Alliances, and Data Politicking in Africa (Stanford), that the limited local research on the acquisition of large-scale digital data by African authoritarian governments with the backing of foreign actors has meant that African civil society has not done sufficient advocacy to spotlight its human rights implications. Yet these practices are not new as they continue the historical authoritarian influence in the analogue era.

This failure highlights a lack of capacity by local researchers to utilize mixed methods approaches to understand such a complex and evolving area shrouded in secrecy. Because of these logistical challenges, local researchers must foster international research collaborations and consider applying robust research methods. Some of these include:

- By focusing on a few qualitative case studies over a longer period. For example, how do the challenges brought by large-scale data collection by authoritarian African governments compare between countries without data protection laws?
- Through empirical field quantitative and qualitative studies. For example, what is the impact of AI-enhanced technologies, how are these technologies designed in theory and practice, what are their capacities, and where are they located? What governance models are suitable for oversight and safeguarding safety and human rights? How do historical data governance structures influence the current governance?
- Deciding on core criteria and heuristics African governments should use to measure the value of personal and non-personal data and its cross-border transfer? What lessons, if any, can Africa learn and adopt from other regions?

How can we ensure that marginalized communities, such as women, youth, people with disabilities, and marginalized groups, are included in efforts to promote Internet freedom in Africa?

The exponential converging technologies are challenging the structure of democratic decision-making. Access to information has changed, elections are vulnerable to manipulation ('fake news,' profiling, and targeting), and the digitalization of political debate changes central features of politics in general. Some pessimists even doubt whether or not, under those circumstances, democracy is still a possible form of governance, while optimists see new opportunities for democratic engagement. And how can such democratic governance function when digitalization requires global regulation while regulatory bodies are necessarily embedded in different political systems and cultural contexts?

There is a need to review the whole international human rights system, which is in a state of atrophy as all major powers seek to dominate in cyberspace. There are (valid) criticisms of the shortcomings of human rights instruments in terms of how far they go in incorporating non-Western values/human rights and not reflecting certain local values, especially those in the Global South. The new digital compact must seek an "overlapping consensus" that draws from the best values from the Global South and Europe and can inform key global values, as it is necessary to pay attention to the cultural context and the values of the communities that have historically faced oppression.

Gaining an alternative view on values spotlights historical inequalities and locates the problem within technical systems and its roots in the social structures and institutions. A good example is the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ) and Chatham House, which have sought alternative views on values in their work from women and Global South thought leaders. Another way is by drawing from the readily available wealth of scholarship and expertise on resisting colonialism among the formerly oppressed. This also enables us to pay attention to the evolving power dynamics within countries in the Global South, where the political elite dominate their populations.

![Media Rights Agenda logo]

Edetaen
Ojo

Executive Director,
Media Rights Agenda (MRA),

Given your experience and expertise in digital rights work in Africa, CIPESA invites you to participate as an interviewee by responding to the following set of questions. What motivated you to become an advocate for Internet freedom in Africa, and how did you get started?

My involvement in Internet freedom advocacy dates back to 2001, when my organization, Media Rights Agenda, partnered with Internews Network and the Centre for Democracy and Technology (CDT), to implement a project called the Global Internet Policy Initiative (GIPI). My organization was in charge of implementing the Nigerian component of the project, which I oversaw along with Eric Johnson, then Managing Director of Internews Europe. The Internet was really in its infancy globally at that time, but more so in Nigeria, which had no policy or regulatory framework to address the issue. However, conversations were being initiated within government to regulate the emerging sector, and our involvement was aimed at engaging with policy-makers within the Executive and the Legislature around the issue of Internet regulation, which also sought to organize the private sector, particularly the Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and well as associations in the computer and other digital technology environment to participate in the policy debates to ensure that critical voices were heard in policy formulation processes.

However, a little over a decade later, I developed a renewed interest in Internet policy advocacy because of more aggressive efforts by the Nigerian Government to regulate the Internet in a manner that threatened human rights online, particularly the rights to privacy and freedom of expression. These efforts manifested in the form of several draft laws and draft regulations pending before different legislative and executive bodies, all aimed at regulating various aspects of the Internet and its use. These included the Regulation of Telecommunication Facilities to Support Investigations and for Other Matters Connected Therewith, Electronic Commerce (Provision of Legal Recognition) Bill, Electronic Transfer of Funds Crimes Bill; Cyber-security Bill, Interception and Monitoring Bill, draft Lawful Interception of Communications Regulations, and, the Cybercrime Bill.

These efforts were uncoordinated and were not being implemented under any clear policy framework. Some of the draft laws or instruments duplicated each other in different respects, while many of them fell below international standards and practices on Internet regulation and violated established human rights norms, including the right to freedom of expression and privacy.

There were also threats from senior government officials to control social media in light of the increasing and widespread use of social media platforms to mobilize citizens around issues of public interest, including against certain government policies and actions. Given these threats to human rights online and the online environment and digital communication in general, it became imperative for me to re-engage the issues within my broader interests in the rights to freedom of expression, media freedom, and access to information.

What progress have you seen in the expansion of Internet freedom in Africa over the past ten years?

10 **YRS**

Over the last ten years, there have been positive developments in the expansion of Internet freedom in Africa that can be considered as progress, while there have also been developments that can be characterized as regression. Although Africa still lags behind many other regions in terms of the number of people who have access to the Internet and, therefore, can exercise their rights to freedom of expression and access to information online, the sheer number of Africans that are now online enabled by access to mobile telephony, represents significant progress. Clearly, more needs to be done to provide the enabling infrastructure, improve digital literacy, and ensure that access to the Internet and digital tools is affordable. However, it is clear that increased access to the Internet on the continent has also resulted in more citizen engagement in a wide range of issues, including policy debates.

There has also been major progress recorded on the continent on the policy front, with the adoption of regional instruments that have helped to expand the policy environment. One such example was the development and adoption of the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in November 2019. This was significant because its predecessor, the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa, adopted by the Commission in October 2002, as well as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, upon which both documents are founded, contained no protection for or reference to Internet freedom or digital rights.

However, the 2019 document contained extensive references and protections for freedom of expression and access to information online; it provides for a multistakeholder model of regulation of the Internet as a normative standard on the continent and, among other things, imposes a mandatory obligation on States to recognise that universal, equitable, affordable and meaningful access to the Internet is necessary for the realization of freedom of expression, access to information and the exercise of other human rights.

It is a matter of concern that many civil society organizations and, many citizens in different countries show no interest whatsoever in engaging policy issues around the Internet. Many of them obviously still lack the knowledge and skills to engage in legislative or policy processes to ensure that laws and policies being adopted at the national level conform fully with international standards and norms. It is, however, gratifying that many more organizations are now involved in policy advocacy than there were 10 to 20 years ago.

What are some of the most promising innovations, best practices, and initiatives that are contributing to the expansion of Internet freedom and digital rights in Africa?

One innovative initiative that has contributed to the expansion of Internet freedom and digital rights in Africa over the last decade has been the conceptualization, development, and adoption of the *African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedom*, which was built on a rich heritage of civil society freedom of expression advocacy and standard setting in Africa.

The Declaration came out of an idea Prof. Kwame Karikari, then Executive Director of the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), and I conceived sometime in February of 2013 to develop a set of principles that would inform and possibly inspire policy and legislative processes on Internet rights, freedoms, and governance in Africa.

At the time, we were very concerned about policy-making by governments across Africa in the digital communications and Internet sectors, particularly in the areas of cybersecurity and cybercrime. That policy environment was characterized by a combination of fear, ignorance of digital technologies, and a desire to control more outspoken populations engaging in public debates about governance and other issues using digital platforms and social media. Working with a number of civil society stakeholders, led by Anriette Esterhuysen, then Executive Director of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), we engaged in a collaborative process of harvesting the expertise, experiences, contacts, and other resources that different organizations could bring to the table.

The Declaration, which emerged at the end of the process, was intended to guide the creation of a positive, rights-based, and democratically governed Internet policy environment in Africa. It was also a major advocacy tool in the development of the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa. Other promising initiatives and good practices have been efforts by a number of civil society organizations to monitor violations of digital rights and Internet freedom with the findings from such monitoring activities serving as a basis for advocacy and campaigns on Internet freedom.

What are some of the emerging threats or pressing challenges to Internet freedom in Africa, and how can we stay ahead of them?

Strictly speaking, it is not accurate to call this an emerging threat, but it is an ongoing threat and, I believe, one of the most serious challenges facing the Internet regulatory environment in Africa and, perhaps, in some other regions.

