Freedom on the Internet: Free, partly free, unfree

Michelle Solomon

South Africa is ranked number one for Internet Freedom on the continent, with the status "free" for while Ethiopia was ranked lowest, and "not free" – of the countries counted in the survey by watchdog organisation, Freedom House, last month. However, it noted there were two threats to SA's "free" status: the Protection of State Information bill (Secrecy bill) and the lesser known General Intelligence Laws Amendment bill.

Watchdog organisation Freedom House last month released its 2012 report *Freedom on the Net* and its report is more alarming for its dearth of data on African countries than for its actual rankings. This after the United Nations Human Rights Council declared internet freedom a fundamental human right in July this year.

In its third edition of *Freedom on the Net* Freedom House rated only a sixth of African countries with their rankings for internet freedom: 'Free'; 'Partly Free'; 'Not Free' and the equally ominous 'No Data'.

Freedom House's "Freedom on the Net" index was developed in 2011 to measure a country's internet and digital media freedom, and claims to include not only internet access but also information transmission via mobile phones and text messaging services. Internet freedom has become increasingly crucial in recent years, as state repression of internet services and the arrest and harassment of dissenting internet voices grows in number internationally. In July this year, and in response to the growing importance of internet access as a tool for freedom of expression and information, the United Nations Human Rights Council passed a resolution supporting freedom of expression on the internet. The resolution affirms "that the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, in particular freedom of expression,

which is applicable regardless of frontiers and through any media of one's choice". The resolution further calls on States to "promote and facilitate access to the Internet".

Africa's internet penetration remains low however, with only 13.3% [http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm] of the continent's population having access to the internet at end of 2011. Internet access is also unevenly distributed around the continent with Nigeria and Egypt – the countries with the first and second largest number of internet users, respectively - hosting almost half of the continent's internet users, but on average only one in four Egyptian and Nigerian citizens has internet access. So while the countries ranked by Freedom House account for more than two thirds of Africa's internet users, the average internet penetration for those countries is 16.9%; a paltry number in comparison to South America's 43.3% and Asia's 26.2%.

While internet penetration across Africa as a whole is alarmingly low, it is in stark contrast to that of Africa's second most populous country, Ethiopia – the only African country ranked 'Not Free' by Freedom House – which has an internet penetration of only 0.7%, or 622 000 of its 87-million strong population. Freedom House blamed Ethiopia's low internet penetration on poor infrastructure and government monopoly over the country's telecommunications sector via the state-owned Ethiopian Telecommunication Corporation (ETC).

Freedom House grouped the North African country alongside Pakistan and the embattled Bahrain as some of the countries that indicated the greatest decline in internet freedom. Ethiopia presented an "unusual dynamic", according to Freedom House, where the state has ratcheted up increased internet restrictions despite the miniscule population of internet users in the country. This is "possibly reflecting a government effort to establish more sophisticated controls before allowing access to expand," the report added. The watchdog organisation also highlighted a growing concern that, given Ethiopia's close relationship with Chinese authorities, the latter will assist the government in developing more sophisticated internet censorship and surveillance mechanisms. This concern seems warranted as Ethiopian activists reported State

surveillance of their emails, text messages and other digital communication, which were increasingly presented as evidence in politicised trials. Additionally, Ethiopia's nation-wide blocking and filtering of politically relevant websites and social media platforms echoes the stance on internet freedom seen in the great Asian superpower.

Most alarming, however, has been Ethiopia's direct censorship of bloggers. This was acutely felt by Ethiopian netizens in July this year, when Ethiopian anti-terrorism law was abused to accuse dissident blogger Eskinder Nega of trying to incite violence through his blog. Nega was subsequently charged, found guilty and sentenced to 18 years imprisonment.

