The Internet, Social Media Gagging and Participatory Democracy in the Horn of Africa

Article · July 2018

DOI: 10.47697/lds.3435000

1 author:

Damilola Adegoke
King's College London
5 PUBLICATIONS   **6** CITATIONS

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:

Future Peace and Future Technologies View project

The Internet, Social Media Gagging and Participatory Democracy in the Horn of Africa

Damilola Adegoke

Introduction

The internet age has witnessed controversy to do with control of the internet. Who has a right over the internet? Should states laws determine behaviours online? Who is to exercise juridical power in case of infractions? Cyber libertarians and social media activists think freedom of expression and of speech should include immunity from all forms of government and non-government control. Most researchers into social media rights often tilt the balance against the government under the assumption that netizens are neutral actors who must be protected and who portend little or no harm.

However, the internet is just a tool of communication. It could be a machinery to preach hatred just as it could be used for peaceful ends. People have used the anonymity provided by the internet to recruit fighters for terrorist organisations and to preach hate against vulnerable groups. A more traditional example was the use of the Radio to propagate genocide and ethnic cleansing in Rwanda. Thus, as romantic as the idea of absolute freedom may seem, the need for governments to protect their citizens from harm must not be overlooked. Yet, the latter is also the excuse provided by governments in Africa, not least those in the Horn of Africa, to fight dissidents and gag opposition.

The debate as to who controls the internet seems to have been laid to rest at least for the moment, ever since the case between the French government and Yahoo over the former's demand for Yahoo to ban Nazi memorabilia merchant sites from French cyberspace. The judicial decision, which favours the position of the French government arguably, set precedence for internet governance.[1] It was one of the defining moments for the status of internet governance and cyber territoriality. The odds are in favour of states in part because the infrastructure for the transmission and distribution of internet access are domiciled in states. This provides opportunities for governments to wield their power against Internet Service Providers (ISPs) who might want to exercise independent agency. The more extreme use of coercive power of the state against internet freedom has typically been seen as 'internet gagging'.

---

[1] Goldsmith, Jack and Wu, Tim, *Who Controls the Internet?: Illusions of a Borderless World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 3-6

Cuba, China, Saudi Arabia, North Korea and countries of Africa particularly in the Horn, such as Ethiopia, are states, which come to mind when anything akin to 'internet gagging' is discussed. This however fosters the erroneous assumption that only such states tamper with the 'freedom of the internet.' Countries across the globe including acclaimed democratic countries have one time or the other, sought extra-legal means to monitor private communications in the name of national security. Edward Snowden is currently wanted for espionage for leaking classified government information.[2] The line between internet gagging and governance of the internet space may appear blurry but it is almost a given that internet gagging is a restriction placed upon individuals or organisations from posting certain contents online. It is another form of cyber-censorship.

Many democratic countries invoke state laws to 'protect' their citizens from negative external influences. Examples include: Germany's clampdown on online peddlers of hate speech and Nazism; United States' fight against online drug vending; and Britain's anti-child online pornography.[3] Conversely, other less democratic countries wield state power against dissents and in some cases resort to incarceration. Insulting Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej's dog Tongdaeng, for example, got a man incarcerated. Pongsak Sriboonpeng was sentenced to 30-years imprisonment for insulting the Thai monarchy on Facebook.[4]

The baseline rationale for the exercise of coercive power in relation to internet freedom, is usually the need to ensure national security. Noble as this may sound, its vagueness has provided opportunities for less democratic states to gag opposition and clamp down on citizens' rights to freedom of expression particularly via the internet.

Another reason behind the massive power of government over the internet could be traced to the history of the technology itself. The internet is a product of massive US Military and Defence contractual arrangements. The core of technology, the language of communication – the TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol) – between one computer and another, the language of sending email SMTP (Simple Mail Transfer Protocol) and other sundry marginal

---

[2] Finn, Peter and Horwitz (2017), Sari 'U.S. charges Snowden with espionage,' *The Washington Post*, June 21, 2013. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-charges-snowden-with-espionage/2013/06/21/507497d8-dab1-11e2-a016-92547bf094cc_story.html?utm_term=.845d53b213f2 (Accessed 21 February 2017)

