GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world

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ZIMBABWE

INTERNET RIGHTS AND ACCESS CHALLENGES IN ZIMBABWE DURING COVID-19: WHAT NOW?

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Introduction

This report focuses on Zimbabwe, where I am currently based. It draws on interviews conducted with representatives of media civil society organisations such as the Zimbabwe chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA Zimbabwe),[1] Digital Society Africa[2] and Magamba Network,[3] among others. These organisations are working on digital rights and digital technology-related issues, and provided me with valuable insights on new digital rights advocacy priorities.

Civil society organisations doing advocacy work on digital rights and digital technology-related issues in Zimbabwe, like their counterparts in other countries in the world, have had to shift their advocacy work online to ensure continuity in their campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet for many this mediated form of communication introduced difficulties, such as not being able to speak to constituencies who did not have effective internet access. At the same time, the pandemic made many civil society organisations more aware of the importance of digital rights – an awareness that digital rights actors should leverage in future advocacy for a free internet in Zimbabwe.

Background

Zimbabweans rejoiced when Emmerson Mnangagwa succeeded former president Robert Mugabe, who was forced out of office in late 2017. The thinking was that the new president would deliver on his refrain that the country was now "open for business".[4]

But frustration has risen over the lack of improvement in the collapsed economy. Zimbabweans have sunk into poverty as food prices continue to go up, and some people can no longer afford the exorbitant fares for public transport.

Like any developing country faced with a massive economic meltdown and high inflation rates, before COVID-19 Zimbabweans had been preoccupied with ensuring the day-to-day livelihoods of their families and putting food on the table. As in other parts of the world, they were drawn to digital platforms for news on the pandemic, which has wreaked havoc in most people's lives, with numerous deaths and illnesses being recorded since its onset. Digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter replaced face-to-face interactions as people resorted to sharing information and news via these platforms. This was necessitated by lockdown restrictions which saw people spending months indoors and some having to move their workspaces to their homes, start conducting business online, and rely on the internet for education.

Moving online introduces new challenges, but more awareness of digital rights

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, civil society organisations mainly conducted advocacy work through face-to-face seminars, workshops and field visits. They also engaged the media in face-to-face discussions on television and radio. However, due to the pandemic, communication was heavily mediated by online communication tools such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet.

MISA Zimbabwe's legal and ICT officer, Nompilo Simanje, noted that this continuity for campaigns was important, but was also limited by the digital divide:

> Civil society organisations had to include online-related advocacy strategies so as to continue with their implementation, since physical meetings were banned or restricted. This included learning and adapting to new tools for communication, new methods for awareness raising and also exploring safer platforms. The challenge, however, was centred on reaching the targeted audience due to the digital divide and issues around digital literacy and affordability of data.

Simanje said that this reliance on the internet foregrounded problems such as affordable access and disinformation:

1   https://zimbabwe.misa.org
2   https://www.digitalsociety.africa
3   http://magambanetwork.com
4   Al Jazeera. (2019, 18 January). Zimbabwe imposes internet shutdown amid crackdown on protests. *Al Jazeera*. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/1/18/zimbabwe-imposes-internet-shutdown-amid-crackdown-on-protests

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an increased reliance on the internet space for access to information, for work purposes, for e-learning purposes, among other uses; hence several digital rights issues had to be prioritised, which include internet affordability and also issues relating to misinformation and disinformation.

She further noted that the right to privacy online became a critical priority for digital rights, as did the need for internet users to be aware of digital safety and security issues.

However, she said this new advocacy landscape also highlighted the importance of digital rights and why all civil society organisations should prioritise advocacy related to access to information online, free expression and the right to privacy.

Human rights violations

The Zimbabwean government is constitutionally bound to uphold people's rights to free expression and access to information. However, with the advent of the pandemic, new challenges arose, such as those that emerged after the government was exposed to an increase in public scrutiny online, and the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) government drew a lot of criticism for failing to revive the economy.

In response, the government came up with subversive measures to stifle dissent on digital platforms.

Simanje noted that the government's response to disinformation had a negative impact on freedom of expression:

It is critical to note also that there were emergency laws that were put in place for purposes of the COVID-19 pandemic which affected free expression, especially laws on the criminalisation of fake news.

