

# Democracy in the Digital Age: Navigating Platforms in Africa's Village Square

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## I. Introduction

Platform regulation debates have resulted in several suggestions and policy proposals. Many policy initiatives, from requiring a duty of care to demanding data interoperability, seek to sustain but control the status quo. The emergence of the Fediverse—a network of interconnected, decentralized social networks—presents itself as a more radical alternative to regulation. The premise, as further discussed, is that we should shift away from centralized platforms and become proactive guardians of our internet interactions and digital privacy.

The main problem is that centralized platforms have established themselves as Africa's new village squares. The concept of a village square (or a town square in some contexts), while not universally acclaimed, refer to the place where public gatherings are organised to discuss matters of communal importance.<sup>1</sup> While some scholars may prefer to use the terms “public or town squares,” the concept arose from the fact that various platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (now X) have become major places for discussion and debate on matters of public importance. Within the context of the internet and platform governance, the US Supreme Court in *Packingham v North Carolina*<sup>2</sup> stated that the internet is a “modern public square” by virtue of how it allows people from around the globe to connect and meaningfully deliberate on matters of varying degrees of importance.

However, although the internet and different platforms have made communication more accessible, the problem lies in the fact that a small group of firms have gained a monopoly over the communications and platforms industry.

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<sup>1</sup> See Andrew Rens, Hanani Hlomani, Jamie Fuller & Abdiaziz Abdikadir Ahmed, *Will Africa Join the Fediverse?* (Research ICT Africa, 2024), at <https://researchictafrica.net/2024/06/06/will-africa-join-the-fediverse/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Packingham v. North Carolina*, 582 U.S. 98 (2017).

This centralized nature of major platforms has led to accusations of bias and discrimination, with concerns that platforms may censor or suppress certain viewpoints.<sup>3</sup> Thus, with the digital village square being the quintessential site of democratic deliberation and a “marketplace of ideas,” exclusion by private actors is equally or even more detrimental to democratic deliberation than exclusion by government actors.<sup>4</sup>

In Africa, a continent plagued with political instability, flawed elections, mass censorship, internet shutdowns and little to no real democratic life, these digital village squares hold immense potential in shaping public discourse, advocating for social justice, and promoting democratic values. However, the interplay between platforms, societal values, and the pursuit of democracy is complex and nuanced, demanding careful consideration of the challenges and opportunities ahead.

## II. Sites of Engagement, Sites of Strife

Viewing platforms as places for civic engagement has long been ingrained in the public consciousness. This is because, at least in part, tech leaders have encouraged us to view them as such.<sup>5</sup> For example, X's (formerly Twitter) owner, Elon Musk posted that he had acquired the platform “because it is important to the future of civilization to have a common digital square.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, it is important that as many citizens participate in this digital square as possible.

There are considerable stakes in this debate. Across Africa, platforms have played a pivotal role in amplifying the voices of marginalized communities and mobilizing support for social justice movements. Famous examples include the Nigerian #EndSARS movement, which began as an online protest against police brutality and corruption and developed into a statewide rally demanding institutional reform and accountability, South Africa's #AmINext movement arose in reaction to the country's high incidence of gender-based violence and femicide, and the #ZimbabweanLivesMatter movement in Zimbabwe, inspired by the global

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Anne Franks, *Beyond the Public Square: Imagining Digital Democracy*, 131 YALE L.J. FORUM 427 (2021), at [www.yalelawjournal.org/forum/beyond-the-public-square-imagining-digital-democracy#\\_ftnref1](http://www.yalelawjournal.org/forum/beyond-the-public-square-imagining-digital-democracy#_ftnref1).

<sup>4</sup> See Genevieve Lakier & Nelson Tebbe, *After the “Great Deplatforming”: Reconsidering the Shape of the First Amendment*, LPE PROJECT, Mar. 1, 2021, at <https://lpeproject.org/blog/after-the-great-deplatforming-reconsidering-the-shape-of-the-first-amendment/>.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Yeung, *Commentary: The ‘Digital Town Square’ Problem*, RAND, Jan. 13, 2023, at [www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/01/the-digital-town-square-problem.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/01/the-digital-town-square-problem.html).

<sup>6</sup> “Dear Twitter Advertisers.” Elon Musk (@elonmusk), X (FORMERLY TWITTER) (OCT. 27, 2022, 9:08 PM), at <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1585619322239561728>.

#BlackLivesMatter movement, brought attention to the country's human rights breaches and political repression. In all these movements, platforms like Facebook, X, and Instagram have helped with the organization and publicization of large-scale rallies and marches, as well as the development of online communities and networks of support and advocacy for survivors and activists.