There is no doubt that governments have a responsibility and frequently a legitimate desire to curb online criminal activities, particularly financial crimes and terrorist activities. But we continue to witness clear instances where the pursuit of these apparently legitimate objectives is also being used to introduce provisions that have no direct relevance to these goals but are merely intended to curtail criticism of the government.

In addition to this challenge, many African governments do not have the technical and legal competence to legislate on such a complex issue as the Internet. They, therefore, often depend on other countries to pass their own laws. But in their efforts to regulate the Internet and online activities, such governments appear to "learn" from the worst examples and replicate what I would call "international worst practice." The tendency is for these governments to take laws of questionable legitimacy from other countries or other regions and adapt them in their countries with little or no changes. Usually, the context and local conditions in these countries are very different. Additionally, in most cases, many critical stakeholders are excluded from the policy or legislative processes, and so there is no input from non-governmental stakeholders.

The result is that many such instruments tend to invade privacy, repress freedom of expression online, and violate other rights, such as the right to a fair hearing as the instruments often impose sanctions to punish certain types of behaviour without the requirement for due process, where such persons should be first tried and convicted by appropriate Courts of Law before being sanctioned.

It is imperative that representatives of civil society organizations and ordinary citizens empower themselves with the knowledge to participate in policy discussions and engage at all stages of policy and legislative processes to ensure that any framework put in place or being proposed is consistent with International law principles, norms and standards; and take proactive measures in the policy arena to protect the online environment as well as to ensure the protection of human rights online.

How can we build trust, promote partnership, and enhance regional collaboration among different African stakeholders in the Internet governance ecosystem, including governments, inter-governmental bodies, civil society, industry, media, and academia?

We need to build partnerships across stakeholder groups and national borders, particularly leveraging regional and sub-regional bodies and processes. Civil society actors should support legitimate governmental processes aimed at combating criminal activities online and lend their expertise to such initiatives to ensure that the measures respect human rights. Civil society actors can also help to build public support for such initiatives, explain such policies and measures to citizens, monitor the implementation of policies and legislation, and create mechanisms for getting feedback from citizens or members of the public about the impact or effectiveness of such measures and channel such feedback, whether positive or negative, to the relevant authorities.

Civil society organizations and their representatives can also help to implement digital literacy programmes to reduce or eliminate the negative impact of misinformation and disinformation on citizens. Although it is frequently the case that many governments use the guise of regulating the Internet to try and constrain or prevent criticisms or being held to account, there are also examples of government officials and parliamentarians putting forward flawed or inappropriate policy proposals out of ignorance. Stakeholders from civil society, the media, academia, or the technical community can help educate and enlighten them in a non-confrontational manner to build trust and win their confidence.

Civil society actors should support legitimate governmental processes aimed at combating criminal activities online and lend their expertise to such initiatives to ensure that the measures respect human rights.

How can we ensure that marginalized communities, such as women, youth, people with disabilities, and marginalised groups, are included in efforts to promote Internet freedom in Africa?

In proposing and advancing multi-stakeholder approaches to Internet governance, it is imperative that each of the stakeholder groups is inclusive. It is incumbent on civil society actors to play their traditional role of advocacy in this regard. They should champion the cause of inclusivity. Not only should the civil society sector include representatives of the marginalized groups within their fold, they need to elevate and amplify the voices of such groups. Civil society actors will not be credible or effective if they are not themselves inclusive. Civil society organizations should make deliberate efforts to support or conduct research to ascertain how new policy proposals or the content of proposed laws will likely impact members of the various marginalized groups and feed their findings into the policy or legislative process to properly address the issues.

Emilar
Gandhi

Head of Stakeholder Engagement,
Global Strategic
Policy Initiatives, Meta

What motivated you to become an advocate for Internet freedom in Africa, and how did you get started?

As an advocate for Internet freedom, I strongly believe in the Internet 's transformative potential and the importance of ensuring that its benefits are accessible to all. My passion for this cause has been a part of my values and interests for as long as I can remember, and it has been fuelled by my desire to bridge the digital divide and address the unique challenges that Africans face in the digital age.

My journey into advocating for Internet freedom in Africa began when I worked as an advocacy researcher in Zimbabwe, where I assisted in developing advocacy strategies to influence regional bodies, governments, communities, local organisations, human rights defenders, politicians, and other decision-makers to tackle human rights challenges. I then joined another civil society organisation and focused on media representation of minority voices in South Africa's 2009 general elections, authoring a report on the coverage of race, racism, and xenophobia in local community media. In these roles, I gained first hand insights into the profound impact of digital technologies on society and the imperative for policies that safeguard both freedom of expression and individual rights in the online sphere. These early experiences motivated me to take on diverse roles in civil society and the private sector, where I sought to shape policies and engage with stakeholders to champion digital rights and promote Internet freedom.

My time at the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) was particularly instrumental in nurturing my growth as a tech policy leader. APC is a dynamic membership-based network of organisations and activists that empowers individuals, organisations, and social movements to leverage information and communications technologies (ICTs) to facilitate equitable human development, uphold social justice, and ensure environmental sustainability. Throughout my journey, I have had the privilege of collaborating with numerous visionary individuals and organisations, including CIPESA, the Kenya ICT Action Network, the Women of Uganda Network, and Protege QV (Cameroon).

Additionally, I have been mentored by strong women in the tech policy space, such as Anriette Esterhuysen, Chat Garcia Ramilo, Karen Banks, Claire Sibthorpe, Dr. Towela Nyirenda Jere, and Dr. Rosemary Okello. These experiences and partnerships have profoundly influenced my advocacy work, enriching my perspective and fortifying my dedication to promoting Internet freedom and digital rights in Africa and globally. I remain inspired by the emerging generation of African technology and human rights policy leaders.

What progress have you seen in the expansion of Internet freedom in Africa over the past ten years?

Over the past decade, Africa has made significant progress in expanding Internet access and promoting Internet freedom. Governments and stakeholders have increasingly recognised the importance of an open and secure digital environment. Improved policy frameworks, increased connectivity, and growing digital literacy initiatives have contributed to broader access to information and online services. The establishment of regional organisations and policy initiatives focusing on digital rights has spurred collaborative efforts among African stakeholders, resulting in more informed and balanced policy discussions. Numerous countries have taken significant steps to bridge the digital divide by increasing Internet availability and reducing access disparities. Several countries have also improved their regulatory frameworks, creating more favourable conditions for competition and investment in the telecommunications sector. This has enhanced connectivity options and reduced costs, making the Internet accessible to a broader population.

It is important to note that Internet access is crucial in realising fundamental human rights, such as freedom of speech and expression. Therefore, the expansion of Internet access directly contributes to the realisation of these rights, underscoring its significance in Africa. Moreover, there is a growing awareness of the critical importance of digital rights and Internet freedom across the continent. This heightened awareness has led to increased advocacy efforts and the development of regulatory frameworks aimed at safeguarding these rights. This commitment to upholding digital freedoms signifies a positive shift in mindset and priorities.

However, it is essential to recognise that challenges still exist. Limited infrastructure in certain regions continues to be a significant barrier to achieving universal Internet access. Additionally, issues related to online censorship and access pose threats to Internet freedom. While substantial progress has been made, much work is still needed to ensure that Internet freedom is fully realised throughout Africa.

One noteworthy aspect of this progress is the adoption of an ecosystem approach. Multistakeholder partnerships involving the public sector, private companies, and civil society have played a pivotal role in driving change. These collaborations have brought together technical expertise, resources, networks, research, and lived experiences, creating a collaborative framework for advancing Internet freedom. Initiatives such as the Freedom Online Coalition, #KeepItOn, My Data Rights, and OpenNet Africa come to mind. This has resulted in a more inclusive approach to policy development and implementation, ensuring that relevant voices are heard and represented. For this progress to continue, multistakeholder partnerships must remain inclusive, with policies shaped by the expertise and input of affected communities.

What are some of the most promising innovations, best practices, and initiatives that are contributing to the expansion of Internet freedom and digital rights in Africa?

The question of what innovations, best practices, and initiatives are contributing to the expansion of Internet freedom and digital rights in Africa is quite significant and needs its own book. There are a number of promising initiatives that are shaping the landscape of Internet freedom and digital rights in Africa. For instance, community networks have emerged as a powerful tool that empowers local communities to create their own connectivity solutions.