Other measures included arresting journalists who shared opposing views to the ruling party online, as well as using pro-ZANU-PF party agents called *Varakashi* to stifle dissent.

According to Tawanda Mugari from Digital Society Africa, Varakashi are "pro-ZANU-PF agents", or people who use social media platforms such as Twitter to bully people who are anti-ZANU-PF and are vocal about it online.

Like other measures to limit freedoms, the state-sanctioned cyber bullying of those with dissident views stifles freedom of expression and can have a long-term impact on citizens' right to express themselves freely online. As one journalist told the International Press Institute:

I have had subtle threats directed at me on social media by some government officials and anonymous accounts that support the government each time we have published stories that make the authorities uncomfortable.[5]

A report from Human Rights Watch notes that Zimbabwe has been one of the worst offenders when it comes to using COVID-19 as an excuse to crack down on journalists.[6] On 20 July 2020, Hopewell Chin'ono, who had voiced support for anti-government protests online, was charged with inciting violence and communicating falsehoods. MISA Zimbabwe director Tabani Moyo commented at the time on the arrest of Chin'ono, saying his arrest was intended to intimidate citizens and journalists in Zimbabwe, calling it a "dangerous trend":

This immediate case points to a clear case of trying to effect a chilling effect on the media. How do you come to a conclusion that Hopewell has violated any law of the country for providing an opinion on a video clip that has thousands of people communicating on it? Why, why arriving at Hopewell, a journalist for that matter? So, it is an assault on the media. Secondly, it is meant to send chilling effect not only to the media, but to the users of the online spaces. This is a dangerous trend we are seeing.[7]

Mugari noted the shift in prioritising digital rights among civil society organisations as they rallied together and spoke strongly against the harassment and intimidation of online journalists and political activists. However, he also noted that journalists had to practise self-censorship with regard to the stories they could publish.

Addressing the digital divide

According to Mugari, the scope of work for civil society organisations involved in digital rights activism in Zimbabwe shifted as they now had to intensify advocacy on cyber laws and bridging the digital divide. People in rural areas were left behind as most of them did not have smartphones and data that allowed them to connect to the internet.

5   Maukonen, R. (2021, 17 March). In Zimbabwe, one year of COVID-19 saw surge in harassment of free press. *International Press Institute*. https://ipi.media/in-zimbabwe-one-year-of-covid-19-saw-surge-in-harassment-of-free-press

6   Mavhunga, C. (2021, 11 February). Zimbabwe Among African Countries Using COVID-19 to Crack Down on Journalists, Report Finds. *VOA*. https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_zimbabwe-among-african-countries-using-covid-19-crack-down-journalists-report-finds/6201904.html

7   Mavhunga, C. (2021, 9 January). Zimbabwe Police Arrest Journalist for Third Time in 6 Months. *VOA*. https://www.voanews.com/a/press-freedom_zimbabwe-police-arrest-journalist-third-time-6-months/6200541.html

It is important to note that Zimbabwe has failed to invest effectively in infrastructure that supports digital technologies. Electricity, for example, is still a challenge in rural areas and in urban areas, particularly in high-density suburbs, which affects internet connectivity.

In a 2021 report, Paradigm Initiative notes the high cost of data in Zimbabwe, which currently stands at USD 4 for 1 GB mobile prepaid broadband. This cost means the majority of Zimbabweans cannot afford it. MISA Zimbabwe notes that the prohibitive high cost of data is discriminatory and infringes on people's right to access information provided for by the constitution and the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms.[8]

To try to address this issue, Simanje said that MISA Zimbabwe held digital rights and literacy campaigns during the pandemic, which included awareness-raising campaigns on cybersecurity and on the data protection bill.[9]

It also launched Information Hubs (or Wi-Fi hotspots)[10] in urban and rural areas, namely in Gweru, which is a town in the Midlands province; Lupane, which is a rural area in Matabeleland North; Gwanda, located in rural areas in Matabeleland South; and Nyanga, a town in Manicaland province. This was in an effort to increase access to information and knowledge through internet services.

Implications of these changes

Some digital rights activists, such as Lukman Adams, viewed the emphasis on digital rights advocacy priorities as a positive development. Adams said this will translate into a wider appreciation of the importance of digital technologies and digital rights advocacy, which will mean that digital inclusion can be achieved for the betterment of society.