Where Ethiopia was ranked quite dismally by Freedom House, South Africa ranked the highest of the 10 African countries and was one of only two – alongside Kenya – to be ranked 'Free'. In fact, South Africa ranked in the top 10 of those countries rated 'Free' by Freedom House; the country come in tenth and only five points away from being relegated to those ranked 'Partly Free'.
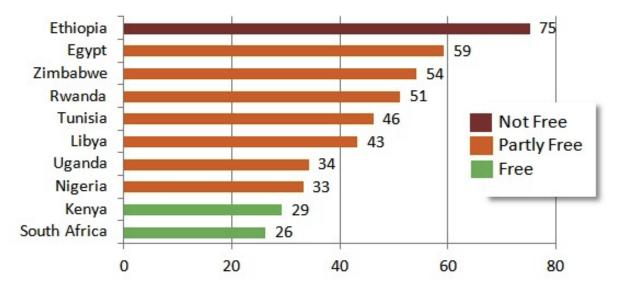
With an internet penetration of 21%, South Africa is leagues ahead its Northern countrymen in Ethiopia. There have reported arrests or cases of harassment of bloggers and other online content creators, and political content is uncensored. "Nevertheless," Freedom House warns, "the status of South Africa's internet freedom was threatened by two pieces of legislation in 2011". The watchdog organisation flagged the hotly contested and probably unconstitutional Secrecy bill and the lesser known General Intelligence Laws Amendment Bill as potential threats to South Africa's 'Free' status. The Secrecy bill would see the publication and access of classified state information criminalised, and whistle-blowers and journalists jailed, thus affecting access to information for South Africa's citizens, while the latter bill would potentially legalise bulk monitoring of internet communications. This could mean that emails sent using a foreign company – in other words all major web-based email companies, including the likes Gmail, Yahoo, and Hotmail – or through social media like Twitter or Facebook could count as "interceptable communication", write Freedom House.

While Freedom House increased the overall total of countries ranked in 2011 from 37 to 47, the lack of analysis of internet freedom in Africa should be cause for concern: the organisation ranked a mere 10 of 61, giving the remaining 51 unranked countries the largely inaccurate moniker of 'No Data'.

Describing the vast majority of African countries with the 'No Data' ranking profoundly affects how the continent is perceived, as well as its role in realising Internet freedom as a human right. Firstly, it isn't accurate to say there is 'No Data' on Internet freedom and access in these countries. While it is foreseeable that there mightn't be in-depth data available on many African countries, especially those in central Africa, it is a stretch to claim there is 'No Data' on several others. Morocco, for example, has 11.2 percent of the entire continent's internet users – a total of an estimated 140-million people – and the third highest number for a single country after Egypt's 15.5% and Nigeria's 32.3%. Despite being the country with the third most internet users, Freedom House has marked Morocco as having 'No Data'. Namibia, headquarters for the Media Institute of Southern Africa, has similarly been described as having 'No Data'.

It is to be expected that a report of the scale of *Freedom on the Net* would be highly resource intensive, leading to some strategic decision-making as to which countries were chosen for analysis. And considering the importance and potential effects – both for its future information and communications technology development, as well as how it is perceived internationally – of describing a country as having 'No Data', it seems pertinent that Freedom House would elaborate about why and when a country may be described this way.

Unfortunately, there does not appear to be any adequate answer to this question anywhere in the 654 page report.

Africa: Freedom on the Net

Country	Value	Category
Ethiopia	75	Not Free
Egypt	59	Partly Free
Zimbabwe	54	Partly Free
Rwanda	51	Partly Free
Tunisia	46	Partly Free
Libya	43	Partly Free
Uganda	34	Partly Free
Nigeria	33	Partly Free
Kenya	29	Free
South Africa	26	Free

Legend:
- Not Free
- Partly Free
- Free

Kelly, S., Cook, S., Truong, M. (eds.) *Freedom on the Net: A global assessment of internet and digital media*. Freedom House. pgs 27- 28.

Michelle Solomon is an MA Journalism student at Rhodes University