Besides, digital literacy programs play a vital role in equipping citizens with the necessary skills to navigate the online world safely. Moreover, there are dynamic partnerships between governments, civil society, and tech industry players that are fostering robust conversations on policy development, ensuring a multi-stakeholder approach. There are several initiatives contributing to the expansion of Internet freedom and digital rights in Africa, and some of the notable ones include (the list is not exhaustive in any way):

- **Africa Internet Rights Alliance (AIRA)** is a network of civil society organizations that aims to protect and promote digital rights throughout the African continent. Its primary objective is to advocate for policies that safeguard online freedoms and privacy.
- **AfChix**, led by Dorcas Muthoni, is a platform that connects African women in tech with each other and the resources they need to gain knowledge and skills about technology to improve their lives. The organization empowers women to be active contributors to technology policy discussions, thereby promoting diversity and gender inclusivity in digital rights advocacy.
- **The Africa Innovation Mradi**, a Mozilla-led initiative, promotes innovation models grounded in the unique needs of users in the African continent. The program is exploring and developing new technology and products by establishing a network of partners and building a community to support these models. Its focus on strengthening local innovation ecosystems in the Global Majority, building products for real life, and movement building is making an indelible mark on the tech policy and digital rights field.
- **The Freedom Online Coalition** is a group of countries deeply committed to the human rights and fundamental freedoms proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As a proactive coalition, members work closely to coordinate their diplomatic efforts and engage with civil society and the private sector to support Internet freedom, including free expression, association, assembly, and privacy online. As a result, they have ensured that Internet freedom issues are on the international policy agenda, driving concrete policy changes and outcomes through diplomatic coordination, shaping global norms, and multistakeholder collaboration.
- **The State of Internet Freedom in Africa** is a thought leadership series produced annually since 2014 by CIPESA. It remains a key reference point on key issues concerning digital rights and the digital society and economy.
- **The African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms** is a pan-African initiative launched in 2014 to promote human rights online in Africa. It is a response to the region's clear need for a rights-based approach to Internet policy. The text of the Declaration is based on existing human rights principles, and a coalition of 23 organizations and numerous individuals (the Coalition) are using it as an advocacy tool to promote and apply human rights standards and principles of openness in Internet policy in their national contexts.

What are some of the emerging threats or pressing challenges to Internet freedom in Africa, and how can we stay ahead of them?

Emerging threats and pressing challenges to Internet freedom in Africa present complex issues that demand our attention. These challenges encompass a range of issues, including online censorship, cyberattacks, regulatory gaps and inconsistencies, and a multitude of factors complicating the Internet freedom landscape. One of the foremost concerns is the increasing online censorship, which poses a significant threat to the very essence of Internet freedom.

Content blocking, misinformation, and enforcing restrictions are tools used to stifle freedom of expression and access to information. These practices erode the foundations of a free and open Internet. Moreover, the continent is facing a rising wave of cyberattacks targeting critical infrastructure. These attacks can disrupt essential services, compromise data security, and lead to economic and social consequences. Addressing this growing threat is imperative to ensure a secure digital environment. The rapid pace of technological advancements often outpaces the development of regulatory frameworks, creating potential gaps and inconsistencies in digital rights protection. This regulatory lag poses a challenge in adapting to evolving threats - and opportunities. Inconsistencies and constraints in enforcement across countries further complicate the regulatory landscape, hindering the promotion of Internet freedom.

Two specific issues warrant detailed attention:

- Online harassment and hate speech. Unfortunately, the digital space has become a breeding ground for hate speech, bullying, and harassment. These behaviours can target individuals based on their identity, leading to silencing and psychological harm. Effective reporting mechanisms, strict enforcement of policies, and awareness campaigns are essential to counteract this issue. -
- Digital divide. Unequal access to the Internet creates a digital divide, limiting the ability of marginalised communities to enjoy their rights online fully. This lack of access to technology and digital literacy creates inequalities in participation and access to information. Addressing the underlying causes of digital exclusion, including economic, social, political, and cultural factors, is crucial. Technical solutions alone will not bridge these divides, necessitating multi-sectoral initiatives that promote digital inclusion.

To effectively address the challenges, we need to adopt a multi-faceted strategy that includes: advocating for robust legal and policy frameworks that encourage governments to enact and enforce laws safeguarding digital rights and promoting freedom of expression; promoting digital literacy among users, empowering them with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate the digital landscape safely and critically evaluate online information; and, collaborating with international organisations and other countries to tackle cross-border threats and promote global standards for Internet freedom.

How can we build trust, promote partnership, and enhance regional collaboration among different African stakeholders in the Internet governance ecosystem, including governments, inter-governmental bodies, civil society, industry, media, and academia?

Building trust and fostering collaboration among stakeholders is crucial to achieving Internet freedom. Dialogue platforms that are open and transparent, such as regular multi-stakeholder forums and roundtable discussions, including initiatives such as the Digital Rights and Inclusion Forum (DRIF) and the Forum on Internet Freedom in Africa (FIFAfrica), serve as vital arenas where diverse voices can be heard. These platforms help to foster trust and collaboration by allowing stakeholders to engage in meaningful conversations, share insights, and work together to shape policies and practices.

To enhance collaboration and build trust, involving under-represented and marginalised groups and investing in capacity building is essential. This investment helps to improve understanding of Internet -related public policy issues and the intricacies of Internet governance institutions and processes. Capacity-building initiatives are particularly beneficial for stakeholders from developing countries, enabling them to engage more actively and meaningfully in Internet governance at various levels. An exemplary capacity-building initiative is the African Internet Governance School, which equips stakeholders with the knowledge and skills to navigate the complex landscape of Internet policy issues.

Collaboration and trust-building are not one-time efforts but long-term commitments. Stakeholders value partners who demonstrate sustained dedication to achieving shared goals. At Meta, we recognise the importance of collaboration and trust-building in developing our content policies. We have established a structured engagement methodology centered around inclusiveness, expertise, and transparency. Gathering stakeholder input is fundamental to refining our Facebook Community Standards and Instagram Community Guidelines. Our policies are shaped by feedback from community representatives and a diverse array of Facebook and Instagram users. We actively seek input from experts to ensure that our policies are well-informed and balanced.

How can we ensure that marginalized communities, such as women, youth, the elderly and people with disabilities are included in efforts to promote Internet freedom in Africa?

Marginalised communities are already making a significant impact in advocating for human rights online. The critical question for us is: how can we amplify and support their efforts effectively? While the Internet has the potential to empower these groups, it can also exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities, especially for the most vulnerable. As we witness widespread digitalisation, these inequalities become even more pronounced. Therefore, promoting Internet freedom must go hand in hand with addressing these disparities to ensure everyone benefits from the Internet.

It is essential to recognise that disparities in Internet access cut across various demographics and abilities. The digital divide encompasses disparities in geography, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and the challenges faced by people with disabilities. These multifaceted digital divides persist, preventing many, especially marginalised communities, from fully enjoying the benefits of Internet access.

To address this, achieving inclusivity requires a deliberate and concerted effort. Inclusivity isn't just a passive outcome or a box-ticking exercise. It demands proactive measures to ensure diverse perspectives and voices are not just present but heard and valued. Also, we must focus on both structural and systemic changes and individual actions and behaviours. This entails creating policies and frameworks that actively promote inclusivity and equity while fostering a culture of respect and openness. Diverse representation alone isn't enough; ensuring that these often unheard voices have a meaningful impact is crucial.

Additionally, collaborating with local organisations working directly with marginalised groups can lead to more contextually relevant solutions. These organisations often deeply understand these communities' unique challenges and needs. By forming partnerships, we can leverage their expertise to design and implement initiatives that make a difference.

It is essential to recognise that disparities in Internet access cut across various demographics and abilities.

It is vital to understand that diversity alone cannot guarantee inclusivity. Inclusivity requires acknowledging power differentials, actively dismantling barriers, addressing biases, and eliminating systemic obstacles. It is about creating an environment where everyone can participate fully and meaningfully, regardless of their background or identity.

KICTANet
The Power of Communities

Dr. Grace
Githaiga

CEO and Convenor,
KICTANet

What motivated you to become an advocate for Internet freedom in Africa, and how did you get started?

I ended up in this field just by default. I had worked as a media personality and supported communities to develop community radio stations and resource centres in East Africa. The work entailed resource mobilisation, programme design, capacity building, and lobbying and advocacy for community broadcasting to be recognised as a third sector in broadcasting. These efforts paid off, and I took a sabbatical and went to the University of Maryland, US as a Humprey Fulbright Fellow.

