Two Sides of the Same Coin: Digital Authoritarianism and Press (Un)Freedom in Africa

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Abstract

Adopting a mixed method of interrogative review of literature, secondary data and case study of a digital legislation employed in jailing a TikToker in Uganda, this study critically evaluated the prevalence of digital authoritarian tactics in Africa since 2014. These repressive measures are not limited to digital spaces but are also used against the press. The paper argued that this double attack on both digital and traditional media is a symptom of a deeper problem. Through an analysis of the authoritarian media theory, this paper suggested that the root cause of digital repression lies in the deep-seated tendencies of African governments to control the media. Digital media has changed the political power dynamics in Africa, and governments are determined to bring it under their control. To address this crisis, it is necessary to look beyond the narrow view of digital repression as an isolated phenomenon. It is part of a process that begins with media control and ends with state capture. The ultimate goal is to eliminate the

public accountability provided by both digital and mainstream media. The battle has only changed names; authoritarian governments will stop at nothing to suppress democracy.

Keywords: *Authoritarianism, Digital rights, Media control in Africa, Privacy, Surveillance.*

Introduction

Over the years, African governments have consistently tightened their control over digital freedom of expression. Tactics such as Internet blackouts, social media restrictions and suppression of dissent have become commonplace. These digital authoritarian measures have violated digital rights and press freedom and stifled dissent (Netizen Report, 2018).

One of the earliest examples of digital authoritarianism in Sub-Saharan Africa occurred in 2014 when nine Ethiopian bloggers were arrested on terrorism charges. They were eventually released a year later (Zone9, 2015). These bloggers were ordinary citizens who expressed their dissatisfaction with their country through their writing (Zuckerman, 2014). Their imprisonment sparked global outrage as it demonstrated the lengths to which an African government would go to silence online freedom of expression (Advox, 2018).

In 2017, the Cameroonian government imposed a three-month Internet shutdown on two Anglophone regions of the country (Netizen Report, 2018). In 2018, the Tanzanian government introduced a law requiring bloggers to pay an annual tax of over USD $900 (Egbunike & Baerendtsen, 2018). On July 1, 2018, Ugandans were required by law to pay a tax for using social media and mobile money (Biddle & Abrougui, 2018).

In 2020, there were either total or partial Internet shutdowns in five diverse African countries (Hammed & Egbunike, 2020). That same year, several African governments introduced regulations under the pretext of combating the COVID-19 pandemic that limited digital rights and freedom of expression. For example, legislation in Tanzania, Chad, Uganda, Nigeria, Niger and Ethiopia targeted press freedom by imposing punitive sanctions that restricted free access to information for both journalists and the public (CIPESA, 2020). However, the suppression of digital freedom in 2020 was not limited to violations of digital rights or authoritarian measures.

On January 13, 2021, just hours before the presidential election in Uganda, the Ugandan Communication Commission (UCC) imposed a social media blackout in the country (Propa & Egbunike, 2021). Later that same day, at 7 p.m. EST, a total Internet shutdown was reported across the country (Netblocks, 2021). Additionally, seven Southern African countries – Zambia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, South Africa, Namibia, Mozambique and Malawi – introduced licence and accreditation fees for journalists and bloggers. This legislation made the cost of expression prohibitively expensive and had a "chilling effect on the free flow of ideas and meaningful discourse" (AfDec, 2021:6).

In June 2021, the Nigerian government suspended Twitter – now known as X – indefinitely after the social media platform deleted a tweet by President Muhammadu Buhari and temporarily suspended his account. Buhari's tweet referred to Nigerian secessionists and threatened to treat "those who misbehave today" in "the language they will understand" (BBC, 2021). This violated Twitter's user rules against content that threatens or incites violence (Twitter, 2022). On January 13, 2022, the Nigerian government lifted the suspension of Twitter (Onuah, 2022). The ban had significant social, emotional and financial repercussions for Nigeria's young population (Akindele, 2021; Audu, 2021; Aniekan Augustine-Edet, 2021).

