Digital Dictatorship versus Digital Democracy in Africa

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Executive summary

'Twitter could have been a town square. But now it's more like a drunken, heaving mosh pit.'

Umair Haque, writer and founder of Eudaimonia & Co

Less than a decade ago the Arab Spring was hailed as a game changer for global politics. Enhanced political debate via social media, a wider diversity of opinions and closer access to governments were meant to enhance social consensus and improve governance. Digital democracy was on the rise, it seemed.

Fast forward a few years – in the wake of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump – and against a backdrop of increasing polarisation, Internet shutdowns and heightened censorship, 'digital dictatorship' has become the new buzzword.

The full range of effects of this development has yet to be fully understood or digested in Africa, where the concept of digital dictatorship is still in its relative infancy. However, how these issues are traversed is set to have huge implications for African democracy and governance, consequently meriting further analysis and reflection.

Introduction

Just how did digital technologies go from empowering citizens and toppling dictators to being used as tools of oppression and discord? In a 2018 paper entitled 'The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism', independent watchdog organisation Freedom House provides a number of compelling insights into this phenomenon. Investigating issues ranging from fake news and disinformation to privacy, propaganda and polarisation, as well as data collection and manipulation, Freedom House found that the Internet is becoming less free globally, and democracy itself is withering under its influence.[1] And with the Internet now being used as easily to disrupt democracies as it is to destabilise dictatorships,[2] the ambiguous nature of this phenomenon has unleashed consequences that have yet to be properly understood.

This policy insights interrogates what these evolving trends mean for governance, both globally and in Africa. It starts by exploring digital democracy and dictatorship, taking stock of current realities, and assessing some of the opportunities and threats involved for societies that espouse this new mode of political communication. It attempts to understand the evolution of these trends and how specific African countries have reacted to them, noting the difference between hard and soft forms of digital dictatorship and

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1   Shahbaz A, 'The Rise of Digital authoritarianism', Freedom House, 2018, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2018/rise-digital-authoritarianism, accessed 9 March 2019.

2   *Ibid.*

where on the continent they are most prevalent. Finally, and most importantly, the policy insights will answer the question 'So what?' by providing an outline of the key future issues for government, business and policymakers.

Social media in politics – a force for good or evil?

The advent of social networks has resulted in free and real-time access to information. Through the ability to connect with audiences with a simple click, both citizens and politicians have found new methods for their messages to travel far and wide. Consequently, the hyperconnected nature of the digital world has made it easier to influence electorates using new and unconventional techniques.

The use of social media and networks such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp has changed the nature of political communication and engagement, both globally and in Africa. In the context of a 'geopolitical recession',[3] which has seen governance backslide globally, this has resulted in a tectonic shift in how voters are influenced and how countries function.

Whereas technological platforms were initially politicised in the Arab Spring campaign and used as tools for democracy,[4] they have since taken on a more sinister dimension in many countries. 'The short-circuiting of democracy and the coarsening of political discourse'[5] is now being exploited for political gain.

While positive aspects of social media remain, including the ability to foster accountability and transparency between citizens and their governments and improve service delivery through 'GovTech' and 'CivicTech' initiatives such as Akshaya in India[6] (which uses technology to make public services more efficient) or M Survey[7] in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which allows citizens to monitor budget meetings, there is now a risk of negative factors surpassing these benefits. Indeed, in the wake of the scandal over the misuse of user data by Cambridge Analytica, Facebook has been branded a threat to democracy, while the results of the failures of an unregulated platform for airing political views and reposting fake news were seen in both the Brexit vote and the US election in

3   Tan W, 'A "geopolitical recession" has arrived and the US-led world order is ending, Ian Bremmer says', *CNBC*, 10 October 2018, https://www.cnbc.com/2018/10/10/china-emerging-markets-are-rising-us-led-order-ending-ian-bremmer.html, accessed 27 March 2019.

4   Thompson A, '"The Great Hack" terrified Sundance audiences, and then the documentary got even scarier', *IndieWire*, 1 August 2019, https://www.indiewire.com/2019/08/the-great-hack-documentary-oscar-cambridge-analytica-1202162430/, accessed 5 August 2019.

5   Dhillon A, 'How vitriol at the Indian polls shows a coarsening of political discourse', *The National (UAE)*, 13 May 2019, https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/how-vitriol-at-the-indian-polls-shows-a-coarsening-of-political-discourse-1.860927, accessed 16 May 2019.

6   Kumar R, 'Five ways technology is improving public services', World Bank, Blog, 2014, https://blogs.worldbank.org/governance/five-ways-technology-improving-public-services, accessed 10 April 2019.

7   *Ibid*.

2016. This is a far cry from the brave new era of digital democracy that social media was thought to usher in following the 2011 revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia.

In the African context, recent trends of authorities closing the online realm for political expression have stoked fears that social media and big data will be harnessed for nefarious purposes. Indeed, alarm bells are being rung around whether these will be used as a tool to control and manipulate voters and citizens, instead of empowering them. More specifically, there is increasing concern that societies will soon have to contend with an era of digital dictatorships as opposed to digital democracy.