When I returned home, I felt I was at a crossroad in that I wanted new challenges but wasn't sure what they were or what they would look like. And so, I started chatting with people and signalling my availability for conferences, meetings, or part-time gigs. It was around this time that the then-founding Convenor of KICTANet, Alice Munyua, invited me to participate in a study titled "Women and the Dark Side of ICTs." I was familiar with KICTANet and had occasionally attended events, but I was not exactly involved. I accepted the invitation to participate in the study and, from then on, took time to learn the issues in ICT through undertaking courses offered by Diplo and the Central European University.

I am inspired by KICTANet's work, which has significantly shaped ICT policies and regulations in Kenya. My work with KICTANet has greatly contributed to the promotion of digital rights in Kenya through policy advocacy, awareness campaigns, capacity building, and public participation in the policy-making process.

What progress have you seen in the expansion of Internet freedom in Africa over the past ten years?

Over the past ten years, there has been a tremendous increase in Africa's access to the Internet. There are more populations with mobile phones. Mobile phones have allowed more people to access the Internet. In addition, the emergence of mobile money has been a game changer in that ordinary people are now transacting through mobile money and getting financially empowered through loans and ownership of bank accounts by unbanked populations.

Other areas have been the emergence of social media, which has allowed unprecedented expression by citizens on various issues. In addition, the media and government have communication channels on different social media handles, through which they articulate issues for the public that may have been missed by the traditional media channels.

In addition, the development and protection of ICT infrastructure is now key since governments have moved several services online and the public is increasingly using online services. Also, the different stakeholders, from government and businesses to civil society, are now accepting the need to embrace multistakeholder approaches, particularly when it comes to ICT policies.

What are some of the most promising innovations, best practices, and initiatives that are contributing to the expansion of Internet freedom and digital rights in Africa?

There are several initiatives that are contributing to the expansion of Internet freedom, and here I list three of them. One of the promising ones that will allow for populations, especially the marginalised get connected is Community Networks, which can be especially useful in places with poor infrastructure and in places where business does not make economic sense. Another one is that of fintech, which allows for the economic empowerment of populations.

Safe and secure communication tools such as encrypted messaging applications now protect users' privacy and the safety of online communication. In my opinion, apps such as Signal and Telegram have grown in popularity across the continent and are giving confidence to users. Organizations like KICTANet have been at the forefront in building the capacity of selected populations (women, persons with disabilities, farmers, youth in informal settlements, etc.) on digital security and cyber hygiene. This way, people are getting confident in how to navigate the digital world safely

What are some of the emerging threats or pressing challenges to Internet freedom in Africa, and how can we stay ahead of them?

With the increase in Internet Freedom in Africa, several challenges have emerged. Three of them come to mind:

Concerns about digital privacy have grown in tandem with rising Internet usage. Data protection and surveillance issues have gained attention, sparking debate over the need for stricter privacy rules.

Fake news and misinformation erode public trust and, in some instances, instigate violence. The danger also lies in where naive citizens who have no fact-checking skills tend to believe and trust in the fake news, and when they find out the truth, they get disappointed by the Internet for 'lying to them'.

Cybercrimes, in particular through mobile money for digitally illiterate populations are on the rise. As digital adoption grows, so does the risk of cyberattacks. The digital landscape's overall security continues to experience and be undermined by emerging threats. This is especially worrying considering that there are more young users (school children), older populations, and non-ICT users utilizing the Internet on a daily basis.

When it comes to staying ahead of some of these challenges, there is a need to promote media literacy and critical thinking, as well as assist fact-checking organisations, to aid in the fight against the dissemination of misleading information. Additionally, building solid cybersecurity frameworks, educating people about online security, and encouraging collaboration among governments, the commercial sector, and civil society can all help to improve the digital landscape.

How can we build trust, promote partnership, and enhance regional collaboration among different African stakeholders in the Internet governance ecosystem, including governments, inter-governmental bodies, civil society, industry, media, and academia?

Building trust, fostering partnerships, and strengthening regional coordination among various African players in the Internet governance ecosystem are critical for fostering a healthy and inclusive digital environment. Here are some approaches:

There is a need to encourage active multistakeholder participation in decision-making processes from all relevant stakeholders, and ensure that no voice is silenced. This is also to ensure that choices are made in a transparent and inclusive manner.

There is a need to encourage regular and open dialogue among stakeholders including governments, intergovernmental organisations, civil society, industry, media, and academia. This way, there is the creation of discussion spaces where different points of view can be shared and heard, generating a sense of inclusiveness and understanding.

There is a need for inclusive policy processes. It is advisable to include representatives from all stakeholder groups in the development of Internet governance policies and regulations. This ensures that policies are balanced and equitable and take into account the ecosystem's different demands and concerns.

Overall, trust and collaboration are continual processes that necessitate attention, patience, and commitment from all parties involved. Prioritising the greater good and collaborating towards a shared vision of a more inclusive and responsible Internet governance ecosystem is critical.

How can we ensure that marginalized communities, such as women, youth, people with disabilities, and marginalised groups, are included in efforts to promote Internet freedom in Africa?

We must be deliberate, intentional, and conscious of the need to carry everyone along. We must remember that all citizens matter and need to enjoy digital dividends.

We need to push for dependable and efficient infrastructure that will allow for the expansion of Internet access for individuals across the continent. We must, therefore, support policy frameworks that will promote community networks.

Women and girls must be empowered through support from donors and government projects that enable them to have access to and use the Internet as a tool for personal and economic development. Training women in digital safety and security should be mainstreamed in such projects to safeguard their digital rights. Funding and support should be provided to civil society organisations that are promoting digital rights and freedoms.

Overall, essential digital rights such as free expression, privacy, and policy transparency need to be protected. And finally, this show to promote Internet freedom in Africa must stay on the road no matter what!

INTERNET
SANSFRONTIÈRES

Julie
Owono

Executive Director,
Internet Sans Frontières
(Internet Without Borders)

What motivated you to become an advocate for Internet freedom in Africa, and how did you get started?

I think my personal story. I was a younger woman in 2010 who was an expatriate/immigrant living in France. I suddenly realised that an incredible tool such as the Internet, social media, and blogging specifically, provided an opportunity for me as a young African woman to tell my side of the story. I was based in a foreign country, which has a complicated relationship with my country of origin due to colonial history, etc.

So, for me, having a platform like the Internet in general and social media was a way to say I'm not in the margins, I am part of this world, my voice matters and my opinion matters. My opinions can help the world to be a better place. I got involved in activism for free expression online because I wanted to ensure persons who look like me, could think the same things and tell themselves, yes, here is a tool where freedom is a principal and restrictions are the exception, so I can express myself and see the change that I want.

What progress have you seen in the expansion of Internet freedom in Africa over the past ten years?

Despite the general environment particularly with regard to Internet shutdowns e.g., in Gabon, Senegal, and my own country Cameroon, which has a bad record for long Internet shutdowns in Africa. Despite this grim image and context, I am very happy with the progress that has been made.

More people are online, but the Internet is still expensive, and it's still a luxury for many around the world including on the African continent. There are many initiatives by governments, international agencies, development agencies, companies, or organizations, to close the digital divide and to advocate for the reduction of Internet access costs. Despite the fact that the Internet still remains a luxury for many, there has been huge progress in terms of cost reduction compared to 14 years ago when I started advocacy in the digital rights space.

More people are online, and this is why we are seeing political developments that we've seen in the past few years. Examples include civil society and citizens being more vocal about what they are not happy about, especially during elections. The inflation of Internet shutdowns and censorship is actually a sign that people have more avenues to speak. So the fact that people have more avenues to speak means that some governments, especially the repressive ones, have no other means to silence populations other than by completely shutting off the Internet.

This is counterproductive. We're seeing that the more shutdowns there are, the more political uprisings there are.

In summary, we have seen the Internet and Internet access in general bring in a lot of progress when it comes to freedom of expression on the continent. Hence, the aggression of repressive regimes towards the Internet and platforms where people have the freedom to express whatever they want. So there's progress and I think we're increasingly getting to a space where we will have a democratic and safe digital environment in Africa.

What are some of the most promising innovations, best practices, and initiatives that are contributing to the expansion of Internet freedom and digital rights in Africa?

One of the innovations is the solidarity that the Internet allows. For so long, the African continent was artificially separated, first of all with the artificial borders that we see in our countries today, and also the divisions along ethnic lines that have been exploited by local and international bad actors to further divide the continent and its population.

