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Ten African countries digital space shut down at twice the rate it has been opened

A new study from the African Digital Network has found that over the last 20 years, online civic space has been shut down at twice the rate it has been opened.

Researchers compared the digital rights' landscapes of ten African countries: South Africa, Uganda, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, Egypt and Cameroon. Between the year 2000 and 2020, they recorded 115 examples of online civic space being closed down – mostly by national governments – but only 65 cases in which such spaces were opened.

The study defined online civic space as any digital space in which people are free to participate in governance, freely voice their opinions online or organise around issues that affect them personally and politically.

"We found that in most cases it was national governments who had sought to close these spaces using a combination of internet shutdowns, digital surveillance, arrests for online speech and the introduction of laws suppressing free speech," said University of Cape Town Associate Professor of Media Studies, Tanja Bosch.

"We also found that citizens responded to such government repression by repurposing technologies and platforms including SMS, social media, VPNs (virtual private networks) and encrypted messaging services," she said.

In the majority of countries studied, Bosch said they identified a common sequence of events. "Governments would close offline "real world" civic spaces, often in a bid to stifle dissent, which would then prompt citizens to create online spaces for civic participation. In response many governments then sought to close these online civic spaces too."

The study found that the trend by national governments to close civic space at twice the rate that it was opened held across the majority of countries studied.

In Uganda for example, the national government instituted a tax on social media and has also resorted to internet shutdowns during elections and periods of civil unrest. Despite these measures, activists have used technology such as VPNs to avoid the tax and continue organising online, often using viral hashtags such as #FreeStellaNyanzi and #FreeBobiWine, two political prisoners who were later released by the Ugandan government after having been arrested.

In Kenya, a country well known as a hub of mobile technology innovation, the online crowdsourced platform Ushahidi, which means "testimony" in Swahili, was used to map instances of violence after the 2007 elections. Ushahidi is now being used across the globe as a way to monitor elections in many countries, as well as map cases of sexual harassment in Egypt and the humanitarian crisis in Haiti.

Juliet Nanfuka, a digital rights researcher at the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa and member of the African Digital Rights Network, explained that digital rights are important because they enable human rights.

"They allow for civic engagement, right to freedom of expression, right to assembly and so much more. In the COVID-19 era, the role of digital rights has become even more pronounced as the digital society must become much more inclusive."

Nanfuka is concerned about the role of self-censorship in closing online civic spaces. "Self-censorship online is being fuelled by financial restrictions and online content regulation. All of these actions inhibit freedom of expression and access to information, both of which are fundamental to have a flourishing civic space."

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