Box 1   Definitions

Digital democracy: This refers to the various ways through which electronic platforms can engage the wider and more informed participation of the public in the political environment.[8] It entails greater use of the Internet to gauge public opinion and to activate political debate via social media, the use of mobile devices to involve the public in decision-making, and the replacement of traditional voting methods with e-technology solutions. A defining feature of digital democracy is the increasing engagement of citizens in the democratic process. In theory, digital technology provides an opportunity to leverage a wider diversity of opinions, leading to better policy outcomes and more transparent and accountable governance.[9]

Digital dictatorship: This concept refers to governments using technologies to monitor their citizens through tracking their movements, habits and thoughts with unchecked power.[10] Faheem Chaudhry, Managing Partner at M&C Saatchi Abel in Johannesburg, observes that[11]

> [d]igital dictatorship is a double headed beast. The first intended aim is to squash information, to control what goes out into the world so perceptions can be managed and narrowed. The second aims to limit communication, to constrict the population's ability to air their opposing views and create mass consensus.

At its core, digital dictatorship achieves the opposite effect of digital democracy. It seeks to promote division and polarisation and generally leads to a breakdown in social consensus.

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8   Graham M, 'Digital Democracy – Introduction', Tutor2U, https://www.tutor2u.net/politics/reference/digital-democracy-introduction, accessed 3 April 2019.

9   Figueiredo Nascimento S *et al.*, 'Citizen Engagement in Science and Policy-Making', European Commission, JRC Science for Policy Report, 2016, https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/communities/sites/jrccties/files/mc10_rio_sio-lopez_mobility_reading.pdf, accessed 30 March 2019.

10   Yuan L, 'Stranger than science fiction: The future for digital dictatorships', *Wall Street Journal*, 1 March 2018, https://www.wsj.com/articles/stranger-than-science-fiction-the-future-for-digital-dictatorships-1519900866, accessed 12 August 2019.

11   Personal interview Faheem Chaudhry, Managing Partner, M&C Saatchi Abel, London, 13 May 2019.

Big data: This is defined as large data sets that can be analysed computationally to reveal patterns, trends and associations, especially relating to human behaviour and interactions. It has become a buzzword in almost every contemporary business and policy discussion.[12]

Social media: Websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking. With over half the world population now using the Internet (over 4 billion people globally) and usage in Africa rising by 20% in the past year alone, the intersection of this domain with politics has now provoked a huge debate around the power of social media in contemporary politics. Facebook 'likes', for example, combined with data from other sources, can reveal much about a person, including their preferences and beliefs.[13] With this information, people, politicians and companies can influence a person's actions and thoughts. Instead of trying to persuade millions of people with the same advert, 'campaigns can now target a specific set of voters, each with specific promises and pledges, based on what they already care about'.[14]

Old leaders, new tricks – how African leaders adapted to new technologies

Understanding global trends

The tendency of politicians to manipulate established systems and platforms to entrench and extend power has long been a feature of politics. Now, with strongmen and populist politics on the rise,[15] governments around the world have become emboldened in their efforts to tighten control over citizens' data and use claims of 'fake news' to suppress dissent. The effect of this has been a gradual erosion of trust in the Internet as well as in the foundations of democracy.[16]

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12   Young D, 'A data and analytics minute: What is big data?', Centric Consulting, 2018, https://centricconsulting.com/blog/a-data-and-analytics-minute-what-is-big-data-cincinnati/, accessed 30 March 2019.

13   Cadwalladr C & E Graham-Harrison, 'How Cambridge Analytica turned Facebook "likes" into a lucrative political tool', *The Guardian*, 17 March 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/mar/17/facebook-cambridge-analytica-kogan-data-algorithm, accessed 6 May 2019.

14   Tambini D & J Bartlett, 'Will big data and media destroy democracy?', *BBC*, 23 May 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/2WyPqhdbcpHDN9z0KdBt5Tp/will-big-data-and-social-media-destroy-democracy, accessed 24 April 2019.

15   Shahbaz A, *op. cit.*

16   Thompson A, *op. cit.*

Nanjala Nyabola, the Kenyan author of *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics*,[17] believes that

> around the world the integrity of the electoral process is under assault, not least through the impact of digital platforms but also through rising corporate influence and the manipulation of voters. There's never been such a thing as a perfect election but at the very least you want an election to broadly represent the will of the people. Where external influence outweighs this will of the people then an election becomes a sham, and this is an issue that we are increasingly dealing with everywhere – a new kind of rigging.

South African journalist Ferial Haffajee adds another perspective by reflecting on how social media platforms have been weaponised by politicians to silence journalists.[18] She cites examples from across the globe to illustrate how 'trolling armies are now used around the world by politicians to grow or protect or gain power'.[19] Haffajee investigates how[20]

> In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte has used a Twitter army and his legal arsenal to hound the journalist and editor Maria Ressa and her site rappler.com. In India, journalist Rana Ayyub is a thorn in the side of Narendra Modi's growing nationalist authoritarianism. She is trolled by a bot force of hundreds of thousands of Twitter accounts and by real-life supporters of Modi too. The same thing is happening in Mexico, in Central America, in Vietnam, Ukraine, everywhere.