What we see is that the Internet and social media platforms e.g., TikTok, Instagram, etc., are spaces where Africans can have rallying cries and can freely express solidarity for one another or for our different countries. I'm always heartened to see people in South Africa, for example, being outraged by the Internet shutdown in Gabon. This would have never happened before the Internet. So I think that solidarity, that ability to bond and to collectively organize to achieve better aims, is very interesting, probably not innovation per se, but it is a kind of historic innovation, if you will.

In terms of technical innovations, I'm always amazed to see how much Africans, in general, are resilient in the face of a fast-changing digital environment. We're seeing, for instance, more discussions and innovations because of the fact that we have much to overcome. So people are using innovation to fast-track the changes we want to see and the changes to the difficulties that we see.

I think that the conversations about AI had started on the continent among citizens way before our governments - which I don't think have actually started really taking a serious look at AI. I'm always heartened to see that citizens understand innovation much better and see the benefits of innovation much better and in advance of their rulers and leading officials.

I'm very curious about initiatives in the gaming space and in the artificial intelligence space, but also in spaces that we're barely starting to talk about. Specifically about the Metaverse, which is not mainstream yet, but we are already seeing communities on the African continent getting together to reflect on what these types of immersive spaces can bring about for our digital spaces in Africa.

What are some of the emerging threats or pressing challenges to Internet freedom in Africa, and how can we stay ahead of them?

The most pressing challenge at the moment is related to content and how content is being governed on the Internet in general, but more specifically on platforms that host user-generated content. This is a more pressing issue because of the reaction of governments given the increased and targeted social media blockings e.g. in Senegal, where Tiktok was blocked recently (in October 2023). This is a sign that repressive governments will want to try to control the conversation, something that they cannot do anymore because of the Internet and its nature.

This is important because if we interest ourselves in these issues, we can talk about hate speech, disinformation, and other harmful content, and how to address them. If we don't discuss these, others will discuss and define them for the African continent. As African CSOs and citizens, we should seize the opportunity to define, in our own words, what the fight against these types of information will mean.

We are at the risk of letting governments do it but when they do it, they censor and block platforms and the Internet and do whatever they can to stop the conversation about what's going on in their countries from happening. So, having strong civil society networks and infrastructure in Africa that are well-equipped with the knowledge to discuss the challenges related to content governance is of the utmost urgency. Equipping means understanding the concepts, of what trust and safety is in Africa, and how content moderation works, among others.

One other way to address this, which is something that I'm particularly working on at Internet Without Borders, is how to bridge the knowledge gap. The gap in trust and safety on the African continent. Not many of us are aware of the complexities of what trust and safety entails. So, one of my endeavours with Internet Without Borders, while being based here in the United States, is to make sure that we can bridge that knowledge gap by putting more civil society actors from Africa based in Africa in conversation with people in the United States and specifically in the Silicon Valley. We have to understand that there is a kind of shift and be aware of the power dynamics in Silicon Valley.

Our aim is to make sure more organizations can come here and meet the companies that are part of the power dynamics and also meet government officials who now have representatives in Silicon Valley, e.g., the Danish Tech Ambassador, the EU Tech envoy, etc.
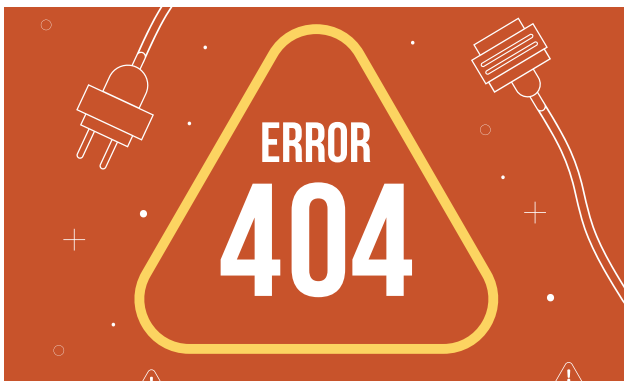
How can we build trust, promote partnership, and enhance regional collaboration among different African stakeholders in the Internet governance ecosystem, including governments, inter-governmental bodies, civil society, industry, media, and academia?

I think that comes from acknowledging our limitations. The first thing that governments in Africa need to acknowledge is that they don't know anything about technology. I think it must be said, very clearly. They have zero clue about technology, and I say this really with confidence because it's based on knowledge. I'm sure some would not disagree with this assessment. There is a lack of knowledge about how technology works, and the Internet shutdown trend is exactly proof of that e.g. Gabon is a very good example. Former President Ali Bongo who led a government that shut down the Internet was the one now asking for help from the international community using the Internet, to address the coup that was ongoing.[1]

We also have to acknowledge our limitations. As a civil society actor, I'm not always aware and abreast of the safety challenges that our countries are facing. It's true, and I have to acknowledge that. I also have to acknowledge as a civil society actor that there is bad content and there are bad actors everywhere - in governments and also in private entities. Also, private companies need to acknowledge that they don't know Africa. Africa is a very complex continent, with a very complex history and with very complex dynamics. There is no way you can understand that while sitting in Silicon Valley.

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1   *Gabon's Ali Bongo Ondimba Calls 'on the World to Make Noise' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJyiz7nz6H4*

I'm not saying that all the companies are sitting in Silicon Valley, they do have African representatives. But how much of these African representatives have actually, a word in the global strategy of their companies? How are these African teams being listened to, and are their perspectives factored into the strategies developed by those tech companies? These are very important issues to address. These are very humble perspectives that we should make sure to have, and we do not have that now. ISF always advocates for having all these stakeholders take the first necessary step of sitting around the table together and discussing our vulnerabilities, with our humility, all these very complex issues from our different perspectives. So that is one thing that I would like to see more.

We've tried to do that in Cameroon. For instance, in 2018 we were able to create a safe space and this round table for multi stakeholder engagement on issues related to *shutdowns and content moderation.*[2] We were able to avert an Internet shutdown in the country despite the fact that the country was having a very contentious presidential election.

How can we ensure that marginalized communities, such as women, youth, people with disabilities, and marginalised groups, are included in efforts to promote Internet freedom in Africa?

Everyone should sit around the table. I'm tired of seeing the same usual suspects at our conferences. I want to see more of the public side that we're talking about here. I know CIPESA is one of the organizations doing a lot to make sure that Internet governance and the digital rights conversations are as inclusive as possible. We need to continue and to do even more. We need to make sure that organizations of street sellers or blind Internet users, for instance, are part of the conferences that we're organizing and the conversations that we are having. I'm not sure such organizations exist, but I'm just saying that we should go the extra mile to reach out beyond the digital rights community because the Internet is for all. it's not just for digital rights advocates and organizations.

I think young people have mastered the understanding of how to advocate using the Internet. They have a clue or two to teach us. And so I would like to see more exchanges of knowledge. We can bring in the history part but also the more technical aspects with regard to what are digital rights and what are human rights online. I think this knowledge is probably not very broadly shared among our youth. In exchange, I think we would need more of the knowledge of younger African citizens on making good use of the different platforms we have, to build strong advocacy that raises awareness beyond the borders of their countries, the continent and beyond.

We have a lot to learn from young people. They also have to learn a lot about their rights and their duties as users and citizens of the Internet. We need to have more conversations about their safety online. Whate type of content do they see and when there's something wrong, do they have channels or can we provide them with channels to make sure that their safety issues are being addressed properly? I think these could be great avenues for collaboration. Thanks, CIPESA for this incredible and important initiative. Thanks for the opportunity.

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2   *Cameroon: dangerous speech online, fake news and digital rights symposium - internet sans frontières*
     https://internetwithoutborders.org/cameroon-dangerous-speech-online-fake-news-and-digital-rights-symposium/

POLLICY

Neema Iyer
Founder,
Pollicy

What motivated you to become an advocate for Internet freedom in Africa, and how did you get started?

My motivation to become an advocate for Internet freedom in Africa stemmed from my experience attending my first Forum on Internet Freedom in Africa (FIFAfrica) event in Johannesburg. Prior to this, I had been working in a technical field alongside telecommunications. This event truly opened my eyes to the importance of digital rights in our rapidly evolving digital landscape. A few years later, I became acquainted with the concept of the feminist Internet, which further deepened my interest in the field of global feminist digital rights.

This pivotal experience ignited my passion for advocating for Internet freedom in Africa, as it highlighted the critical need to address issues related to online rights, access, and inclusion. It made me realize that promoting digital rights is not just a technical matter but a fundamental aspect of ensuring a fair and inclusive digital future for all Africans.

What progress have you seen in the expansion of Internet freedom in Africa over the past ten years?