Beyond social justice movements, these platforms have also played an important role in improving African democratic processes. X, Facebook, and WhatsApp have been used to monitor and to report on general elections, as well as to mobilize and engage voters and candidates. For example, in Kenya, during the elections, the [Ushahidi](#) platform, a crowdsourcing tool that collects and maps information from diverse sources, was used to track and verify acts of violence, fraud, and intimidation. In Nigeria, the #NotTooYoungToRun campaign, a youth-led movement that advocated for the reduction of the age limit for running for office, was launched and promoted on social media. The campaign successfully lobbied for a constitutional amendment that lowered the minimum age for presidential candidates from 40 to 35, as well as for other positions.<sup>7</sup>

### III. What is the Problem?

Despite their transformative potential, platforms have also raised concerns about freedom of speech and online censorship. As has been stated above, concerns have been raised about risks that platforms may censor or conceal particular points of view, considering allegations of bias and discrimination resulting from their centralized nature. For example, in 2019, Facebook removed hundreds of accounts, pages, and groups linked to the Egyptian government and its allies, accusing them of engaging in coordinated inauthentic behaviour and spreading misinformation.<sup>8</sup> The accounts, pages, and groups were allegedly used to target domestic and regional audiences with pro-government propaganda, as well as to smear and

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<sup>7</sup> Bukola Adebayo, *#NotTooYoungToRun: Nigeria Lowers Minimum Age for Election Candidates*, CNN, May 31, 2018, at <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/31/africa/nigeria-not-too-young-to-run/index.html/>. Samson Itodo, *#NotTooYoungToRun and Historic Wins in Nigeria's 2023 Elections*, CABLE, July 11, 2023, at [www.thecable.ng/nottooyoungtorun-and-historic-wins-in-nigerias-2023-elections/#google\\_vignette](http://www.thecable.ng/nottooyoungtorun-and-historic-wins-in-nigerias-2023-elections/#google_vignette).

<sup>8</sup> Givi Gigitashvili & Eto Buziashvili, @DFRLab, *Facebook removes assets connected to Egyptian newspaper El Fagr*, MEDIUM, Oct. 16, 2019, at <https://medium.com/dfrlab/facebook-removes-assets-connected-to-egyptian-newspaper-el-fagr-7ff5e5b41f78>. See Nathaniel Gleicher, *Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior in UAE, Nigeria, Indonesia and Egypt*, META, Oct. 4, 2019, at <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/10/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-in-uae-nigeria-indonesia-and-egypt/>.

discredit critics and opponents of the regime.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in 2022, X suspended the account of Ugandan novelist Kakwenza Rukirabashaija for violation of Twitter's rules after he accused government agencies of torturing him before he fled Uganda.<sup>10</sup> In Ethiopia, at the height of the conflict in the Tigray region, the government ran numerous propaganda campaigns which resulted in Facebook shutting down multiple government pages. The Ethiopian government responded by announcing plans to develop its own social media network.<sup>11</sup>

The common theme across these points is the intersection of platforms with concerns related to freedom of speech and online censorship as these incidents underscore the complex relationship between platforms, political dynamics, and the potential limitations on the free exchange of ideas in online spaces.

Additionally, the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation on platforms has posed a significant challenge to democratic discourse. For example, misinformation and disinformation were rife in the 2022 Kenyan elections, commonly distributed over TikTok and X.<sup>12</sup> As the report by the Mozilla Foundation fellow Odanga Madung highlights, despite having developed policies that limit the spread of hate speech and disinformation, content violating these policies on TikTok was left unmoderated.<sup>13</sup>

The examples above demonstrate how significant and hazardous these new village squares are. Platforms have established themselves as venues for meaningful discourse and engagement in democratic life. However, one emerging difficulty is the centralized structure of these platforms. Many people are outraged that platforms have outsized and unchecked authority to decide what is good or bad for

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<sup>9</sup> See William Gumede, *Policy Brief 8: Censorship of the Internet, Social Media Rising in Africa*, DEMOCRACY WORKS FOUND., Sept. 21, 2016, at [www.democracyworks.org.za/policy-brief-8-censorship-of-the-internet-social-media-rising-in-africa/](http://www.democracyworks.org.za/policy-brief-8-censorship-of-the-internet-social-media-rising-in-africa/); Joey Shea & Alexei Abrahams, *Disinformation Wars in Egypt: The Inauthentic Battle on Twitter between Egyptian Government and Opposition*, JUST SEC., Oct. 26, 2020, at [www.justsecurity.org/72961/disinformation-wars-in-egypt-the-inauthentic-battle-on-twitter-between-egyptian-government-and-opposition/](http://www.justsecurity.org/72961/disinformation-wars-in-egypt-the-inauthentic-battle-on-twitter-between-egyptian-government-and-opposition/).

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Omara, *Twitter Suspends Kakwenza's Account*, CHIMPREPORTS, Feb. 12, 2022, at <https://chimpreports.com/twitter-suspends-kakwenzas-account/>.

<sup>11</sup> Reuters, *Ethiopia starts building local rival to Facebook*, GUARDIAN, Aug. 23, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/23/ethiopia-starts-building-local-rival-to-facebook>.

<sup>12</sup> Lilian Olivia, *Disinformation was rife in Kenya's 2022 election*, LSE BLOGS, Jan. 5, 2023, at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2023/01/05/disinformation-was-rife-in-kenyas-2022-election/>.