The primary difference, however, between how this phenomenon plays out in Western and African democracies concerns the distinction between privacy and access. In more developed markets, access to technology is almost universal and a distinct feature of daily life; efforts to suppress it would thus be futile and met with significant civic and legal backlash. In Africa, consumers care less about surveillance and more about access to technology and social media and the multiplier effects these offer in improving their daily economic realities.

Therefore, while more subtle and manipulative methods are needed to 'hack' the system in advanced economies, these methods resonate less in Africa. Although connectivity is increasing, it remains underdeveloped across the continent and in countries where vote share remains largely rural. Restricting access to information is therefore a far more effective tool in the arsenal of incumbent governments. Given these vastly different dynamics and contexts, the political imperatives are significantly different, and this informs how those in power use the tools at their disposal.

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17   Nyabola N, *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era Is Transforming Politics in Kenya*. Nairobi: ZedBooks, 2018.
18   Haffajee F, 'Twitter and the rest of social media are a rising threat to media freedom — and I am part of their roadkill', *Daily Maverick*, 6 August 2019, https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-08-06-twitter-and-the-rest-of-social-media-are-a-rising-threat-to-media-freedom-and-i-am-part-of-their-roadkill/, accessed 6 August 2019.
19   *Ibid*.
20   *Ibid*.

An African context

The concept of digital dictatorship is especially relevant on a continent where democracy is in its relatively early stages. Prior to the early 1990s, big-man rule, military juntas and coups were commonplace in Africa. Since then, multiparty democracy, regular elections and peaceful transitions have begun to take root across the continent.

According to a study by the African Development Bank, there were 99 coup attempts in sub-Saharan Africa from 1970 to 1989. From 1990 to 2010, the region witnessed 67 coup attempts. While this still indicates a high occurrence in comparison to the rest of the world, it nonetheless marks a decrease in coup attempts of about one-third in two decades.[21]

Furthermore, as noted by Nic Cheesman and Jeffrey Smith,[22]

> [i]n 1991, Benin and Zambia became the first former dictatorships to hold multiparty elections after the fall of the Soviet Union. In both countries, the opposition beat the incumbents. In 1994, South Africa replaced apartheid with majority rule, and soon after that, Nelson Mandela was elected president. Later that decade, Ghana, Kenya, and Malawi also held elections and saw power change hands.

Despite this progress, the march towards democracy has seemingly stalled in recent years. According to the 2018 Ibrahim Index for African Governance, governance trends show a worrying trajectory; the initial upward trend has reversed into decline in 27 countries. This is particularly concerning given the continent's 'youth bulge'. Most concerning, however, has been the slow progress in the categories of transparency and accountability as well as participation and human rights, which speaks to a democratic deficit between the continent's leaders and those they lead.
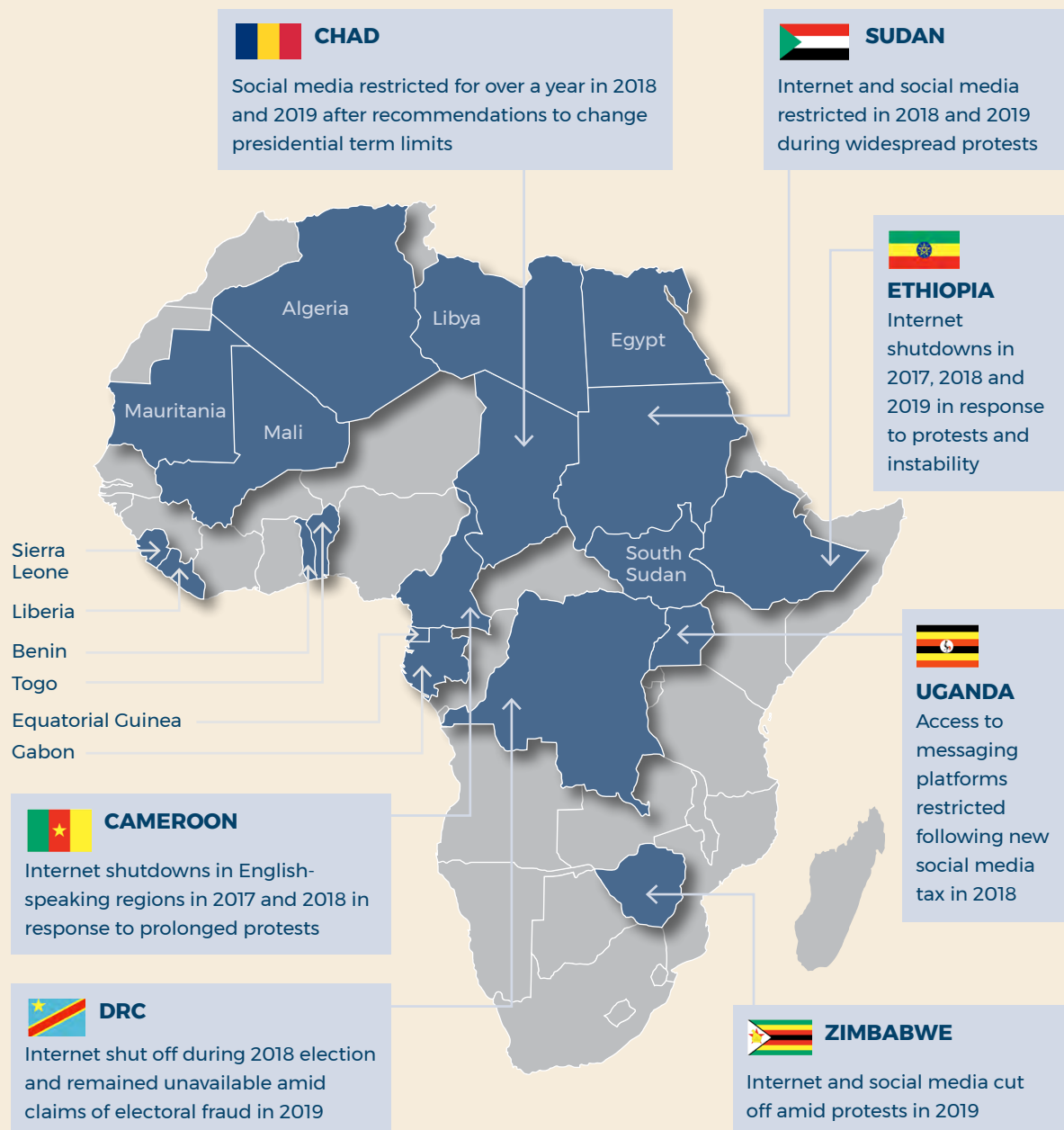
Indeed, a pattern is now emerging where Africa's old leaders are simply learning to use new tricks to undermine and manipulate their electorates. Ranging from Internet shutdowns to the arrest and monitoring of critics and dissenting voices, punitive social media taxes, and the closing of the political arena to competition, there are signs of increasingly autocratic and subversive behaviour by many leaders on the continent. Chipo Dendere[23] noted that,

