

Online expression and activism in Zimbabwe

FULL SCRIPT

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INTRODUCTION

Offline political commentary, and expression has over the years taken form in public 'utterances', graffiti, defaced images of the ruling elite and in some instances artistic expression in the form of film, song and paintings resulting in citizens, journalists and artists arrests while exercising their rights to free expression. The internet has extended the space for this and with an even greater reach, thereby causing the government anxieties.

[KAHOOT SURVEY]

Status of Freedom of expression/Access to information online

By 2016, the face of social media had changed as the platforms widened opportunities for political discourse and mobilisation for civil action. Social movements #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka built a following and utilised social media to organise protests that included the largest citizen led mass stayaway since independence on 6 July, 2016. Social movement leaders, Pastor Evan Mawarire and Promise Mkwanzai were arrested at the time. Clearly the swift adoption of the National ICTs policy in August 2016 was prompted by these 'disturbances'. The policy, which had been shelved since 2009 sets out the framework for the anticipated cyber laws, namely the Data Protection Bill, the Electronic Transaction and Electronic Commerce Bill and the Computer Crime and Cyber Crimes Bills.

- Warnings against use of social media by state Security forces issued by the **Commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces** General Constantino Chiwenga, **Police Commissioner** General Augustine Chihuri and **Army Commander** Lieutenant General Valerio Sibanda, against citizens 'abusing' social media to share information and organise the protests. **ZANU PF Members of parly** [Independence day commemorations] & **Presidium**
- Misleading/Misinformation of the citizenry on what constitutes cyber terrorism by state media aimed at instilling fear and self-censorship among citizens when exercising their rights to free expression, access to

information and freedom of conscience.

- Online self-censorship & citizens policing of each other in aid of the state is high on even private groups- MISA-Zimbabwe recorded 27 arrests in 2016
- The face of social media has changed -Facebook live broadcasts [freelance journalists- and online content producers]

Digital security activists have also raised concerns about the levels of awareness of online users on their rights to the privacy of communications and their ability to secure their communication in response to possible violation of that privacy. At the same time feminists and marginalised groups such as the Lesbian Gay Bi-Sexual Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) community argue that the internet, for them is not a 'technology of freedom' as they continue to face violence online, based on their sex and sexuality.

There are a number of reasons why the likelihood of another shutdown cannot be ruled out in Zimbabwe, especially as the country heads towards an election in 2018. These include:

- Trends in the region that have seen governments impose a partial or blanket shutdown during elections
- The fact that the Zimbabwean government has over the years moved in to significantly control the telecommunications sector through ownership
- The apparent vulnerability of ISPs in Zimbabwe as will be noted below in the section on intermediary liability.

Access to the Internet

Zimbabwe's urban-rural divide exists mainly because the greater number of base stations that facilitate access to the internet via mobile phones are found in the urban areas.

Other critical elements that limit access to the internet include:

- Affordability as mentioned above,
- Local content that is, relevant and understandable [language] to the development of the poor and marginalised.
- Legal and regulatory environment conducive for business, innovation and enterprise.
- Promotion of the Youth in their access to and skills in using the internet and related technologies.

- Media and information literacy in schools and in other public institutions as a means of enabling all people to access, interpret and make informed judgements as users of information, and at the same time, create information.
- ISPs have expressed concerns over the use of the USF to cater for rural connectivity, stating that rural goes beyond their corporate social responsibility as they are driven by a profit motive, which rural users cannot contribute to. ¹ In a move to ease connectivity issues, government adopted the infrastructure-sharing policy through Statutory Instrument 137 (2016). The policy sees to eliminate duplication of existing and future telecommunication infrastructure so as to maximize its reach.

QUOTATION

Mohamed Morsi is an Egyptian politician who served as the fifth President of Egypt, from 30 June 2012 to 3 July 2013

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¹ Making the case for net neutrality regulation in Zimbabwe (2016)
<http://www.dszim.org/2016/05/19/making-the-case-for-net-neutrality-regulation-in-zimbabwe/>