Over the past decade, there has been significant progress in the expansion of Internet freedom in Africa. One of the most notable changes has been the increased awareness among the African population about the importance of Internet freedom. As the Internet has become more integrated into everyday activities, more people have come to understand that there are forces at play trying to limit online freedoms. They have also recognized the economic, social, and political opportunities that digital spaces offer.

A positive trend is that Africa is now well-represented at global events and discussions related to Internet freedom and digital rights. This signifies a growing engagement and interest in the region in shaping the future of the Internet. Additionally, there has been a proliferation of initiatives and organizations in different African countries dedicated to advancing Internet freedom and digital rights. These initiatives include advocacy groups, research centres, and grassroots movements, all working towards a common goal. Successful advocacy campaigns have also played a crucial role in preserving Internet freedom in Africa. These campaigns have raised awareness about various threats to online rights and have mobilized communities to take action in defence of their digital freedoms.

In summary, the past decade has seen positive developments in terms of awareness, engagement, and the establishment of initiatives to promote Internet freedom in Africa. Yet, the dynamic nature of the digital landscape demands ongoing efforts to counter emerging threats and ensure that the Internet remains a fair and accessible space for all Africans. There is still significant work for the digital rights community to do!

What are some of the most promising innovations, best practices, and initiatives that are contributing to the expansion of Internet freedom and digital rights in Africa?

One of the most promising avenues for expanding Internet freedom and digital rights in Africa lies in raising awareness among the population about the many benefits of the Internet. As more individuals come to understand how the Internet can positively impact their lives through economic empowerment, social connections, and access to information, they become increasingly attuned to the need to preserve Internet freedom and access. This awareness-building approach serves as a foundational element in the broader efforts to secure digital rights across the continent.

A particularly impactful strategy involves the use of entertainment and educational programs, including games, that have the potential to reach a wide and diverse audience. This approach recognizes the power of engagement and the role it plays in conveying the significance of Internet freedom.

What are some of the emerging threats or pressing challenges to Internet freedom in Africa, and how can we stay ahead of them?

It is important to note that while progress has been made, challenges persist. One notable challenge is the increasing sophistication of tools used to suppress Internet freedom. Governments and other actors have become more adept at implementing online censorship and surveillance, making it essential to stay vigilant and adaptive in the fight for Internet freedom.

How can we build trust, promote partnership, and enhance regional collaboration among different African stakeholders in the Internet governance ecosystem, including governments, inter-governmental bodies, civil society, industry, media, and academia?

We can do so by breaking down silos and fostering open and candid discussions. By dismantling these barriers and facilitating dialogue, we create a conducive environment for cooperation. Forums like FIFAfrica are particularly important in this regard and we need to have many similar national and regional engagements. Oftentimes, these events may only invite other CSOs or other academics. Open and candid discussions allow stakeholders to openly share their perspectives, concerns, and priorities.

This transparency fosters trust and mutual understanding, enabling participants to work collectively towards common goals. Multistakeholder forums and regular conferences provide neutral spaces for these discussions, encouraging diverse voices to contribute to Internet governance decisions. Furthermore, we need to expand who we invite to the table beyond just digital rights academics, activists, or government departments but rather think about how organisations working on health, education, or justice should also be keenly involved in these discussions.

How can we ensure that marginalized communities, such as women, youth, people with disabilities, and marginalised groups, are included in efforts to promote Internet freedom in Africa?

To ensure that marginalized communities, including women, youth, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups, are actively included in efforts to promote Internet freedom in Africa, a range of thoughtful strategies can be employed. These approaches are designed to remove barriers and foster a more inclusive environment.

Firstly, providing financial support in the form of stipends can help marginalized individuals overcome the economic challenges associated with attending events. These funds can cover expenses such as travel, accommodation, and registration fees, ensuring that financial constraints do not hinder participation.

Additionally, childcare facilities can be made available at events and conferences to support the attendance of parents, particularly women. This provision allows participants to fully engage in discussions and activities without concerns about caregiving responsibilities.

Hosting events in community settings instead of expensive hotels can make them more accessible and comfortable for marginalized communities. Familiar and community-based venues can lower barriers to attendance.

Creating physically accessible venues is crucial for individuals with disabilities. This includes providing ramps, elevators, sign language interpreters, and materials in accessible formats to ensure that everyone can participate fully.

Expanding the format of sessions beyond traditional panels and talks to include workshops, interactive discussions, and hands-on activities can engage participants from various backgrounds and learning styles, encouraging active involvement.

Lastly, offering workshops on public speaking, workshop management, and leadership skills can empower individuals from marginalized communities to take on active roles in Internet freedom initiatives. These skill-building sessions boost confidence and expand the pool of potential leaders and advocates.

By implementing these inclusive measures, we can ensure that marginalized communities in Africa have the opportunity to not only be part of but also actively contribute to efforts promoting Internet freedom. This inclusivity enriches the diversity of voices and perspectives in the conversation, leading to more effective and comprehensive solutions that address the unique challenges faced by these communities in the digital era.

Dr. Tabani
Moyo
Regional Director,
Media Institute of
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What motivated you to become an advocate for Internet freedom in Africa, and how did you get started?

I have always been an advocate for human rights, particularly freedom of expression and the media. Over the years, the Internet has become central to how we communicate and access information. So, being an advocate for Internet freedom was a natural progression in terms of my passions. Access to the Internet is now an enabler for other rights such as access to information and freedom of expression that I have already alluded to above. But with the growth of the Internet, there is a need to emphasise other rights, such as the right to privacy.

What progress have you seen in the expansion of Internet freedom in Africa over the past ten years?

I think the fact that digital rights are now being prioritised at regional forums such as the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) is a testament to the work that has been done in advocacy for Internet freedom. Just recently, digital rights, as key to the realisation and enforcement of human rights on the African continent, were among the thematic focus areas at the 73rd ordinary session of the ACHPR. This prioritisation shows that there has been a rapid expansion in Internet freedom.

However, advocacy on Internet freedom is still nascent in Africa and more work still needs to be done to ensure further expansion. For example, we have seen a flurry of cyber security laws in Southern Africa, which are ostensibly meant to protect Internet users, but in reality, are meant to stifle freedom of expression and freedom of assembly among other rights. Internet shutdowns are still quite commonplace across the whole continent. So, a lot of progress has been made, but more still needs to be done.

What are some of the most promising innovations, best practices, and initiatives that are contributing to the expansion of Internet freedom and digital rights in Africa?

Even under difficult circumstances, we are seeing a lot of great work by the youthful population on the continent. This has been witnessed through innovative interventions. We see these innovations in East Africa, West Africa, and Southern Africa. Literally, in the scope of my work, I have noticed Sub-Saharan Africa, where I do most of my work, is coming of age.

Disruptions and shutdown of Internet services remain one of the most critical challenges facing the continent. Further, the cost and access to the platforms remain a challenge, yet we have seen structured responses through court challenges to shutdowns, and the launch of circumvention tools and mechanisms to keep the speed of the net in check. Although we are at different stages on the innovative growth trajectory, there is increasing pressure across the continent towards the next wave of AI-induced growth to be localised rather than the importation of technology that struggles with indigenous knowledge systems. This is where we are seeing a lot of experimentation across the continent in the efforts towards providing solutions to this challenge.

What are some of the emerging threats or pressing challenges to Internet freedom in Africa, and how can we stay ahead of them?

Government censorship is a massive threat to Internet freedom. Censorship comes in many forms such as surveillance of users, Internet shutdowns, and cybersecurity laws that infringe on freedom of expression and criminalise defamation and the publication of falsehoods.

Governments will defend surveillance and claim this is for public safety and security. What we must push for is a human rights-based approach to the deployment of surveillance equipment. We must advocate for transparency and accountability where surveillance is being used. We must also insist on judicial oversight. This will ensure that governments do not overstep their bounds.

How can we build trust, promote partnership, and enhance regional collaboration among different African stakeholders in the Internet governance ecosystem, including governments, inter-governmental bodies, civil society, industry, media, and academia?

Regional collaboration is key in any advocacy ecosystem. However, such collaborations and partnerships need to be organic and bring together people and organisations because they share a common cause and passion. There should be equality in the partnerships and members should be able to support each other. Once there is a feeling that one member is a big brother or sister, such collaborations become toxic and do not last.

How can we ensure that marginalized communities, such as women, youth, people with disabilities, and marginalised groups, are included in efforts to promote Internet freedom in Africa?

At the centre of what we do should be the grassroots, we should always have a bottom-up approach, where we seek to address the needs and concerns of the marginalised people. Women, people with disabilities, youth, and marginalised communities should be our guiding compasses in whatever we do.