To this day, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Zambia are using surveillance software to monitor their citizens. This has resulted in an increase in online harassment, mass and targeted surveillance, data storage vulnerabilities and digital attacks (including hacking) that have compromised the safety and integrity of journalists and their sources (Simanje, 2022:11). On the other hand, surveillance legislation in Egypt, Kenya and Nigeria has greatly hindered digital rights (Roberts, Mohamed Ali, Farahat, Oloyede, & Mutung'u, 2021).

While the cases mentioned above are concerning and problematic, they are merely symptoms of a deeper issue. The underlying cause can be traced back to the on-going struggle by governments to control the media and, by extension, the flow of information.

Methodology

Firstly, this study adopted a narrative review of literature since it has the advantage of synthesising theoretical perspectives from the topic under review (Torraco, 2005; Ward, House, & Hamer, 2009; Cronin & George, 2023). Secondly, this study used secondary data from EIU (2022) and CIPESA (2023) to highlight the digital authoritarianism of African governments.

African Governments and Digital Authoritarianism

Many African leaders have held on to power for many years by manipulating elections in their favour. The means adopted by these governments include state-sponsored violence, appointing party members as electoral umpires, jailing political opponents, etc. The Economic Intelligence Unit (2023) Democracy Index for 2022 evaluates democracy based on clean election process, civil liberties political culture and participation. The report, as represented in Table 1, shows that half of the 44 countries evaluated in Sub-Saharan Africa are authoritarian, while others are semi-authoritarian.

Sub-Saharan Africa 2022

	Overall score	Global Rank	Regional rank	I Electoral process and pluralism	II Functioning of government	III Political participation	IV Political culture	V Civil liberties	Regime type
Lesotho	6.19	71	7	9.17	4.14	5.56	5.63	6.47	Flawed democracy
Liberia	5.43	86	12	7.42	2.71	6.11	5.63	5.29	Hybrid regime
Madagascar	5.70	80	11	7.92	3.57	6.67	5.63	4.71	Hybrid regime
Malawi	5.91	76	8	7.00	4.29	5.56	6.25	6.47	Hybrid regime
Mali	3.23	119	26	1.17	0.00	5.56	5.63	3.82	Authoritarian
Mauritania	4.03	108	21	3.50	3.57	5.56	3.13	4.41	Hybrid regime
Mauritius	8.14	21	1	9.17	7.86	6.11	8.75	8.82	Full democracy
Mozambique	3.51	117	24	2.58	1.43	5.00	5.00	3.53	Authoritarian
Namibia	6.52	58	5	7.00	5.36	6.67	5.63	7.94	Flawed democracy
Niger	3.73	112	23	2.92	1.50	3.89	5.63	4.71	Authoritarian
Nigeria	4.23	105	19	5.17	3.93	3.89	3.75	4.41	Hybrid regime
Rwanda	3.10	126	29	1.42	4.29	2.78	4.38	2.65	Authoritarian
Senegal	5.72	79	10	6.58	5.71	4.44	6.25	5.59	Hybrid regime
Sierra Leone	5.03	96	15	6.58	2.86	4.44	6.25	5.00	Hybrid regime
South Africa	7.05	45	4	7.42	7.14	8.33	5.00	7.35	Flawed democracy
Tanzania	5.10	92	13	4.83	5.00	5.00	6.25	4.41	Hybrid regime
Togo	2.99	130	32	0.92	2.14	3.33	5.63	2.94	Authoritarian
Uganda	4.55	99	16	3.42	3.57	3.89	6.88	5.00	Hybrid regime
Zambia	5.80	78	9	7.92	3.64	5.00	6.88	5.59	Hybrid regime
Zimbabwe	2.92	132	33	0.00	2.50	3.89	5.00	3.24	Authoritarian
Regional score	4.14			3.63	3.10	4.56	5.27	4.13	

Source: EIU.

