



“Access to information, misinformation and freedom of press in the digital age”

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Access to information and freedom of press are entwined and reinforcing rights, required for a democratic society to function and the realization of sustainable development goals (SDGs). Whereas the right to information helps journalists and citizens access information from public and relevant private bodies, freedom of the press enables journalists to report on critical issues while at the same time holding governments and other powerful institutions accountable for their actions. This in turn helps people to make informed decisions, hold their governments responsible, and participate in the democratic process.

The advancement of technology and especially social media and online news platforms over the past two decades has increased opportunities for people to know what is happening around them. With Africa’s majority of the population being youthful, millions of young people are online every day. It is estimated that over 97 million people in Sub Saharan Africa use Facebook every month. In Nigeria for example, in January 2022 there were 37 million users of Facebook alone- more than viewership of all television and readership of all newspapers in the country combined for that month! The trends are the same with other social media platforms across the African continent.

The 2022 Digital Global Report indicates that social media users experienced a double-digit growth with bigger gains for YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. This has also been enabled by expansion of internet coverage enabled by heavy investments in infrastructure by governments and telecommunication companies in respective countries.



With such huge numbers and growing subscribers, the internet has become an important source of information for millions of people, but also a major target for advertisers and promoters of commercial, political and social objectives, taking away from traditional and mass media platforms. Across the continent several online news sites are active in each country, producing and sharing content almost instantly as events unfold.

This increase in access to internet and online platforms has given people means that were unimagined in the past decade. They can share and express themselves socially, they get to know and question decisions authorities make or mobilize for causes- social, economic or political. This has greatly impacted people individually but also collectively.

However, despite of these positive trends there have also been challenges including the spread of misinformation and the threat to freedom of the press. Misinformation- information created or spread without the deliberate intention of misleading or cause harm has been common- and a source of concern. In the digital age, anybody can create, publish and share anything online without any fact-checking or verification. As a result, conspiracy theories, fake news, and propaganda have multiplied, with major ramifications for people and society as a whole.

The spread of misinformation and the erosion of trust in traditional news sources have jeopardized press freedom. Misinformation tends to increase in times of intense activity such as elections, protests, epidemics, and pandemics as was experienced during COVID-19. Governments have tended to respond with harsh and restrictive laws, punitive arrests and enforcements, surveillance and other forms that affect expression and free flow of information.

This however, has a chilling effect, eroded peoples' trust and undermines their informed participation in their governance, reversing the content's transition to democracy. It is worth noting that over the past four years, there has been resurgence of military coups and unconstitutional change of governments in a number of African countries, with citizens cheering in some cases despite of governments removed having been "voted" into power a few months before these coups.

Governments should recognize that lack of access to information creates a vacuum which gets filled with misleading or wrong information being created and spread without wrong intentions. As such, the passage and effective implementation of access to information laws including proactive disclosure should be prioritized as a vaccine for misinformation. Unfortunately, as of May 2023, only 27 African countries have access to information laws- with implementation challenges across the board.



Recognizing that it will take time for information gaps to be filled, media and civil society organizations should invest in fact-checking and verification to combat misinformation and its effects. For this reason, governments should be more intentional in promoting freedom of press for media organizations and Civil Society Organizations to operate independently and freely to ensure access to information as a public good. In addition, Governments, media organizations, and individuals must work together to foster media literacy and critical thinking abilities. It also necessitates a commitment to supporting and defending press freedom, as well as guaranteeing that journalists can report on concerns without fear of retaliation.

Given the fact that online and social media are major channels through misinformation spreads, these network platforms should enact policies and measures that detect and remove incorrect material while also boosting reliable sources of information.

Information commissioners and regulators should actively engage various stakeholders to play a promotional role in advancing public access to information to prevent or minimize the impact of misinformation.