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Temitope

Executive Director,
TechSocietal

Ogundipe

What motivated you to become an advocate for Internet freedom in Africa, and how did you get started?

I started my journey with a passion for media and for youth. In those days, I was not sure how these merged, but I was interested in youth development and thought digital media was a great means. Then I came across a job advert with an organization empowering young people through digital technologies and I felt that aligned strongly with my passion and skill set, so I applied and joined the organization as its Chief Operating Officer. I was later immersed in the policy side of the conversation within a few months of joining, realizing that if we did not have the right policy environment, it would not be possible for tech and innovation to thrive in the country. About this time too political leaders in the country began to call for restrictions online, realizing the power of the Internet for civic participation and demanding accountability.

What progress have you seen in the expansion of Internet freedom in Africa over the past ten years?

It's been a journey of both good things and not-so-good things. For instance, Internet access has improved greatly in the last 10 years on the continent, but much of the world's unconnected population still lives in Africa. Social media has greatly improved access to information and freedom of expression as well as greater civic and political participation more broadly, but in response there has been a wide spate of Internet shutdowns in African countries and legal frameworks with concerning provisions around mass surveillance and censorship. In 2014, the African Union (AU) Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection adopted a legal framework for addressing cybercrime and data protection in Africa. It took nine years to come into effect, with the 15th ratification by Mauritiana happening on 9th May 2023. So the convention came just in June 2023.

 In 2014, the African Union (AU) Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection adopted a legal framework for addressing cybercrime and data protection in Africa.

What are some of the most promising innovations, best practices, and initiatives that are contributing to the expansion of Internet freedom and digital rights in Africa?

The collaboration happening across organizations on the continent, the networks and coalitions and partnerships developing to address critical issues related to access and rights online, across borders and on a regional level, the exchange of ideas and best practices; I think these are some of the most promising trends I am seeing emerge. I am also seeing a trend in access to funding that is contextual and targeted to support smaller organizations and individual voices from smaller countries or marginalized communities within Africa, such as the Africa Digitals Rights Funds. There needs to be more of those. There are also initiatives developing the talent, skills, and interest for digital rights advocacy in the next generation of lawyers, development experts, or young professionals in the domain of public interest tech more broadly.

How can we build trust, promote partnership, and enhance regional collaboration among different African stakeholders in the Internet governance ecosystem, including governments, inter-governmental bodies, civil society, industry, media, and academia?

The effort has to continue in terms of encouraging dialogue and cooperation, through conferences, forums, summits, etc. Continuing to facilitate those open conversations, knowledge sharing and exchange is crucially important. We must go a step further to ensure that we are not in an echo chamber, preaching to the converted and patting ourselves on the back without doing more to foster relationships with some of the groups that are not traditionally well represented especially in local or regional Internet governance conversations e.g industry, law enforcement or policy-makers. We also need to continue to build the capacity of the most marginalised groups to engage in Internet governance conversations.

How can we ensure that marginalized communities, such as women, youth, people with disabilities, and marginalised groups, are included in efforts to promote Internet freedom in Africa?

We can advance the involvement of marginalised communities in Internet rights and freedoms advocacy efforts by implementing inclusive policies, promoting digital access and literacy, and addressing the discrimination, harassment, and broader harms that these marginalized groups typically encounter online through effective legal frameworks and mechanisms to promote their safety and protect their rights online.

Wafa
Ben-Hassine

Principal, Responsible Technology,
Omidyar Network

What motivated you to become an advocate for Internet freedom in Africa, and how did you get started?

My experience with Internet freedom and Africa was shaped by the revolutions of 2011 in Tunisia. I have always been interested in the Internet as this kind of liminal space in which we could exist in and be shielded from external harms - such as a dictatorship spying on every word you say.n my childhood, we used to say the that the "wall has ears". So, I saw the Internet as something that could offer a space of security, beauty, wonder, and exploration because I had access to many things. I was interested in social media and the Internet as agents to support change or tools that could be used by agents of change.

And that started my interest in Internet freedom. Back in2009, I took an interest in the use of social media during the Iranian Green Revolution, writing a paper about it while I was in college. When the 2011 uprisings happened in Tunisia (the country my parents hail from) I was very much engrossed and taken by everything that had happened. And that really solidified and concretized my idea of the Internet being this really critical tool for social movement.

However, all that has changed, but that was my initial seed. That's what motivated me. And I think at the time, I really focused on what I would say are two sides of the same coin. I focused a lot on freedom of expression online and on anti-censorship online. I really centred a lot of my own concerns with those two elements of browsing the Internet and using the Internet. So that was my big motivation.

What progress have you seen in the expansion of Internet freedom in Africa over the past ten years?

I think there has been a lot of progress, but unfortunately, there has also been a lot of regression. Throughout most of my career in Internet digital rights. I did not have the privilege of focusing my efforts on countries in southern Africa. . Needless to say, our continent is very diverse in terms of the political systems and the geopolitical kind of subtleties and nuances associated with every country and region. The Maghreb region was really challenging.

Some progress I've seen from that time to today in Tunisia is the fact that now, we can express ourselves online without fear – or at least without direct fear of being arrested, detained, or put in jail.

I mentioned regress because I think in some countries, including Tunisia, those democratic gains are being rolled back. A lot of activists, advocates, and artists are putting themselves at risk every time they express themselves online. The window of opportunity for change was very brief.While it led to some gains, those gains are also being rolled back. I believe the most significant advancements in broadening Internet freedom lie primarily in two areas: the enhancement of online freedom of expression, and the effective utilisation of these tools by advocates who have become increasingly adept in their use.

There is kind of this competition in terms of skills and understanding of how the Internet and different emerging technologies work. There's almost like this game of chess or, a tug of war between government actors and civil society advocates. This is because both civil society advocates and governments have learned how to use these technologies. Very smartly, very intelligently, and in critical ways that really help mobilise people. And now we're facing the consequences of launching troll armies and using false information to mislead. Ultimately, I think it is a point of progress, but we always have to keep up, and we always have to keep moving and learning more.

Furthermore, across the African continent, there is a growing consciousness about the digital right to privacy, data protection, and the significance of safeguarding user data. This awareness extends to the point where even those who might seek to diminish privacy rights recognize its importance.So, I think the criticality of it has become something very central, and that's a point of progress because it means that it's being recognized as such. Moreover, even when legislators, companies, or other actors infringe upon that right, it is being acted upon and acknowledged as a violation of human rights. And I think that is really important, not just in Africa, but anywhere in the world. There's increased civil society movement around the topic, and this wasn't the case before anywhere in the world. Many people now understand that your data is also a part of yourself, and you need to protect it. It is a fundamental human right to protect your own privacy.

What are some of the most promising innovations, best practices, and initiatives that are contributing to the expansion of Internet freedom and digital rights in Africa?

It's challenging to ascertain, as many of those best practices appear to have regressed, through no fault of the individuals committed to implementing them. The room for manoeuvrability, particularly in the context of civil society advocacy in Northern Africa and across the continent, seems to have diminished. The civic space has shrunk significantly. One of the best practices is coalition building, which is critical. It's not an innovation, it's not exciting and new, but it is a very critical social and political tool that is used to highlight what unites different groups and what divides them in a transparent and accountable way. So what I mean by that is being able to build coalitions across civil society, organisations that are more "traditional," and those that are more new or novel or innovative.

In many African countries, there are numerous civil society organisations that specialise in distinct areas of advocacy - such as press freedom, online censorship, and women's rights. Historically, these organisations have had challenges talking to each other, especially because some older organisations (some dating from the early 1960s) lack the contemporary methods and human rights perspectives prevalent among newer entities- it's only natural. Consequently, I think coalition building and creating bridges across the different kinds of civil society actors has been a pivotal strategy to work on specific issues or demystify the digital sphere to more traditional organisations.

Then, what traditional organisations bring to the newer civil society is their understanding of the system they operate in. For example, they know who was the head of an advocacy group way back1980, and why there is an issue around that, or that there was a campaign in response to a crackdown. They have all the institutional history, and they can help us understand the landscape and terrain that we're operating in. We can also assist them in understanding newer technologies and how they could be used to both liberate and repress. I think this reciprocal generational exchange is one of the most promising best practices I've seen within the African continent. I would also say the more transparent organizations are, the better it is. You see, these kinds of collaborations flourish when organizations are transparent and open to coalition building among diverse equities and stakeholders.