> during 2016 and 2017, the continent saw nearly 119 internet shutdowns, 43 social media blackouts and 237 days of delayed internet in 2017. The shutdowns range from hours, as in the case of Zimbabwe, to 40 weeks in Cameroon – June 2017 to January 2018.

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21   Ndaba O, 'Military coups see beginning of their end in Africa', *Hufffington Post*, 10 May 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/africa-military-coups-end_b_8237976?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbvS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAMrQ9cz7D2pAez1Y6tmPDAjBSm6mC9T-nhjbOw6iCRvo4YcmQGrlpa92Ykkli-wzEKy67ySO5aewL3glQ5HyhA3jbpXhaWfJf_Ro5xgDxlV6prG_rdFebiAC4Ye4j0DXZM7nigervos6twVK8UCS0b37OuRf9-DN-09i1Rs5K7he, accessed 6 April 2019.

22   Cheesman N & J Smith, 'The retreat of African democracy', *Foreign Affairs*, 17 January 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2019-01-17/retreat-african-democracy, accessed 7 April 2019.

23   Dendere C, 'Why are so many African leaders shutting off the Internet in 2019?', *Washington Post*, 30 January 2019, https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/spotlight/why-are-so-many-african-leaders-shutting-off-the-internet-in-2019/ar-BBSYDtM?li=BBoPWjQ&%25253Bocid=ACERDHP15, accessed 7 October 2019.

Fast forward to 2019 and the trend continues. Remarkably, there were five registered Internet shutdowns in January 2019 alone. Gabon, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, Sudan and the DRC were the offenders and, although the cited reasons varied in each instance, they had one common denominator: political expediency.

Figure 1   Internet shutdowns in Africa: Network and social media restrictions since 2017

CHAD
Social media restricted for over a year in 2018 and 2019 after recommendations to change presidential term limits

SUDAN
Internet and social media restricted in 2018 and 2019 during widespread protests

ETHIOPIA
Internet shutdowns in 2017, 2018 and 2019 in response to protests and instability

UGANDA
Access to messaging platforms restricted following new social media tax in 2018

CAMEROON
Internet shutdowns in English-speaking regions in 2017 and 2018 in response to prolonged protests

DRC
Internet shut off during 2018 election and remained unavailable amid claims of electoral fraud in 2019

ZIMBABWE
Internet and social media cut off amid protests in 2019

Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Mauritania, Mali, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Benin, Togo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, South Sudan

Source: Access Now.org, 'The State of Internet Shutdowns Around the World: The 2018 #KeepItOn Report', https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2019/07/KeepItOn-2018-Report.pdf, accessed 12 December 2018

These developments mirror global trends. In a 2019 CNN article, James Griffiths notes that 'there have been more internet shutdowns every year for the past three years – and may become the new normal as countries around the world attempt to clamp down on online dissent'.[24] Indeed, according to Access Now, there were more than 185 Internet shutdowns around the world last year, up from 108 the year before. Asia and Africa are the worst affected regions, with India – where Internet censorship is on the rise despite the government's much vaunted pro-tech policies – taking the lead in ordering the most shutdowns in both 2017 and 2018.[25]