[3] Cellan-Jones, Rory (2014), 'Protecting children from pornography,' *BBC* News, March 28, 2014. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-26783483 (Accessed 5 April 2017)

[4] Matharu, Hardeep (2015) 'Thai man jailed for 30 years for Facebook Posts insulting monarchy,' *The Independent*, August 7, 2015. Available at: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/thai-man-jailed-for-30-years-for-facebook-posts-insulting-monarchy-10445226.html (Accessed 5 April 2017)

technologies which surround the internet, were bye-products of engineers and scientists working directly or indirectly under contracts funded by the US government with the exception of a tiny fraction of geeky associates.[5] By design and structure, internet technology needs a gateway and governments have managed the space mainly because they grant licenses for ISPs to operate within the country; and without the providers, there is no internet, hence no social media.

Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti conveniently chose regulatory approach of control over the internet often monitoring this space in ways that lead to censorship. In fact, they take the 'control' aspect to the extreme. These countries of the Horn of Africa have always featured prominently on the list of states that interrupt, interfere, restrict or filter internet access. According to Freedom on the Net 2016 Report, only China, Syria, and Iran rank worse in internet freedom than Ethiopia.[6] In 2015, Eritrea trumped North Korea and Saudi Arabia on the list of the most censored countries in the world.[7] The situation in the region demands serious attention as governments appear to have taken national security to mean restricting the freedom of dissident citizens.

The Internet and Social Media Gagging

Without the internet, there would be no social media. Just like the internet, the social media including, for example, Facebook, has links to governments. That explains perhaps why all the tweets posted online are archived in perpetuity by the Library of Congress in the United States. Facebook Graph provides a ready tool for intelligence gathering and passive surveillance operations - a situation which led several internet activists to protest over internet users' infringement of privacy.[8] There are censorship laws in most countries of the world. The primary reason often cited is to protect national security. Countries in the Horn of Africa seem to have mastered the excuse of clamping down on dissenting voices under the pretext of national security.

The Ethio Telecom and the Ethiopian Telecommunication Agency (ETA) are government agencies with sole control of internet access in Ethiopia. Ethio Telecom is the sole Internet Service Provider (ISP) and also the only top-level-

---

[5] Goldsmith and Tim, *Who Controls the Internet?: Illusions of a Borderless World*, pp. 22-27.

[6] 'Ethiopia: Freedom on the Net 2016,' *Freedom HouseI.* Available at:
https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2016/ethiopia (Accessed 5 April 2017)

[7] '10 Most Censored Countries 2015,' *Committee for the Protection of Journalists.* Available at:
https://cpj.org/2015/04/10-most-censored-countries.php (Accessed 6 April 2017)

[8] Decugis, Guillaume (2017), 'The Big Problem with Facebook's Graph Search: Privacy Constraints,' *Fast Company*, January 22, 2013. Available at:
https://www.fastcompany.com/3004952/big-problem-facebooks-graph-search-privacy-constraints (Accessed 7 April 2017)

domain vendor in the country. This means, all internet connections and access are regulated and monitored by the government. In Eritrea, only one percent of the population has access to the internet, and only around six percent have mobile phones.[9] Countries in the region use filtering, monitoring and surveillance equipment to regulate social media activities and internet communications; and anti-government websites and blogs are blocked. At some point in 2006, Ethiopian internet café users were required to register their names and addresses.[10]

Bloggers and social media activists have had to contend with intrusive policies of governments, which are hidden under vague anti-terrorism laws; thereby equating opposition to government with terrorism. Websites are attacked by paid internet mercenaries; email accounts are hacked and police often wire-tap phone conversations or demand self-censorship of social media posts.[11] Some of the countries in the region are signatories to several international conventions and laws, which guarantee freedom of expression but they have manipulated local laws to serve their ends. Ironically, they intensify these monitoring, intrusions and surveillance around periods of organised protests against injustice; for example, Ethiopia was alleged to have blocked social media sites during Oromo protests.[12] In situations where government controls who gets connected and what sites get visited by the citizens, there is little to no democratic rights for the citizens because the aim of the so-called national security effectively comes across as regime preservation.

