The State of Censorship in Kenya, Tanzania, and Nigeria

Technology offers hope for the economic future of many sub-Saharan African nations, but repressive regimes are using that same promising technology to promote censorship. This article looks at the evolution of digital censorship in three key countries.

While censorship has long existed as a cornerstone of authoritarian regimes, a new form of censorship is becoming popular in democracies around the world, including in Africa. This censorship has been propelled by political and technological trends, including the rise of China, surveillance technology, and big tech companies. The impact of these trends in Africa, the youngest and fastest-growing region by population, must be considered. Kenya and Nigeria are known widely as two of sub-Saharan Africa's largest and most dynamic economies. As a socialist-leaning country, Tanzania provides a foil to Kenya, its neighbor in East Africa. Although the three countries and governments have taken different approaches to censorship of their citizens, they share a justification to protect African society from instability as a result of so-called fake news. As events play out with COVID-19 censorship in Tanzania and the Twitter ban in Nigeria, this paper examines the global trends that provide insight into why censorship is becoming increasingly relevant for Africans as well as the types of censorship methods used throughout the continent.

Kenya

As Kenya made its first steps as an independent state, its government's history of censorship fluctuated, becoming particularly prevalent during times of political change. Kenya saw increasingly strict rules on the media industry under the autocratic rule of Daniel arap Moi. During his presidency, which lasted 24 years, Moi exerted significant control over Kenya's media outlets and was granted power to dismiss judges he saw as unfit. Censorship during Moi's presidency was most evident during 1994 and 1995, when the president publicly chastised The Daily Nation, a privately owned regional newspaper. In the following months, the publication would go on to terminate the contracts of three reporters who had written stories relating to government corruption. Meanwhile, the news editor of The Daily Nation, Mutegi Njau, was arrested and charged with subversion. While the late 1990s marked the beginning of the end of Moi's control over the country, his tenure ensured lasting stability in Kenya at the cost of human rights abuses and the suppression of opposition.

In the wake of Moi's regime, Kenya has seen the rise of several outlets for information sharing, including newspapers. Despite the increasing adoption of digital media, newspapers are still very relevant in the country where the cost of internet access has let the printing world survive. The freedom that the media has enjoyed over the past decades after Moi's tenure was challenged in September 2018, when the current government implemented numerous censorship measures after the Supreme Court of Kenya nullified the election between the country's sitting president, Uhuru Kenyatta, and his opponent, Raila Odinga. Following the announcement of the election results, the current president used old censorship tactics by ordering the shutdown of four TV stations, causing public fear of being punished for speaking out and panic in the community. Despite the growth that Kenya has experienced post independence, democracy has backslidden under the current regime.

With the growth of digital technology and the internet in Kenya, the way information is shared has changed significantly. As a country with one of the highest number of internet users on the continent, Kenya hosts
a growing tech-savvy population and a very active social media landscape. It is important to note that despite the contested 2017 presidential elections, the internet remained largely unrestricted during the period following the election, including when the government interfered to block the signals for the three leading television stations planning to air Odinga’s unofficial inauguration in January 2018. However, following the contested elections and the alleged misinformation campaign ran by Cambridge Analytica on behalf of Uhuru Kenyatta’s campaign in 2017, the Kenyan government introduced the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act, which passed in May 2018, imposing penalties for up to 10 years in prison for the publication of false or fictitious information that results in “panic” or “is likely to discredit a person’s reputation.” The passage of such an act marked a turning point in censorship in Kenya. Despite this negative development resulting in the decline of the country’s freedom of expression, Kenyan civil society has been very active in pushing against such practices. Most recently in April 2018, the High Court of Kenya ruled unconstitutional the Communication Authority’s plan to implement a Device Management System that would have provided the Kenyan authority with access to mobile subscriber data, including call data records.

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Tanzania

In Tanzania, government censorship has dramatically expanded since the late President John Magafuli came to power in 2015. Since then, a series of controversial regulations have passed, including the 2015 Statistics Act, which criminalized publishing economic statistics without government approval; the 2018 Electronic and Postal Communications Act, which subjects bloggers to excessive license fees; and the 2016 Media Services Act, which gave government agencies broad power to censor the media by creating stringent rules for journalist accreditation. When media outlets were suspected of violating these laws, the government was quick to act. In 2019, the Ministry of Information, Culture, Arts and Sports suspended Tanzania’s major English language newspaper, The Citizen, for publishing articles highlighting depreciation of the local currency and a U.S. congressman’s opinion on the “disrespect for civil liberties in Tanzania.”

Unsurprisingly, Tanzania’s crackdown on free expression has everything to do with political power. Despite having become a multiparty democracy in 1992, Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) — the party of independence leader Julius Nyerere — has managed to hold onto executive power, rendering the country a de facto one-party state. While Magafuli was running for reelection in October 2020, citizens were reportedly cut off from social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. International media organizations were also barred from covering the elections. In another example, during the global COVID-19 crisis, Magafuli remained in denial that the disease had reached Tanzania. First, he proclaimed that Tanzania had defeated the pandemic through prayer. Then, he banned doctors in public hospitals from wearing face masks and from reporting COVID-19 deaths, which had to be classified as pneumonia, heart disease, or other ailments. Not only did he deprive citizens of access to critical medical care, but he also restricted the testing and reporting of cases. Censorship led to otherwise avoidable losses of life, potentially including the president’s own.

