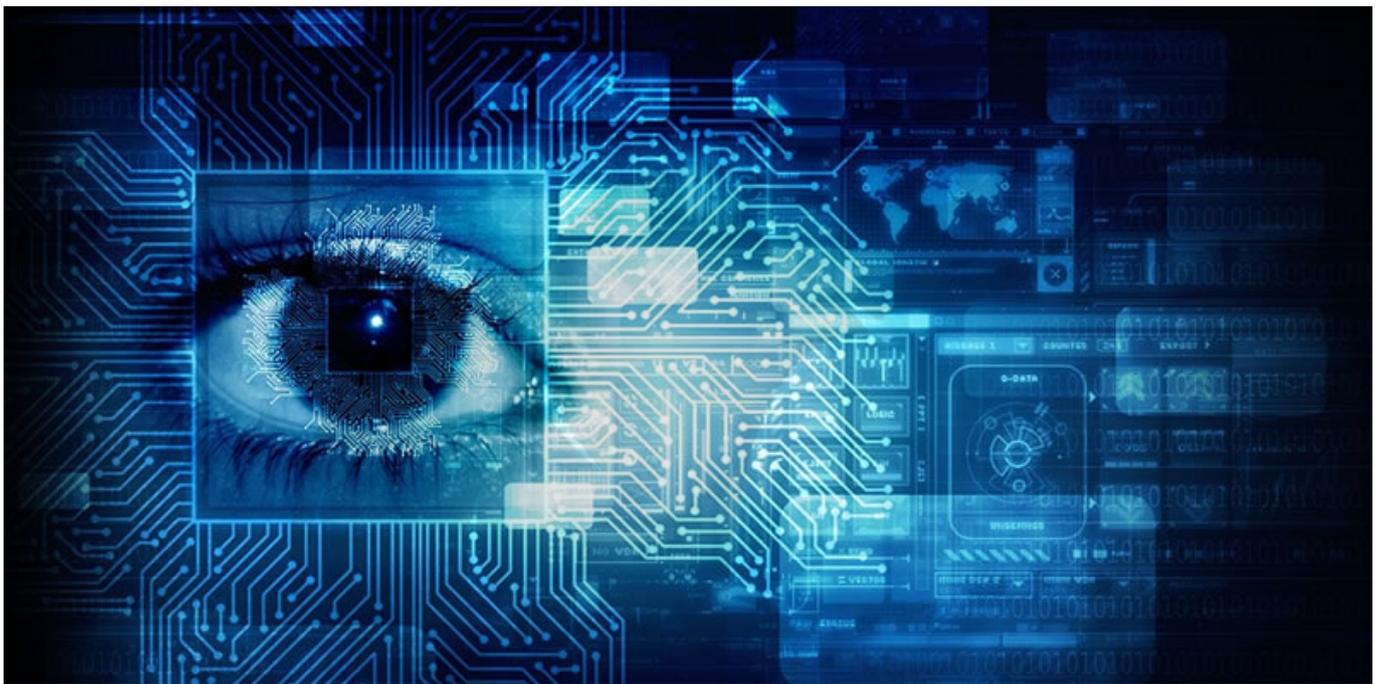# Digital Citizen, Analogue Subject: The Struggle for the New Democracy in Africa

By Nanjala Nyabola

Last month, individuals from 47 countries gathered in Accra, Ghana for the launch of the "State of Internet Freedom in Africa 2018" report from the Collaboration on International ICTY Policy for east and Southern Africa (CIPESA). The report itself only focuses on thirteen of the 54 countries on the continent but it does give insights into how global trends of repression and control on the Internet are playing out in various African societies. Despite mounting economic and political challenges, the report finds, a significant number of the countries surveyed are investing in heightened surveillance and control of citizen activity online.

The rapid growth of the CIPESA summit speaks to the increasing urgency of this question. In 2014, the first summit attracted only 80 participants while the 2018 edition had almost 250. And in the interim, government shutdowns of the Internet have grown painfully common. In 2017, nine countries in Africa shut down the Internet in connection to social or political upheaval, including a record-breaking 230-day shutdown in Cameroon's Anglophone region – the longest in the world to date. Six countries have threatened to, or have introduced taxation on the Internet or social media, in part to curtail people's access to the various platforms. Activists and ordinary citizens like Uganda's Stella Nyanzi have been arrested and charged with crimes as serious as treason for statements made online.