Table 1: Performance of African countries on the Democracy Index

The digital tyranny witnessed in these countries cannot be divorced from the political climate of the countries in Table 1. There seems to be a connection between a tyrannical political leaders and the suppression of digital rights (CIPESA, 2023). Specifically, digital authoritarianism in Africa has a strong connection with the number of years spent in power by African political leaders.

Figure 1: Africa's longest serving presidents as at 2023
Source: CIPESA (2023:11)

Censorship and repression are characteristics of tyrannical governments. Consequently, it is not surprising that "there are manifestations of these in numerous African countries, increasingly effected through 'digital authoritarianism' – the use of technology tactics to advance repressive political interests" (Wakabi, 2023:12).

Ugandan TikToker Charged under Repressive Digital Law for Insulting a Dead General[3]

On September 9, 2022, a Ugandan TikToker, Tracy Manule Bobiholic (real name is Teddy Nalubowa), was charged with offensive communication and detained in Luzira Prison for allegedly recording a video celebrating the death of General Elly Tumwine, a former security minister (Kigongo, 2022).

On August 25, 2022, retired army commander General Elly Tumwine passed away in Kenya after battling lung cancer. His death sparked a public discussion about his controversial legacy (Ley, 2022). Tumwine was the commander of military forces that killed over 50 civilian protesters in 2020. The dead general never expressed remorse for these killings. He rather told journalists that the police could shoot and kill anyone without repercussion (Kiyonga, 2022).

Nalubowa, the 27-year-old Ugandan TikToker, was charged with offensive communication under Section 25 of the Computer Misuse Act 2011. This was after being detained for over 10 days without legal representation for rejoicing over Tumwine's death.

The intent of the 2011 Ugandan Computer Misuse Act (CMA) appears commendable. The Act aims at safeguarding the integrity information systems by preventing illicit misuse while keeping electronic transfers reliable. However, like most laws, the 2011 CMA contains some problematic sections. For instance, sections 25 and 26 contain hazy definitions for offensive communication and cyber harassment.

Uganda has applied these sections in the prosecution of vocal critics in the past. From 2018 to 2022, Ugandan writer Kakwenza Rukirabashaija and feminist activist Dr Stella Nyanzi have all been jailed under sections 24 and 25 of CMA (The Independent, 2019; BBC, 2021).

CMA was replaced in 2022 with the Computer Misuse (Amendment) Bill (The Monitor, 2022). Critics argue that the new law is even more authoritarian than the old one (Africa Press Release, 2022). The new bill is redundant and only duplicates issues that have either been covered in CMA or the Data Protection Act of 2019 (Wandera, 2022).

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[3] Egbunike, N. (2021). This case, originally published in Global Voices (Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 licence), can be retrieved from https://globalvoices.org/2022/09/14/ugandan-tiktoker-jailed-for-criticizing-the-problematic-legacy-of-a-dead-general/

Sadly, African governments have expanded their nets on digital media through legislations. Ugandan TikToker Nalubowa ordeal is just one more exemplifier of how official draconian laws have been deployed by governments to suppress digital freedoms.

Press Freedom in Africa

Repressive tactics against media freedom are not limited to digital media. These tactics have been and continue to be used against mainstream media worldwide. Over the past decade, media freedom has declined globally, with new forms of repression emerging in both open societies and authoritarian regimes (Diamond, 2015; Maerz et al., 2020; Dwyer, Wilding, & Koskie, 2021). This trend is particularly evident in Europe, Eurasia and the Middle East (Dostalik, 2021; Pukallus et al., 2020; Papadopoulou & Maniou, 2021; Tsourapas, 2021; Aras & Oztig, 2021; Freedom House, 2023).

African governments have employed various methods to repress the press, including the spread of mis- and disinformation, ownership changes, regulatory pressure and the arrest of journalists (Bratich, 2020; Moyo, Mare, & Mabweazara, 2020; Chari & Mabokela, 2021; Essien, Muoghalu, & Sulaimon, 2022). Media capture is also achieved through state contracts, advertising revenue, favourable regulatory decisions and preferential access to state information (Dassah, 2018; Canen & Wantchekon, 2022; Freedom House, 2023b).

