

Africans are embracing digital media, but they're wary of the downsides

Afrobarometer surveys also reveal that there's still a digital divide

By **Jeffrey Conroy-Krutz** and **Joseph Koné**

Dec. 4, 2020 at 5:00 a.m. EST

Editors' note: Our biweekly Afrobarometer Friday series explores Africans' views on democracy, governance, quality of life and other critical topics.

In Nigeria, thousands have taken to the streets in recent weeks, calling for the abolition of the police's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and other police reforms. On social media, #EndSARS has been a rallying cry for those protesting how the unit has extorted, harassed, illegally detained, tortured and even killed with impunity for decades. This social movement has demonstrated how disenfranchised groups, in this case youths and women, can harness the power of digital media to fight endemic problems like police corruption and brutality.

Earlier this year, Ethiopians took to social media after the killing of singer Hachalu Hundessa. While many shared expressions of sadness, others spread speculation and rumors. Some asserted that government agents killed Hachalu as retaliation for his activism on behalf of displaced ethnic Oromo. Others blamed the government of Egypt, reasoning that the country was trying to sow chaos as Ethiopia proceeded with plans to construct a controversial dam on the Nile. Riots followed, leaving as many as 230 dead.

These examples highlight the promise and peril of social media in Africa. WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook are providing new platforms for social mobilization. But they are also making it easier to spread disinformation, rumors and hate speech, sometimes with deadly consequences.

New data from Afrobarometer show that the use of digital media (news from the Internet and social media) is growing fast across Africa. But access is uneven, and many Africans are well aware of the pitfalls of getting their information online.

Africa has a large digital divide

The past decade has seen significant growth in Africans' use of digital media. Surveys by Afrobarometer, an independent African research network, offer a way to track this growth. On average across 16 countries surveyed in both 2014/2015 and 2019/2020, the proportion of people who said they used either the Internet or social media to get their news at least a few times a week nearly doubled over five years, from 22 percent to 38 percent.

But are groups benefiting equally from the spread of digital media? Survey responses show that some traditionally disadvantaged groups — such as rural residents, women and those with primary education or less — are seeing big gains in their regular use of digital media (see Figure 1).

But so are already-privileged groups. Between 2014/2015 and 2019/2020, urban residents logged bigger gains (+13 percentage points) in use than rural dwellers (+11). Men's gains (+16) outpaced women's (+14). And those with at least some secondary school saw bigger gains (+20) than those without (+10).

If already-privileged groups are more likely to have access to new technologies, those advances could make existing inequalities even worse. Africa's digital divide is not shrinking. It might even be growing.

The digital divide separates countries as well. Half or more of citizens in Botswana, Cabo Verde, Gabon and Tunisia now use digital media regularly for their news. But in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Malawi and Uganda, fewer than 1 in 5 do. To be sure, these numbers probably underrepresent the actual reach of messages conveyed on digital media; in many contexts, one user can share information with many others. But the lack of widespread access to Internet and social media news can give a relatively small number of people disproportionate power as information gatekeepers and opinion influencers.

Africans have mixed feelings about social media

For every #EndSARS example of social media use for positive change, it seems there's a Hachalu riots tragedy. So do Africans view the overall social media ledger positively or negatively? Among the 66 percent of respondents who were aware of social media, people were more than twice as likely to say that the overall effects of social media are positive (54 percent) than negative (25 percent). Across nearly 27,000 respondents in 18 countries interviewed in 2019/2020, large numbers saw social media as informing people about politics (88 percent) and helping them have more political impact (73 percent) — see Figure 2.

However, they also saw social media's apparent downsides. A majority said social media makes people less tolerant (64 percent) and more likely to believe "fake news" (75 percent).

When it comes to "fake news" shared via any media channel, most respondents held politicians and parties responsible; nearly two-thirds (65 percent) said political figures spread disinformation "sometimes" or "often." Half blamed government officials (51 percent) and the media (50 percent). But even more blamed social media users (60 percent).

In fact, many Africans think the downsides are significant enough to warrant government action to limit certain kinds of speech (see Figure 3). Three-quarters (76 percent) supported government prohibitions on the sharing of information that is false, while smaller majorities approved of limitations on hate speech (70 percent) and on messaging that criticizes or insults the president (62 percent). Almost half (45 percent) endorsed restrictions on information or opinions that the government disapproves of.

Opportunities for the censors?

In practice, governments in Africa are clamping down on digital media with increasing frequency, citing everything from coronavirus rumors and election-time hate speech to Russian influence campaigns. Dozens of countries have blocked the Internet or social media at various points since 2015. A shutdown in Chad lasted for more than a year.

But while respondents in the Afrobarometer surveys seem to recognize the real dangers that digital media presents, they are not willing to give their governments free rein. Nearly half (48 percent) agreed that unrestricted access to digital media should be protected, while only 36 percent said governments should regulate digital media. Broad shutdowns therefore seem decidedly unpopular, as do widely derided policies like Uganda's "[social media tax](#)."

Like others around the world, Africans seem torn about digital media and how to expand its benefits while limiting its dangers. This ambivalence gives governments potential openings to limit speech and press freedoms. And that could mean further challenges for international and domestic groups looking to promote media freedom and the use of digital media as pro-democratic spaces, as well as those concerned with expanding digital literacy and limiting the viral spread of harmful messages.

Jeffrey Conroy-Krutz is associate professor of political science at Michigan State University and editor of the Afrobarometer Working Papers series. Find him on Twitter [@jconroykrutz](#).

Joseph Koné is a research associate and finance officer at Centre de Recherche et de Formation sur le Développement Intégré (CREFDI), the Afrobarometer National Partner in Ivory Coast. Find him on Twitter [@infoCrefdi](#).

Sign in to join the conversation

Comments



This conversation is moderated according to The Post's community rules. Please [read the rules](#) before joining the discussion. Send feedback about the comments section [here](#).

All Comments (0)

Viewing Options ▾

There are no comments posted.