The state of Internet freedom in Africa is, according to the CIPESA attendees at least, not great.

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Ten years ago, many of these events would have been unfathomable. In Kenya for example, 2007 was the year of MPesa mobile money and Ushahidi crisis mapping, two innovations that quickly established the country's reputation as a hub for creativity in ICT. In the face of bleak headlines about poverty, disease and violence, mobile money was routinely offered as the "feel good" African story – proof of Africa rising and affirmation that the continent had more to offer the world than bad news. By 2017, mobile money transactions in Kenya amounted to the equivalent of one third of the country's GDP and the country is by far the global leader in the use of this technology.

Many of these developments occurred because the government didn't understand or wasn't paying attention to what was happening on the Internet until much of the basic infrastructure was already in place. And when they did get involved, in the shadow of a complex political environment triggered by the 2007/08 post-election crisis, it was to enable the ICT environment – to score a political win. For example, the legacy of former Cabinet Secretary for ICT, Bitange Ndemo, includes the 2009 launch of Kenya's fibre optic network that has enabled some of the fastest Internet connections in the world. And the Silicon Savannah, announced to great fanfare in 2010, was supposed to benefit from an enabling policy environment that would use these raw materials to catapult Kenya into a digital future.

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But governments learn, and that is why in 2018 many of those gathered in Accra to demand that governments keep the Internet free are Kenyans. A week before the CIPESA summit the Kenyan government announced a hefty excise duty of 20% on the Internet as well as a 15% tax on mobile money transactions that will undoubtedly throttle the policy space that has put the country on the global technology map.

And taxation is only one face of an increasingly hostile policy environment for ICT in Kenya. Since 2013 the government has on at least three occasions attempted to introduce legislation to curb freedom of expression online, each time stymied by a court decision that found the proposed legislation to be unconstitutional. Similarly, Privacy International, the global Internet privacy advocacy non-profit has found that the Kenya government is building an elaborate digital Panopticon enabled by surveillance technology built elsewhere. And while a data protection law is currently being discussed in parliament, activists fear that much of the framework for unchecked data harvesting and misuse by both government and private corporations is already in place.

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Why would a country that can barely afford to feed its people spend so much time and money on curtailing and controlling what is happening online?

I discuss Kenya in detail in my upcoming book on the subject, but broadly speaking as long as the government wasn't paying attention, the Internet incubated a political idealism around what Kenya could be. But I called my book 'Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics' because of the gap between this society that Kenyans are organising for online, and a state that consistently flirts with or veers into authoritarianism. Governments embrace "digital democracy" as long as it is a generic policy point that can score easy PR victories, but once the true face of the society takes shape online, states in turn show their own true face in age-old practices of control and repression.

Many of the plenary conversations at the CIPESA summit dwelled on abstractions – UN policy initiatives and new metrics on Internet freedom that did not fully appreciate the political realities of the various countries. Only in the smaller breakout sessions, some led by activists like Ethiopia's Zone 9 bloggers who suffered directly the violence of a state intimidated by political organising online, did the reality of increasing repression and control become clear. New data points and rankings can only confirm what ordinary citizens and activists already know – the governments of African countries are afraid of an informed and increasingly organised polity mobilising in a space that they do not really understand and therefore, have trouble controlling.

Certainly, threats to Internet freedom are not uniquely African, nor are experiences of Internet on the continent purely utopian. Bad things can and do happen on the Internet in Africa, and the experiences of countries like Kenya, where the Internet has become a key space for political mobilising, are shaped by who has access to the Internet and what preoccupies them offline. It's also about demographics of access, which will change considerably as more and more young people who have not known a world without the Internet come of age.

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A legislative framework is imperative to encourage the good and prevent the harm that can occur online, and governments are necessary in this conversation. But what the *State of Internet Freedom r*eport confirms is that we can't keep blindly banking on governments with little or no interest in citizen welfare to create that policy environment on their own. It seems rudimentary but it bears repeating – good Internet policy making cannot ignore local political contexts, and where the government is the main threat, the conversation on Internet freedom must be markedly different.

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