In Southern African countries such as Angola, Botswana, eSwatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, press freedom is under threat from digital surveillance and challenges to freedom of expression (Media Institute of Southern Africa, 2022). Weak institutions have also contributed to the erosion of human rights and press freedom in the region (Human Rights Watch, 2020). In Zimbabwe, journalists face on-going attacks (Ruhanya, 2018; Mlotshwa, 2019; Young, 2019).

In the last decade, East African governments have made little progress in protecting press rights, with some countries experiencing a sharp decline in press freedom. Burundi has seen increasing restrictions on freedom of speech and other rights (Fiedler & Frère, 2018; Russell, 2019). In Ethiopia, press freedom initially improved under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed but has since declined due to the Tigray conflict (Conroy-Krutz, 2020; Workneh, 2022). Uganda has a history of state repression of media freedoms, while Rwanda maintains tight control over dissenting views (Höglund & Schaffer, 2021; McIntyre & Cohen, 2021).

In West Africa, politicians are finding new ways to suppress journalists and limit freedom of expression. Nigeria, Ghana and Liberia are among the most challenging environments for the press in the region (Ibezim-Ohaeri et al., 2023).

A Theoretical Interrogation of Media Control

The authoritarian media theory, which originated in the 16th century, is based on the idea of state absolutism. According to this theory, the definition of truth is determined by a small group of leaders in a top-down approach (Folarin, 2005). The normative theories of the press assume that the media reflects the social and political structures in which it operates (Siebert et al., 1956:1). Consequently, the media, whether privately or publicly owned, serves the interests of those in power and cannot criticise the government. While this theory has become out-dated in the West due to the rise of democratic governance, neo-authoritarian media control is still prevalent in countries such as Russia, Iran and China (Becker, 2004; Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011; Wojcieszak et al., 2019). In these countries, the media supports dictatorial governments by promoting the official state narrative.

Authoritarian media control has persisted in Africa for various reasons, including the prevalence of military dictatorships. Until the end of the Cold War, many African countries were governed by military regimes. Sub-Saharan Africa has experienced at least 70 successful coups since 1957, with only the Ivory Coast avoiding a coup attempt. Nigeria, for example, was under military rule for 28 years and experienced six successful coups (Harden, 1993:218). The Nigerian military first became involved in governance in 1966 when junior officers overthrew the Balewa-led government and brought General Aguiyi-Ironsi to power. By May 29, 1999, Nigeria had been through a series of successful, as well as unsuccessful coups, which had installed six military regimes (Jega, 2007:85).

The global wave of democratisation in the 1990s led to the fall of many military regimes in Africa and had a direct impact on media ownership. Governments relaxed their control over media ownership, leading to an increase in private ownership of mass media. State-owned newspapers and broadcasters gained editorial independence and new radio, television and print outlets emerged (Conroy-Krutz, 2020:97). This provided a brief period of relief. The rise of digital media and its impact on democracy has

further fuelled the belief that decades of repression of freedom of expression and press control were over. However, this was not the case. Despite the increase in media ownership diversity in Africa, many governments continue to maintain an authoritarian approach towards the media. While these governments may hold elections and profess democratic ideals, in practice, they often operate as dictatorships (Ake, 1991; Ake, 1993; Kweifio-Okai & Holder, 2016).

The relationship between the "media and governments" is shaped by the tension between freedom and control. Non-state actors often prioritise media freedom as a necessary condition for democratic governance and accountability. This freedom is characterised by limited government regulation and oversight. Conversely, governments are more concerned with controlling the media. In democratic states, this tension is resolved through regulations that protect press freedom while also specifying penalties for violations of that freedom. However, in authoritarian or quasi-authoritarian states, the media is often forced to submit to government control or face extinction. This explains why "the nearer any medium gets to operating as a *mass medium*, the more it can expect the attention of governments, since it affects the exercise of power" (McQuail, 2005:42). The rise of digital media and its impact on political power dynamics in African countries has not gone unnoticed. Therefore, many African governments have tightened their grip on digital media in an effort to maintain control (Diamond, 2008; Egbunike, 2018).