Nigeria

Despite constitutional protection, Nigerian media was controlled by the government throughout most of its post-colonial history. Censorship in Nigeria typically targets certain kinds of ideas, such as ethnic discussion, political opposition, and morality incorrectness. The news media outlets in the post-colonial period continued the practice of using news media to serve political interests, but ongoing ethnic tensions shifted their focus from political parties to ethnic groups. This development significantly contributed to the self-censorship among news organizations.

Since 1961, the Nigerian government has taken an active role in gaining control of the press by seizing various newspaper organizations. The direct and indirect influence on censorship caused Nigeria to be ranked 115 out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters without Borders in 2020, despite having a
vast number of independent newspapers. The concerns on censorship in Nigeria were amplified in June 2021, when the Nigerian government decided to suspend Twitter services from operating in the country. This announcement came shortly after the company decided to delete President Muhammadu Buhari’s tweet for violating the policies of the platform — a tweet that promoted the use of violence against young Nigerians who were protesting.

The Twitter ban occurred in the context of separatist movements in the region of Biafra and raised the debate about how far the government can go to expand its control over the freedom of speech of its citizens. A Brookings Institute article points out the economic impact of this decision, estimating that e-commerce lost $5 million in the first two months of the ban. It also negatively affected the perception of Nigeria as a technology hub for Africa because startups need an active social media presence to grow.

The government itself faced a new paradox, as Twitter had been the official communication platform for institutional decisions. This problem paved the way for a new form of censorship with the partnering of the Nigerian government with the Indian microblogging platform Koo in months after the Twitter ban in June 2021. This partnership is presented as an alternative to Twitter that does not follow the "neo-colonial" ways in which a U.S. company imposes its policies over Nigerian law. However, at the time of the ban, Koo had only 6 million users who were mostly based in India, while Twitter had tens of millions more. The alternative the government has presented clearly would not fill the hole left by Twitter’s absence.

In October 2021, the Nigerian government announced its intentions to lift the Twitter ban if the platform agrees to all the government’s requests. TechCrunch, a leading technology news site, reported that requests still under negotiation included, “Twitter setting up a local office, paying tax locally and cooperating with the Nigerian government to regulate content and harmful tweets.” The implications of such modifications are alarming since agreement could pave the way for governments to exert more power in social media and set a precedent that regulation on freedom of speech is a business problem and not a human rights issue.

**Comparative Analysis**

As can be seen from the various case studies discussed above, most countries in sub-Saharan Africa have experienced various forms of censorship since gaining their independence from European powers. In Kenya and Tanzania, government censorship has increased significantly in the post-independence period with the enactment of laws aiming to restrict the freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Two examples of such laws are the new Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act passed in 2018 in Kenya, and the 2015 Statistics Act in Tanzania. These tactics are the results of the governments’ initiatives to take control of the public narratives. The rapid rise in technology has also enabled Africans to access information through the internet via various social media platforms. As a result of the increasing influence that the internet has had in shaping public opinion, governments have applied censorship in all of the countries analyzed. The most notable example is the Twitter ban in Nigeria following the company’s decision to remove a tweet from the Nigerian president. This move brought about a massive reaction domestically and internationally. The move will not only reduce Nigeria’s image as a truly democratic nation, but will also decrease productivity, especially when it comes to the country’s burgeoning use of e-commerce and fintech platforms.

**New Challenges**

New trends and challenges have paved the way for the rise in censorship in Africa. China’s growing influence globally has led many to view its policies as an alternative path to economic development for low-income countries, including those in Africa. Over the last decade, the Chinese government has vastly expanded domestic surveillance, which has fueled the growth of a new generation of companies that produce surveillance-related tech products at a much lower price than the rest of the world. Coupled with China’s global infrastructure initiative, these types of home-grown surveillance technologies have reached many corners of the world.

countries on the list include Kenya, Rwanda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Thirty-six countries have sent media elites and government officials to China for weeks-long seminars on “new media or information management.” Both Kenya and Nigeria are among the 15 African countries that obtained training from China.

The growing influence of China’s surveillance model is especially alarming because China has used tools such as facial recognition technology to monitor its own population and thwart any act deemed to be harming public order or national security. This level of surveillance is particularly evident in the Northwestern Xinjiang region. Coupled with the wider adoption of the nationwide Social Credit System, which tracks “trustworthiness” of citizens through their daily routine, in the rest of the country, the level of surveillance in China could be reaching levels unprecedented in human history. Industry leaders in this field include Chinese companies such as Yitu, Hikvision, and CloudWalk. CloudWalk has entered into an agreement with Zimbabwe to build a national facial recognition database and monitor system.

Besides China’s growing influence on censorship, the debate on stopping the spread of false information and freedom of expression still rages. Censorship has not become a concern uniquely limited to the media industry; it now expands across the internet, social media, and telecommunications industries. This development could have grave consequences to the future of technology, which is widely seen as a key sector to guide many African nations out of the current economic model based on the exportation of natural resources.

Africa is entering a new era of censorship marked by the inclusion of tools and technologies used by those in power to restriction of information. In the cases of Kenya, Tanzania, and Nigeria, recent efforts to block political upheaval, underreport COVID-19 caseloads, and ban access to major technology companies serve as a timely reminder to the continent’s continued embrace of censorship. As China continues to play an outsized role in Africa, the question is not if governments on the continent will continue to censor online but how effective they will become at it. Increased government controls over Africa’s digital landscape will play into what those in power hope to preserve: a lack of regime change and an upkeeping of the status quo.

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