Figure 2   Internet shutdowns are becoming more common
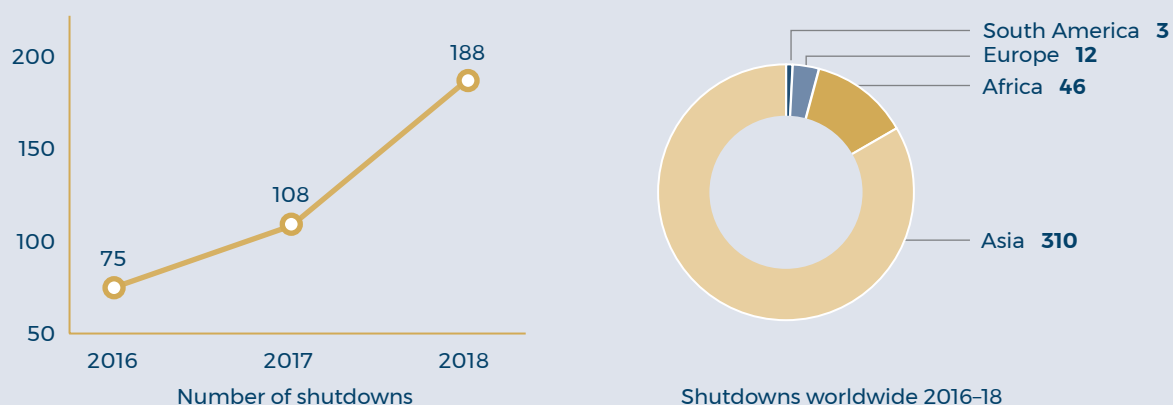
Source: Access Now.org, 'The State of Internet Shutdowns Around the World: The 2018 #KeepItOn Report', https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2019/07/KeepItOn-2018-Report.pdf, accessed 12 December 2018

The impact of Internet shutdowns in Africa is especially pronounced given the limited mechanisms that exist to combat such interference. Underdeveloped institutional maturity, limited checks and balances, fragmented civil societies, opaque regulatory frameworks and limited private sector advocacy means that recourse tends to be weak in many countries on the continent. In the absence of this, conditions are fertile for abuse and slippages in governance.

Suddenly, from its being an isolated and opportunistic tactic used in a handful of countries, African societies are now waking up to the reality that this could be part of a bigger trend and a more systematic erosion of civil liberties and democratic freedoms on the continent. Alarm bells are ringing around the broader consequences of this new development.

24   Griffiths J, 'Internet shutdowns aren't just Africa's problem. They're happening worldwide', *CNN*, 17 January 2019, https://edition.cnn.com/2019/01/17/africa/internet-shutdown-zimbabwe-censorship-intl/index.html, accessed 3 July 2019.
25   Access Now.org, 'The State of Internet Shutdowns Around the World: The 2018 #KeepItOn Report', https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2019/07/KeepItOn-2018-Report.pdf, accessed 12 December 2018.

The trend is certainly worrying, says Simon Allison, Africa editor at the *Mail & Guardian*, who points to Zimbabwe's three-day Internet shutdown as an example of this regression:[26]

> When Emmerson Mnangagwa launched his brutal crackdown on civil society and opposition in January this year, the first sign that something was wrong was not a flurry of social media posts. It was the opposite – a sudden absence, where Zimbabwean Twitter and Facebook used to be, thanks to the government cutting off all internet services. All the people that would normally be raising the alarm were silent. And, as a direct result, it took much longer for the alarm to be raised at all.

African leaders have now realised that they can control technology and manipulate the freeness and fairness of political processes. Slowly, they are pushing the boundaries of what is and is not acceptable. Whereas social media and the Internet were initially seen as a threat to the closed and restrictive culture of Africa's old guard of leaders, governments and political parties have flipped the equation and are now using digital technologies in their favour.

Here the concepts of hard and soft digital dictatorships become increasingly relevant. The nuances between the two are especially important in comparing the type of subversion and control that takes place in some African countries, with some of the more strategic and subtle methods used in China, where an 'Orwellian',[27] socially-engineered society is being crafted. Referring to 'China's social credit system', which uses a technological mass surveillance network to influence behaviour, economist Martin Chorzempa suggests that '[t]here is potentially a totally new way for the government to manage the economy and society'.[28]

However, in many parts of Africa governments mostly remain crude in their attempts to achieve political expediency rather than orchestrate a master plan to control the populace. According to Access Now, the top three reasons given for Internet shutdowns are public safety, stopping the spreading of illegal content, and national security.[29] Overall, the modus operandi of African governments that perpetrate these actions has been reactive, rather than proactive.

But what exactly is the difference between the two approaches?

In hard digital dictatorships, governments exercise control over their citizens by denying them access to content or data and restricting them from either accessing or sharing

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26   Personal interview, Simon Allison, Africa Editor, *The Mail & Guardian*, Johannesburg, 14 May 2019.

27   Wilhelm B, 'Why China's "Orwellian" social credit scheme enjoys domestic support', *World Politics Review*, 17 April 2019, https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/27769/why-china-s-orwellian-social-credit-scheme-enjoys-domestic-support, accessed 9 May 2019.

28   Mozur P, 'Inside China's dystopian dreams: AI, shame and lots of cameras', *The New York Times*, 8 July 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/08/business/china-surveillance-technology.html, accessed 9 May 2019.