However, he added that in jurisdictions where the government interfered in the digital rights of its citizens, the implications might be devastating, since they are likely to be victims of internet shutdowns and unlawful surveillance.

His caution is not unfounded. In Zimbabwe, a total internet shutdown was witnessed in July 2019 during fuel price hike protests. For the first time, Zimbabweans had organised a protest using social media against the increase in fuel prices.

Upon realising the power that digital platforms and especially WhatsApp were having, the government saw fit to come up with counter-measures to the protests, one of which was to demand a total internet shutdown. This meant that Zimbabweans were unable to effectively plan and roll out their protests using WhatsApp and online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Critics said this was an attempt to hide growing reports of a violent crackdown on the protests.[11]

In February 2022, internet service access was restricted during a Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) rally held at Zimbabwe Grounds in Highfields, one of Harare's oldest suburbs. NetBlocks established that the internet was throttled, limiting live streaming and access to online content. Reports indicate that multiple media houses failed to broadcast the rally in real time because of this.[12]

Nyasha Mukapiko from Magamba said that by throttling the internet during the CCC rally, internet service providers infringed on people's right to access information online. Simanje noted that the Zimbabwean government might continue to use the law as a weapon to limit the exercise of rights online.

Meanwhile, Lukman added that some jurisdictions might also want to use the increasing interest in digital inclusion, particularly internet access, to make excessive profits by introducing new taxes and charges.

Conclusion

This report identified a rising interest in digital rights issues in Zimbabwe, following the need for people to move online during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is likely that digital rights will continue to be a priority going into the future, as more and more social and economic activities move online. There is therefore a simultaneous need to ensure that no one is left behind and for priority attention to be given to the digital divide. This will take a lot of work and commitment from civil society organisations, working together with the government and internet service providers. Laws that are friendly to online users, journalists and political activists need to be strongly advocated for to avoid a narrowing of the online space, in the process infringing on people's rights to access information and to freely express themselves.

8   Matimbe, T. (2021). *Londa: Zimbabwe Digital Rights and Inclusion 2020 Report*. Paradigm Initiative. https://paradigmhq.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/lr-Zimbabwe-Digital-Rights-Inclusion-2020-Report.pdf

9   New Zimbabwe. (2020, 22 March). MISA-Zimbabwe launches free internet WiFi to marginalised communities. *New Zimbabwe*. https://www.newzimbabwe.com/misa-zimbabwe-launches-free-internet-wifi-to-marginalised-communities

10 Media Institute of Southern Africa Zimbabwe. (2020). *An Analysis of Social Media Use in the SADC Region: 2014-2020*. https://data.misa.org/entity/4sgzarl1vce?file=1624258998903w3z3ke5tz37.pdf&page=6

11 Al Jazeera. (2019, 18 January). Op. cit.

12 Pindula News. (2022, 20 February). Internet Slowdown Limits Coverage Of CCC Rally. *Pindula*. https://zero.pindula.co.zw/internet-slowdown-limits-coverage-of-ccc-rally

Action steps

Below are some action steps for consideration by civil society organisations working in Zimbabwe, which draw on the interviews conducted for this report:

- Civil society groups need to reinvigorate their attention on the digital divide, including through providing disconnected groups and people on the margins of society with access to digital technology as well as training in digital literacy skills.

- Civil society organisations also need to intensify their advocacy on data costs.

- They should prioritise advocacy related to accessing information online, free expression and the right to privacy.

- Civil society will also have to strengthen its advocacy on internet shutdowns, which are likely to be imposed in the future, as well as against unlawful surveillance. There is a need to advocate for reviews and amendments of all laws that limit digital rights.

- They need to continue to raise awareness on the importance of digital rights.

DIGITAL FUTURES FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) highlights the different and complex ways in which democracy and human rights are at risk across the globe, and illustrates how fundamental meaningful internet access is to sustainable development.

It includes a series of thematic reports, dealing with, among others, emerging issues in advocacy for access, platformisation, tech colonisation and the dominance of the private sector, internet regulation and governance, privacy and data, new trends in funding internet advocacy, and building a post-pandemic feminist agenda. Alongside these, 36 country and regional reports, the majority from the global South, all offer some indication of how we can begin mapping a shifted terrain.

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