Social Media and Participatory Democracy

Society is stratified and political elites dominate political discourses and seem to attract traditional media patronage. It is not uncommon for issues to be moderated to express the contrasting opinions of those at the top rung of society. Typically, debates are between different elite groupings. Rarely do ordinary people have a means to express their opinions and truly drive policies. Most democracies are representative democracies, even the quasi-democratic states of

---

[9] 'Eritrea: Freedom on the Net 2016,' *Freedom House*. Available at:
https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/eritrea (Accessed 5 April 2017)

[10] Abate, Groum (2017), 'Ethiopia Internet Cafes Start Registering Users,' *Nasret*, December 27, 2006. Available at:
http://nazret.com/blog/index.php/2006/12/27/ethiopia_internet_cafes_start_registerin (Accessed 10 April 2017)

[11] 'Ethiopia Trains Bloggers to attack its opposition and the Eritrean Government,' *Madote*. Available at: http://www.madote.com/2014/06/ethiopia-trains-bloggers-to-attack-its.html (Accessed 20 April 2017)

[12] 'Ethiopia: Social media and news websites blocked by government to prevent protests,' *Amnesty International UK*, December 13, 2016. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/ethiopia-social-media-and-news-websites-blocked-government-prevent-protests (Accessed 20 April 2017)

Africa. One apparent weakness of this arrangement is that politicians are more loyal to their parties, to lobbyists or their own hegemonic sustenance than to care so much about the electorates. Arguably, there is need for an independent platform for citizens to aggregate their opinions and form groups to engender some form of direct democracy, participatory enough to in some cases drive policies, organize revolutions such as in Tunisia and Egypt and pressure governments without the 'middle men' politicians.

Societies with an appreciable level of freedom of the internet (there is no such society with totally free internet space), tend to record steadier economic growth. Shutting down internet in a globalised economy does not forebode well for developing countries such as those in the countries of the Horn Africa that are the focus of this paper. According to the Centre for Technology Innovation at the Brookings Institution, internet shutdowns in Ethiopia between mid-2015 and mid-2016 cost the country's economy about $9 million.[13] Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia are no exception. Open societies have certain characteristics, which include open media and freedom of information. While as earlier noted, this freedom is qualified, a cursory look at more economically advanced societies reveals a large guarantee of freedom of expression. Nearly all the countries of Africa have diverse methods of controlling access to information. They have enjoyed years of controlling political agenda and are often unwilling to relinquish that power to the user-generated political agenda shaping the power of social media. Many see the technology as a threat rather than a tool for engaging the polity in the task of nation building.

Hyperbolic assertions have nonetheless been made about the ubiquitous nature of social media as an instrument of entrenching democracy. The social relationships power of the social media could be attributed not to the technology in itself but to the various human actors who have imposed their power on the system. These actors include activists, politicians, celebrities – agents who brought their offline power to bear upon discourses and narratives on the internet. A careful examination of group dynamics across social media networks would reveal that regular users do re-tweet tweets posted by political actors and also follow 'popular' social influencers on the different platforms. This is not to preclude the possible role of social media in promoting participatory governance, but to serve as a cautionary point against over-fitting the real influence of social media in democratic governance.

---

[13] James Jeffrey, 'Ethiopia: Internet shutdowns take their toll on economy,' *Madote*. Available at: http://www.madote.com/2016/12/ethiopia-internet-shutdowns-take-their.html (Accessed 17 May 2017)

Recognising the role independent actors can play on social media in shaping public opinions; several governments in the Horn of Africa particularly in Ethiopia and Eritrea, have attempted to crack down on activists.[14] This approach has been counter-productive for the image portrayal of these governments. Countries where citizens have been actively engaged through participative governance have fared better than those where governments seek to totally control citizens' engagements online.