29   Aydin D, *op. cit.*

dissenting views. At the same time, governments restrict the ability of their online population to form part of the global citizenry.[30]

Soft digital dictatorships are far more insidious and are slowly rising in prominence. This kind of digital dictatorship is characterised by governments and political parties using data and social media to monitor and spread information and disinformation in order to control and manipulate the behaviours and ideas of their citizens. This happens frequently, but usually without the citizens' consent or knowledge.[31]

Although hard digital dictatorship is more prevalent across Africa, there are signs of softer forms taking root in certain countries too. South Africa's experiences with Bell Pottinger, the discredited UK PR agency that ran a sophisticated campaign of disinformation aimed at fuelling racial tensions during 2017, is a case in point.[32]

The spreading of false news, primarily during elections, has also been particularly challenging for Kenya in recent years. Although not a new problem, 'the permeation of false information through social media channels during the last few election cycles, particularly in the 2013 and 2017 election seasons, has been among the most notable in recent history'.[33]

Meanwhile, in Nigeria, the fake news story reporting that the country's president had been replaced by a Sudanese clone named Jubril circulated widely on social media, and eventually gained worldwide attention, prompting the president himself to denounce the rumour.[34] Tolu Olungesi, a media assistant to Nigeria's president, expressed concern over the impact of fake news on social cohesion in a country where ethnic fissures and tensions are already elevated: 'Fake news kills people. We have seen a lot of things like that,' he said. 'Some of the deadly clashes in Nigeria were sparked off by fake news.'[35]

Africa is not immune, then, from the scourge of misinformation and disinformation, although this is most prevalent in the more urban areas of countries with larger economies. During Nigeria's and South Africa's recent elections, 'soft techniques' were used to wage a war on information:[36]

> Through Whatsapp and Facebook, people shared propaganda videos, made-up quotes, and fabricated articles made to look like they are from the likes of the

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30   Personal interview, Ahmed Bulbulia, Brand Strategist, Johannesburg, 10 December 2018.

31   *Ibid*.

32   Segal D, 'How Bell Pottinger, PR firm for despots and rogues, met its end in South Africa', *New York Times*, 4 February 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/04/business/bell-pottinger-guptas-zuma-south-africa.html, accessed 3 July 2019.

33   Goitom H, 'Initiatives to counter fake news: Kenya', Law Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/law/help/fake-news/kenya.php, accessed 29 June 2019.

34   *Deutsche Welle*, 'Nigeria's president denies death rumor and replacement by Sudanese lookalike "Jubril"', 3 December 2018, https://www.dw.com/en/nigerias-president-denies-death-rumor-and-replacement-by-sudanese-lookalike-jubril/a-46545666, accessed 7 July 2019.

35   Muhumuza R & S Olukoya, 'Nigeria in battle against fake news ahead of elections', *AFP*, 13 February 2019, https://www.apnews.com/9134e478ee894360a0297e6b78d9b6a1, accessed 21 July 2019.

36   Iroanusi Q, 'How Nigerian politicians, supporters use fake news as campaign strategy', *Premium Times Nigeria*, 10 February 2019, https://allafrica.com/stories/201902110016.html, accessed 6 July 2019.

BBC or Al-Jazeera. Meanwhile on Twitter, bots and trolls ... amplify false stories and contribute to the polarisation of the discourse through bullying and intimidation.

Such disinformation campaigns are run for a variety of purposes. In an election season, they are typically geared towards garnering more votes, dividing the electorate, or suppressing support for political rivals.[37]

Understanding regional trends and dynamics in Africa

In Africa, hard digital dictatorship has been primarily achieved using two avenues: targeted Internet shutdowns and increasingly punitive legislation. The case studies below provide examples of how governments across the continent are becoming increasingly creative in curbing freedoms through their use of Internet shutdowns and legislation.

Internet shutdowns

DRC

In the DRC, a total block on Internet connectivity and SMS services was imposed after the chaotic presidential poll of December 2018.

With very little news coming out of the country, it became increasingly difficult for civil society to raise red flags, for protestors to organise, or for independent electoral observers to communicate and share their findings. This lack of transparency raised obvious suspicions of electoral irregularities and fraud, of which there were numerous allegations.[38]

As expected, the government's use of draconian measures to control the Internet was justified in the name of protecting citizens. Claims to protect 'peace and security' were used to justify increasing government-led censorship and the repression of digital civil liberties.[39]

Zimbabwe

The government of Zimbabwe, faced with violent demonstrations, chose to cut off the Internet in January 2019, triggering an 'information blackout' across the country.[40]

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37   Hassan I, 'How fake news spreads, sowing distrust ahead of Nigeria's elections', *African Arguments*, 31 January 2019, https://african arguments.org/2019/01/31/nigeria-fake-news-2019-election/, accessed 18 July 2019.

38   Burke J, 'DRC electoral fraud fears rise as Internet shutdown continues', *The Guardian*, 1 January 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/01/drc-electoral-fears-rise-as-internet-shutdown-continues, accessed 11 April 2019.

39   *Ibid*.

40   Masuku J, 'Internet Shutdown in Zimbabwe: A Most Dangerous Precedent', *The CMDS Blog*, 18 January 2019, https://medium.com/center-for-media-data-and-society/internet-shutdown-in-zimbabwe-a-most-dangerous-precedent-fbdc031e85a4, accessed 3 April 2019.

Although it was later ruled unconstitutional, the blackout achieved its desired effect. It restricted the flow of information and quelled any potential systemic countrywide uprisings or citizen revolts in the wake of the regime's unpopular economic measures. Any resistance movements were cut off at the source, allowing the state to maintain a tight grip on its citizens and use military might to offset potential threats.

