

## FOREWORD

### **Plenty of Media Freedom gains in Africa**

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The need to critique laws governing media freedom in Africa is one topic that is currently gaining ground following recent government efforts, across the continent, to curtail freedom of speech and freedom of press. As citizens have jumped on to the social media bandwagon as a platform for potential political emancipation, governments across the world, have responded with harsher laws that are aimed at flashing out online dissent. Social media tax has been introduced in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania to “curb gossip” with critics arguing decisions by authorities in the East African countries would have an overwhelming effect of freedom of speech. It is from this background that editors Lai Oso, Rotimi W. Olatunji, Dele Odunlami and Kola Adesina deserve nothing but praise for putting together this important and timely collection that analyses a topical issue that mostly affects many Africans and other citizens of the Global South.

The 'Arab Spring' uprisings of 2010-11 demonstrated the strengths and weaknesses of digital activism. As many leaders in North Africa were forced to resign in the wake of the nonstop protests, many African leaders realized they had to come up with clever ways of muzzling freedom of expression and speech. The Internet, after all, had played an important role in helping put the message across that the end was nigh for many Arab leaders. Repressive and authoritarian governments in Africa knew that one way to extend their longevity in power was to stifle digitally-based mobilization and dissention. Internet shutdowns for example have become a common occurrence in Africa. From Chad to Sudan, DR Congo to Mali and Ethiopia to Zimbabwe, African governments have been accused of blocking Internet access and digital dissidents have been detained en masse. Several tactics, including throttling, which restricts internet traffic to targeted sites under the facade that the service is slow, thereby giving limited access to those sites, became a common tactic for African leaders keen on controlling what citizens see, hear or share.

As shown in several chapters in this book, repressive regimes have not always been successful in taming the digital dissent. Former Sudan President Omar al-Bashir was overthrown in 2019 following a spate of large-scale protests that demanded his ejection from power. As I write, social media-backed protests are currently hogging the limelight in Mali, where demonstrators are calling for the resignation of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, who they accuse of failing to stop rising jihadist and inter-communal violence across the country. In Zimbabwe, Emmerson Mnangagwa, who replaced longtime leader Robert Mugabe in 2017, is also facing fierce online protests amid tension caused by rising inflation and rampant unemployment.

In spite of the recorded gains, social media activism has been shown to have plenty of loopholes. Research by Mutsvairo (2016, 2020; Mutsvairo and Ronning, 2020) has shown that not everyone who is digitally connected is interested in digital activism. Digital inequalities also permit other Africans from taking part in online activism. African governments have also reacted with heavy-handedness, discouraging potential activists from participating in digital activism. Activists, particularly whistleblowers seem to face the full wrath of repressiveness and punity. However, the Julian Assange and Edward Snowden cases show us that even in the West, whistleblowers are not treated with kids' gloves.

Media freedom that caters for people of Africa, should be defined and anchored from within the dictates of African ontological experiences and thoughts. Media freedom should not be dictated by external forces as Africans have the capacity to shape their own future paths. While it is important to have international partners, and again while free press is indispensable in a democratic society, foreigners should not define and decide on what constitutes 'freedom.' Besides, it is not an objective of every African country to embrace democracy. Equally, African governments that choose the path of dictatorship instead of protecting their citizen's rights should know that their time is up. Once their reputation gets soiled, it becomes nearly impossible for some of these leaders to retain any form of legitimacy. As citizens take to social media to protest, they should also be aware of some of the most notable limitations of digital activism, which are discussed in several chapters of this significant collection.

It is a pipe dream for many in Africa that media firms operate freely without government control, restriction, or censorship. Violations of freedom of expression, including freedom of the media, remain rampant. These should however be dealt with from within the confines of national African laws. Some civil society organizations championing media freedom should remain active given their work eventually ensures that media freedom continues to play a pivotal role particularly in so far as the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms is concerned. However, as stated, globalized notions of media freedom should be critiqued if not rejected. The dominant discourses of media freedom emerging from the West should not be forced upon African societies. Cultural or religious differences are a reality, which however should not be used as an excuse to limit press freedom. Freedom of expression should not be curtailed so as to meet increasing sensitivities of various cultural, political and religious groups. Instead, Africans should be able to choose which laws work for their respective contexts with diversity of ideas encouraged. African journalists need to be supported in their daily reporting endeavors, but they also need to be responsible.

### **Bibliography**

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