Authoritarian regimes in Africa have used the same tactics to control digital media as they are used to controlling mass media. These tactics include repressive legislation, crippling taxation, state-controlled staffing, regulation of production materials, censorship, and suspension or banning of publications (Folarin, 2005). Similarly, Internet shutdowns, social media taxation and blackouts, surveillance, privacy violations and repressive legislation targeting journalists and digital rights are common across the continent (CIPESA, 2020; CitizenLab, 2020; Propa & Egbunike, 2021; Netblocks, 2021; BBC, 2021; AfDec, 2021; Simanje, 2022). These tactics remain the same but are now being applied to a different platform in various forms.

Media Control and Capture

It is clear that the digital authoritarian tactics used by African governments are an extension of their methods for controlling mainstream media. To fully understand this emerging phenomenon, it is important to view it in this broader context. The violation of digital freedom is part of a process

that predates digital media. Surveillance, privacy breaches, Internet shutdowns, social media bans, throttling or taxation, and repressive regulations should be evaluated as part of this larger picture. While it may be easier to divide these tactics into sub-groups for research or activism purposes, finding a solution to this problem requires a broader perspective.

Control of digital and mainstream media is a precursor to complete media capture. State actors in Africa seek to have exclusive control over the dissemination of news and information. This involves direct control of all media outlets, with the goal of using them as a means of government propaganda. The idea of the media as a public watchdog holding the government accountable is uncomfortable for those in power.

Resisting media capture in the face of authoritarianism in Africa is a daunting task, but it is necessary to prevent complete state capture. If tyrannical governments succeed in capturing the media, there will be no safeguard against their control. Despite its flaws, democracy remains the only fair, free and participatory form of governance available to humanity.

Independent journalism is one way to resist media capture. This involves having principled journalists and media organisations that are not financially dependent on government patronage. Such organisations can maintain high standards of journalistic integrity and hold those in power accountable. In an ideal world, this is a straightforward solution, but journalism costs money. It will, therefore, be mere fantasy to expect good journalism without financial backing. Unfortunately, many people with the access to these funds are politicians and their cronies – particularly within the continent.

The growth of digital media has greatly diversified the media landscape in Africa, giving rise to many independent and citizen journalists who hold governments accountable. However, these independent voices have faced challenges such as surveillance, arrests, death threats and exile. It is important to resist digital authoritarianism in Africa to protect democracy. If African politicians succeed in suppressing digital media, democracy will not only be at risk but will also die off.

Conclusion

Digital media, by assuming such potent force in Africa's political landscape, will never be free from the control of governments. As mainstream media went through and is still in the trenches, warding off officialdom control, digital media has to evolve to this reality. Until the

fundamental issues of democratisation with all its consequences are established across the continent, this problem will not diminish. Hence, it goes without saying that the main battleground is the installation of full-fledged democratic ideas and the institutions that will enforce it. The current reality of having democratic authoritarianism emboldened in the African 'strongman or woman' does not cut it. This large framework makes it easier to scrutinise the details which digital authoritarianism, a small part of the whole picture, presents. In effect, the violation of digital rights is merely an alarm for more debilitating assaults on the democratic process in Africa.

However, this grim reality is not a call to pessimism. The battle against mainstream media control by governments no longer poses existential threats in many African countries. This means that digital authoritarianism, the 21st century extension of this battle, may one day become something of the past. However, this will entail a coalition of two major stakeholders – journalists and digital rights activists. These two impermeable silos, which hardly meet, have to be discontinued for any meaningful progress. Journalists and digital advocates are equal victims of digital authoritarianism since digital media has already collapsed all the boundaries of space and time. If news flows freely from digital media to mainstream media, then let activists also lean on the experience of journalists in warding off dictatorships. This is imperative because the common enemy, tyrannical African governments, is primarily interested in controlling the narrative. Hence, they will stop at nothing to make any media submissive and totally under their control, be it digital or mainstream media.

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