The shutdown was an obvious method of political survivalism, where the narrow interests of the ruling elite were placed above those of the general population, whose ability to engage in commercial and economic activity and earn a livelihood was significantly affected.

Econet Wireless confirmed that it had been placed under government orders to block Internet services[41] – a directive it was legally obliged to fulfil. This not only sets an ominous precedent for the citizenry in Zimbabwe but also highlights the risks for other African countries when regimes come under significant pressure.

Legislation

Uganda

Halfway through 2018, Uganda introduced a controversial new levy relating to social media, ostensibly to increase tax revenues, which, it claimed, would augment greater social spending. The so-called Social Media Tax requires users of over-the-top (OTT) services such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter to pay a daily fee for usage.

Despite the proclaimed fiscal benefits, the aim of the levy is to inhibit freedom of speech, curb political dissent and restrict the free flow of information. 'Social media has become the major source of news and political information,'[42] Irene Ikomo, a Kampala-based lawyer told *The Guardian* in January 2019. 'Heightened exposure to information via the Internet has led to Ugandan citizens being more critical about political conditions in the country.'[43]

Since the introduction of the levy in July 2018 there has been a noted decline in the number of Internet users, total revenues collected, and mobile money transactions. The Uganda Communications Commission noted Internet subscriptions declined by more than 2.5 million users (from 16.1 million in July to 13.58 million in September 2018), while the sum of taxpayers from OTT media services decreased by more than 1.2 million users.

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41   Karambo T, 'Zimbabwe shuts down all Internet connectivity again', *BusinessReport*, 18 January 2019, https://www.iol.co.za/business-report/economy/zimbabwe-shuts-down-all-internet-connectivity-again-18869497, accessed 3 April 2019.

42   Ratcliffe R & S Okiror, 'Millions of Ugandans quit internet services as social media tax takes effect', *The Guardian*, 27 February 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/feb/27/millions-of-ugandans-quit-internet-after-introduction-of-social-media-tax-free-speech, accessed 5 June 2019.

43   *Ibid*.

Tanzania

Under the leadership of John Magufuli, the Tanzanian government has instituted an ongoing clampdown on bloggers, online content providers and users with stringent regulatory requirements (including a controversial $924 licencing fee). These measures form part of an increasingly draconian stance across Tanzania, which has seen the country arrest key political opposition figures for dissent and pass a raft of legislation aimed at neutralising critics. This is in keeping with the increasingly authoritarian features that have come to define the Magufuli era.

The Media Services Act and Cybercrime Act are two pieces of legislation that aim to criminalise 'defamatory' remarks and content that is deemed 'seditious' while authorising greater government oversight.[44] Magufuli continued to turn the proverbial screw, particularly on online media, by instituting the Electronic and Postal Communications Online Content Regulations Act in 2018.[45] These policies not only limit use of the Internet by barring entry to many who are unable to pay the prohibitively high fees but also provide governments with 'unfettered power to police the web'.[46]

So what?

The earlier case studies are indicative of recent trends on the continent where 'hard' forms of digital dictatorship are being actively implemented by African governments looking to maintain their grip on power in the face of growing threats to their authority. Internet shutdowns have been particularly successful where civil societies are weak and where institutions are not robust or independent.

Meanwhile, countries in East Africa such as Tanzania and Uganda have also begun to use 'hard digital dictatorship'. They have used less forceful approaches, choosing to rather employ legislative tactics to achieve their aims. While the methods have not been as explicit as those employed by Zimbabwe and the DRC, the intended consequences have largely been achieved. They have successfully limited political expression, stymied debate and constrained the mobilisation of political opposition by controlling the ability of citizens to access and use online information.

The impact of such actions is not limited to the political domain. Connectivity in Africa continues to rise dramatically and is the lifeblood of commercial activity in many countries. In several African countries there is evidence of a movement towards mobile phone payment systems such as EcoCash and mPesa, which are becoming a preferred form

44   Cummings R, 'Tanzania – Digital Age Autocracy', *The Signal Room*, 2018, www.thesignalroom.com, accessed 11 November 2018.
45   *Ibid*.
46   Dahir A, 'You now have to pay the government over $900 a year to be a blogger in Tanzania', *Quartz Africa*, 2018, https://qz.com/africa/1248762/tanzania-social-media-and-blogging-regulations-charge-to-operate-online/, accessed 20 April 2019.

of payment for daily monetary transactions. This means that an Internet shutdown has economic repercussions that reach far beyond limited political communication.

Indeed, according to a <u>2017 report by The Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa</u>, government Internet shutdowns have cost sub-Saharan Africa about $237 million since 2015.

Public safety is also affected. As Access Now's Deniz Duru Aydin argues:[47]

> Shutdowns imposed in the name of 'national security' have the opposite effect on the people cut off from communications platforms and online resources. People don't feel 'secure' or safe when they can't figure out what's going on, can't get access to important news or reach emergency services, and can't check in on their loved ones.

Recent examples and trends suggest the continent is at a crossroads.