In terms of innovation, there's a lot happening in cryptocurrency and fintech. However, I don't necessarily view these developments as direct contributors to Internet freedom. They may aid in economic growth, but they don't inherently ensure liberation or protect freedoms, despite the importance of cross-border digital payments in modern economies. But again, while valuable, these advancements don't directly correlate with the concept of Internet freedom.

What are some of the emerging threats or pressing challenges to Internet freedom in Africa, and how can we stay ahead of them?

The operating environment for advocates, which also encompasses researchers, professors, engineers, and anyone aspiring to contribute to Internet freedom, presents significant challenges. These constraints significantly hinder efforts in advancing Internet freedom.

I hope I don't sound like a pessimist–but it's just that the space is so closed, at least in northern Africa. I don't follow all of the countries in Africa as closely as I want to. But ultimately, a common trend is the diminishing civic space, which also affects academia. This constriction hampers our ability to operate flexibly. For instance, if a researcher wants to explore topics like disinformation or troll armies, conducting such studies is exceedingly difficult unless they're affiliated with a Western country or university. This external perspective often leads to research that lacks on-the-ground insights, resembling more of an 'ivory tower' approach rather than engaging with the real-life context

The biggest threat, in my view, lies in the absence of democratic nation-states characterised by accountability, transparency, and the full exercise of citizens' rights.

I'm also at a loss. Ultimately, it's very hard for me to even talk about these things. For example, the situation in Tunisia has deteriorated significantly. Despite our best efforts, there has been such regression that my ability to remain as actively involved as I would like is now questionable. The situation has changed a lot.

The way advocates use social media has also changed. It has always been corporate, about data and the bottom line that these companies are extracting from our usage of their products. Today, our relationship with social media exists independently of everything else. It exists independently of the context of where countries were in the early 2010s. Back then, repressive regimes underestimated the power of the Internet. Civil society advocates understood it and used it as an advantage to get ahead of threats, organise, and elevate marginalised voices to mainstream visibility. Advocates and activists, once operating in obscurity, utilised the Internet to amplify their message and garner mainstream support.I think today that has changed a lot because the relationship that exists between companies and users now exists in the context where governments are very aware of how to use the Internet. In fact, they are using the Internet to repress, So we're in a situation where the complete opposite exists. The only reason a revolution was able to happen in Tunisia was because the regime didn't understand the power of the Internet. They knew of it, but they didn't understand the potential that social media held for social mobilization on the ground, how it translated from being online to offline, and how they linked together. For example, how sharing a video on YouTube of a protest in one part of the country could lead to protests in other parts of the country. They were not able to really capture how it spread like fire, but now they do. So now I think social media can't really be used as an avenue because it is highly surveilled and highly censored. Unfortunately, we see a lot of "fake news" legislation to counter disinformation, but really they are being used to restrict people's right to free expression. You can tell because the legislation itself is not very detailed and is often too broad.

The Internet today has become a vast arena of entertainment and leisure, as opposed to being a tool for meaningful engagement. I know people who really do great work in terms of political action and short TikTok videos. I have mixed views on this. I don't think that you can understand socio-political context through a mere 60-second video or even a five-minute video. But some other people can tell you that these snippets serve as valuable entry points for people who don't know much about politics or who are just starting to ask questions. It's not a black-and-white situation. It's just a question of whether we can utilise such platforms not just for initial engagement but as gateways leading to broader mobilisation, change, and securing greater freedoms.

How can we build trust, promote partnership, and enhance regional collaboration among different African stakeholders in the Internet governance ecosystem, including governments, inter-governmental bodies, civil society, industry, media, and academia?

On trust and safety, I think there are two things here. The first is that oftentimes questions of safety are instrumentalized by governments to censor and repress people and to violate their human rights. For example, "fake news" legislation appears to have a sensible goal, which is to protect users from online manipulation. But what's actually happening is that these are very clumsy and obtusely written laws that do not protect people's safety.

In fact, they just prevent people from sharing content that state authorities deem unpalatable or not good or violating some sort of perceived moral, harm, etc. A great example here could be a case where somebody publishes a campaign for gay pride, and the government censors that because they think it's misinformation, or according to the fake news law, it is fake news. So that's obviously a violation of people's critical rights and fundamental human rights to express who they are and have a campaign.

Second, oftentimes, there's this triangle of relationships between users, companies, and governments. When it comes to questions of trust and safety, at least in Africa, we criticise companies a lot. But, in some cases, we have more of a possibility of talking to a representative of a company than we do a representative of a government. Or there's better trust sometimes because there's so much distrust between activists and their governments that ultimately we take an alternate route by going to the companies and saying, "Hey, look, you need to change your community guidelines or policies to make sure that users are safe."

Imagine a scenario where an ethnic cleansing is on the brink of eruption at the border of two neighbouring countries In such cases, it is unlikely that advocates would approach a government to say "Hey, please watch the information that's travelling on this platform". This is because some governments are literally pushing this conflict in many instances, so they want it to happen. Instead, advocates often turn to the companies managing digital platforms and they say, "Hey, listen, be aware, be cognizant of the fact that this is happening in this region, and if you don't do something about the information travelling through these channels, then people there may lose their lives".

In contrast, the situation in the United States appears quite different. There's some sense of the rule of law that you can hold your representatives accountable or you can talk to them, but you don't necessarily trust the companies. So that's why with trust and safety in particular, I think it just depends on the relationships that users have with states and with companies. This dichotomy really underscores why trust and safety work has to be context-specific. It has to be tailored. It can't just be a one-size-fits-all. It really has to be around what is needed here to protect against loss of life and property, protect against polarization, and protect children from being abused and from all sorts of different harms, while also making sure that we do that in a rights-respecting manner.

Openness and transparency are very important pillars of information sharing and collaboration. I think being in contact and communicating with one another is important. Oftentimes, you have big organizations that cover big regions, that work with local groups on the ground. But I think it would be really useful to have those local groups talk to one another and have different types of meetings or gatherings, where they share their experiences and can learn from them in confidence and in security. This is hard to do. For example, RightsCon happened in Tunis in 2019. I don't think it can happen in Tunisia now. We have to be asking questions about where we host these events, and what are the physical security and safety questions that we have to keep in mind.

Also, how do we prioritize the mental health and well-being of advocates who work in the space? I think a lot of advocates have faced significant trauma around the work that they do in many countries. We need to take care of one another more and also prepare the next generation. Ultimately, I see Internet advocacy as receding and in some cases, maybe it's advancing. But in most places around the world, I think advocacy is receding for a variety of reasons mentioned earlier. TikTok is a potential opening and maybe we can modernize the way we do campaigns and try to use such channels in a smarter way.

How can we ensure that marginalized communities, such as women, youth, people with disabilities, and marginalised groups, are included in efforts to promote Internet freedom in Africa?

We need to be able to engage organisations that are working directly on the issues and with marginalised communities. They are the experts on their populations and their challenges. Specifically, I think we shouldn't presume to know and understand what they go through. Coalition building with traditional groups, including those representing people with disabilities, youth and other marginalised groups is essential. We should go to them and talk to them and actively include them in the things that we do.

If we lack connections with groups working on freedom of expression and disability rights, then it means there's some work that needs to be done - proactive outreach. It means that we need to go to that group and meet with them separately, have many conversations, and then involve them in different roundtables and conversations about legislation and having their voice be really heard. In some cases, organisations that represent other groups that are not focused on digital rights often have stronger and more solid standing in the society in which they operate than digital rights groups do. So, there's something to be learned there. For example, there are many organizations in Africa that are very strong that work on disability that have existed for a long time and we really have to reach out to them and talk to them and build coalitions with them and learn from them.

Finally, I would just say that we're at a crossroads right now in terms of what we can and cannot achieve when it comes to Internet freedom in Africa. It's vital to think strategically about involving youth and the next generation in this work.. People born in 2012 may not have the lived experience of revolutions, yet they are already active on platforms like TikTok and Instagram at age 12. It is our responsibility to pass on our institutional knowledge, our history and lessons from previous generations, and work together as a community in relation to one another. Things are very challenging at the moment and we have to also be kind and gracious with one another.

The upcoming generation is poised to redefine our landscape. Their norms for Internet use, practices, and even their perceptions of privacy, differ markedly from ours. It's crucial that we devote more attention to and engage in dialogue with them. This is not only vital for advancing Internet freedom but also for the overall well-being of our societies. Although we may not be in the most optimistic period, it's important to remember that even in challenging times, there are opportunities to shape a brighter future. Focusing on the youth, in my view, is a wise strategy to ensure that the lessons we've learned are not forgotten but rather passed on and built upon.

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