Allowing citizens to air their grievances freely can help government officials and policy makers to crowdsource solutions while also providing direct access to citizens' opinions. The United Nations harnessed the wisdom of the crowd to crowdsource policy ideas for the post-2015 development agenda from hundreds of thousands of digital media and mobile phone users across the world. This participatory approach could be deployed by states in the Horn of Africa to harvest opinions from citizens thereby promoting a vertical distribution of power as against the highly-centralised, top-down approach to governance. When citizens feel ownership of policies, they tend to trust governments the more. Representative democracy could be tainted by various extraneous power actors but direct participatory democracy is beneficial to all political actors. There is no doubt that social media has provided the platform for social interactions and network building; but we must not be tempted to extricate the actors from the tools.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The African Leadership Centre emphasises as one of its core values, the need for African led-ideas in policy formulations particularly in the area of peace and security. The issue of internet freedom and use of social media for participatory governance calls for African-led ideas. There is need for governments in the Horn of Africa and Africa as a whole to interrogate several transnational issues around social media use, security and development. It is important for governments in the region to put in place a more open and transparent security approach which would guarantee that the rights to privacy and freedom of expression of all citizens is not violated. There are other areas of security, which could be monitored and which would be applauded by all and which will not give the impression that security is about regime preservation. There are, for example, internet child pornography sites, internet predators, online recruitment platforms for terrorist activities, ethnic hate sites and other instruments of insecurity out

---

[14] Müller, Tanja (2015) 'Singled Out? Eritrea and the Politics of the Horn of Africa,' *World Politics Review*, September 17, 2015. Available at:
https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/16715/singled-out-eritrea-and-the-politics-of-the-horn-of-africa (Accessed 17 April 2017)

there on the internet and on social media which demand the attention of governments.

The internet should not be portrayed as an instrument of subversion because it is just a tool which can be put to beneficent use. A typical example is the use of social media and internet for crowd sourcing policies that will entrench democratic ideals. Opinions could be mined through social media using existing methodologies to measure public reactions to government policies and to also help design pro-people initiatives, which can aid development.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

'10 Most Censored Countries 2015,' *Committee for the Protection of Journalists*. Available at: https://cpj.org/2015/04/10-most-censored-countries.php (Accessed 6 April 2017)

Abate, Groum (2017) 'Ethiopia Internet Cafes Start Registering Users,' *Nasret*, December 27, 2006. Available at: http://nazret.com/blog/index.php/2006/12/27/ethiopia_internet_cafes_start_registerin (Accessed 10 April 201)

Cellan-Jones, Rory (2014), 'Protecting children from pornography,' *BBC* News, March 28, 2014. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-26783483 (Accessed 5 April 2017)

Decugis, Guillaume (2013) 'The Big Problem with Facebook's Graph Search: Privacy Constraints,' *Fast Company*, January 22, 2013. Available at: https://www.fastcompany.com/3004952/big-problem-facebooks-graph-search-privacy-constraints (Accessed 7 April 2017)

'Eritrea: Freedom on the Net 2016,' *Freedom House*. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/eritrea (Accessed 5 April 2017)

'Ethiopia Trains Bloggers to attack its opposition and the Eritrean Government,' *Madote*. Available at: http://www.madote.com/2014/06/ethiopia-trains-bloggers-to-attack-its.html (Accessed 20 April 2017)

'Ethiopia: Freedom on the Net 2016,' *Freedom HouseI.* Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2016/ethiopia (Accessed 5 April 2017)

'Ethiopia: Social media and news websites blocked by government to prevent protests,' *Amnesty International UK*, December 13, 2016. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/ethiopia-social-media-and-news-websites-blocked-government-prevent-protests (20 April 2017)

Finn, Peter and Horwitz, Sari (2013) 'U.S. charges Snowden with espionage,' *The Washington Post*, June 21, 2013. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-charges-snowden-with-espionage/2013/06/21/507497d8-dab1-11e2-a016-92547bf094cc_story.html?utm_term=.845d53b213f2 (Accessed 21 February 2017)

Goldsmith, Jack and Wu, Tim. (2006), *Who Controls the Internet?: Illusions of a Borderless World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Jeffrey, James (2017) 'Ethiopia: Internet shutdowns take their toll on economy,' *MadoteI.* Available at: http://www.madote.com/2016/12/ethiopia-internet-shutdowns-take-their.html (Accessed 17 May 2017)

Matharu, Hardeep (2015) 'Thai man jailed for 30 years for Facebook Posts insulting monarchy,' *The Independent*, August 7, 2015. Available at: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/thai-man-jailed-for-30-years-for-facebook-posts-insulting-monarchy-10445226.html (5 May 2017)

Müller, Tanja (2015), 'Singled Out? Eritrea and the Politics of the Horn of Africa,' *World Politics Review*, September 17, 2015. Available at: https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/16715/singled-out-eritrea-and-the-politics-of-the-horn-of-africa (Accessed 17 April 2017)