The question now is whether these approaches will continue to gain in popularity across the continent in the face of growing political pressures and young populations who are demanding better governance. Rather than face the threat of a disorderly or messy end to their regimes, leaders on the continent may attempt to nip these issues in the bud by employing heavy-handed tactics. This prospect scares analysts like Allison, who fears that the 'digital dictatorship' contagion may become a much bigger problem than it already is as other leaders learn from Mnangagwa's example. But if the genie is already out of the bottle, can it really be put back in, as many African governments are attempting to do? Is it simply too little, too late? Consensus among the experts suggests that digital dictatorship, at least in its current form in Africa, is unlikely to be sustainable.

In a personal interview Chaudhry argued that[48]

> [s]quashing full information may be a short-term plug, but eventually leaks happen, information travels, and that agitates. Limiting communication is a simply short-term tactic as people either identify new avenues through which to communicate or external groups, often in other geographies, take on the communication mandate.

Africa is becoming increasingly connected, with mobile penetration on the rise. According to Ericsson, by 2019 there will be 930 million mobile phones in Africa, almost one for every person on the continent.[49] Similarly, the International Telecommunication Union notes strong growth in Africa; the percentage of people using the Internet increased from

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47   Aydin D, 'Five excuses governments (ab)use to justify Internet shutdowns', Deutsche Welle, 24 October 2016.
48   Chaudry F, *op. cit.*
49   Moosajee N, 'Is Africa leading the innovation revolution?', World Economic Forum, 19 January 2016, <u>https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/is-africa-leading-the-innovation-revolution/</u>, accessed 20 April 2019.

just 2.1% in 2005 to 24.4% in 2018 and continues to rise rapidly.[50] In light of this, it seems incongruent that such restrictive tactics will be successful over the long run.

But such views are premised on current iterations of hard dictatorship in Africa. African countries have yet to fully get to grips with soft digital dictatorship, which uses more manipulative and sophisticated methods to utilise data in a more structured and subtle way. This shift, if it happens, could still have a seismic impact on the way African societies are shaped. Indeed, the use of data in an African context is a double-edged sword – presenting both huge opportunities and substantial risks. If used for benevolent purposes, data-based governance could mitigate poor governance, spark better service delivery, and create leapfrogging effects, resulting in the general upliftment of society. If exploited for short-term gains by self-interested politicians and left unregulated, the risks are skewed to the latter.

Another perspective

But what if the current state of affairs is not as bad as it seems? What if our initial naivety about the positive aspects and potential provided by technology has now been supplemented with a more nuanced understanding of the challenges digital societies are facing? Richard Gevers, of civic tech lab Open Data, ponders whether 'better connectivity and access actually makes us more aware than ever of the threat and action against civil liberties and democratic freedom?'.[51]

Mike Stopforth, a digital strategist, echoes this point through his belief that it may be a case of 'catching up' after an initial lag in public knowledge:[52]

> We [humanity] got really excited when we realised that we could publish for the first time. The early, innocent and idealistic rise of citizen journalism and the evolution of influence and digital network effects were all very alluring and intriguing, but not for a moment did we consider the extraordinary responsibility of democratised publishing. We were given all the power and no guidelines. We paid for the privilege with our data, not realising how valuable it was, and that transaction is the fuel of digital dictatorship. We can't put the genie back in the bottle, but realising the value of our personal data may just slow the destructive effects of the change.

In simple terms, increased connectivity has magnified problems and behaviours that have always existed but have now been brought into the public domain. The increased scrutiny and vigilance by the general public and civil society around such issues has therefore had the net effect of enhancing transparency. This could be a positive thing, even though it

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50   *ITWeb*, 'Africa sees strong Internet growth', 11 December 2018, https://www.itweb.co.za/content/VgZeyvJA3V6qdjX9, accessed 1 May 2019.
51   Personal interview, Richard Gevers, Founder, Open Data, Durban, 25 May 2019.
52   Personal interview, Mike Stopforth, Digital strategist, Johannesburg, 23 May 2019.

may seem somewhat counter-intuitive in the current climate of heightened tensions and polarisation.

Conclusion

The era of digital dictatorship is far from over. The big question now is whether it will continue on its current trajectory or change course. Democratic societies both globally and in Africa need to adapt to the modern realities of this brave new world. This will require skilful navigation of a more contested and dangerous online sphere by securing Internet freedom against the rise of digital authoritarianism.[53] Questions of freedom of expression, censorship and what constitutes the public interest will need to be wrestled with. The roles and responsibilities of governments, civil society, Internet providers and regulators will need to be re-assessed and redesigned to ensure that they are adept at managing the complex, ambiguous and evolving realities that sit at the intersection of technology, politics and governance.

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53   Shahbaz A, *op. cit.*

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SAIIA is an independent, non-government think tank whose key strategic objectives are to make effective input into public policy, and to encourage wider and more informed debate on international affairs, with particular emphasis on African issues and concerns.

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Cover image

Musician turned politician Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu aka Bobi Wine (C) is joined by activists in Kampala on 11 July 2018 to protest a controversial tax on the use of social media. Access to media such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter has been blocked unless users pay a 200-shilling ($0.05, 0.04 euro) daily tax. Uganda's President justified the move saying many citizens did not pay their taxes as they were meant to, and should not 'donate money to foreign companies through chatting or even lying' on social media (Isaac Kasamani/AFP/Getty Images)