<sup>13</sup> See Odanga Madung, *From Dance App to Political Mercenary: How Disinformation on TikTok Gaslights Political Tensions in Kenya* (Mozilla Foundation, 2023), at <https://foundation.mozilla.org/en/campaigns/kenya-tiktok/>.

the community.<sup>14</sup> Coupled with the fact that the policies of large platforms are inconsistent across jurisdictions, with varied approaches to content moderation and online regulation, this can lead to competitive imbalances and inconsistent enforcement based on regional pressures and regulations.<sup>15</sup> As previously stated, the economic model of the majority of these platforms implies that, in certain circumstances, some voices may be amplified above others for a fee. Similarly, some people may be silenced without any motivation or context.<sup>16</sup>

In Africa, the discontent over content moderation on platforms is intensified by a crucial factor—the dominating concentration of these platforms in the United States. This presents substantial concerns with the impartiality of establishing community standards intended to govern content moderation processes. The criticism points out the lack of a comprehensive understanding of the varied socioeconomic, cultural, and political circumstances in African nations. Hence, the implementation of universal content standards might fail to consider the subtle viewpoints and sensitivities that are specific to African contexts.<sup>17</sup> What may be considered acceptable or offensive can vary significantly between regions, making it difficult for platforms based outside Africa to accurately interpret and apply community standards in a way that resonates with local values. For example, in many African cultures, traditional attire might involve less clothing than what is typically accepted in Western cultures. For instance, in certain African ceremonies and cultural events, traditional dress might include bare breasts or minimal clothing, which is an accepted and respected part of the cultural heritage. However, Facebook's global community standards on nudity for example, which are largely influenced by Western norms, often result in the removal of such images, even

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<sup>14</sup> See Monica Anderson, *Most Americans Say Social Media Companies Have Too Much Power, Influence in Politics*, PEW RESOURCE CTR., July 22, 2020, at [www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/07/22/most-americans-say-social-media-companies-have-too-much-power-influence-in-politics/](http://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/07/22/most-americans-say-social-media-companies-have-too-much-power-influence-in-politics/).

<sup>15</sup> See Akhilesh Pillalamarri & Cody Stanley, *Online Content Regulation: An International Comparison*, GW LAW INT'L LAW & POL'Y BRIEFS, Dec. 8, 2021, at <https://studentbriefs.law.gwu.edu/ilpb/2021/12/08/online-content-regulation-an-international-comparison/>; Imanol Ramirez, *Online Content Regulation and Competition Policy*, HLS ANTITRUST ASS'N, Dec. 3, 2020, at <https://orgs.law.harvard.edu/antitrust/2020/12/03/online-content-regulation-and-competition-policy/>.

<sup>16</sup> Franks, *supra* note 3.

<sup>17</sup> Tafi Mhaka, *How Social Media Regulations Are Silencing Dissent in Africa*, ALJAZEERA, Nov. 12, 2020, at [www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/11/12/how-social-media-regulations-are-silencing-dissent-in-africa](http://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/11/12/how-social-media-regulations-are-silencing-dissent-in-africa).

when they are culturally significant and non-sexual in context.<sup>18</sup> This discrepancy can lead to instances of perceived bias, where content that may be culturally or politically relevant to African users is misconstrued or inadequately addressed.

### III. Time for Another Model?

Platform governance advocates contend that the power that these centralized platforms wield should be regulated. Several ideas have been presented to regulate platform services. Some suggest that platforms should be allowed to self-regulate with the condition that they would be held responsible for dissemination of harmful information while others suggest that platforms should be obliged to provide alternative algorithms that allow users to decide what they view.<sup>19</sup> There is also a more extreme school of thought that believes centralized platforms should be abandoned in favor of the Fediverse, which is gaining hold in the Global North but is still in its conception in Africa and other parts of the Majority World.

The Fediverse is a network of interconnected, decentralized social networks, offering a more democratic and open approach to online communication. Federated networks operate without a single controlling entity, allowing users to have greater control over their data and privacy.<sup>20</sup> A popular example of a platform in the Fediverse is Mastodon which is a free, open-source social networking platform that operates on a decentralized protocol (ActivityPub). It allows users to create and join independently operated servers, called "instances," each with its own rules and moderation policies as well as to interact with content shared on other platforms using the same protocol.<sup>21</sup>

The Fediverse holds immense promise to foster more inclusive and democratic online spaces in Africa. Decentralized platforms may gain more traction in the African context because they can address some of the challenges that traditional platforms pose at scale, such as censorship, data breaches, server outages, high costs and lack of local relevance. Decentralized platforms can also empower African users

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<sup>18</sup> Scott Timcke, et al., Research ICT Africa, *Dissent and Resistance to Silicon Valley AI Narratives*, TECH POL'Y PRESS, Mar. 21, 2023, at [www.techpolicy.press/dissent-and-resistance-to-silicon-valley-ai-narratives/](http://www.techpolicy.press/dissent-and-resistance-to-silicon-valley-ai-narratives/).

<sup>19</sup> See Michael A. Cusumano, Annabelle Gawer, & David B. Yoffie, *Social Media Companies Should Self-Regulate. Now*, HARV. BUS. REV., Jan. 15, 2021, at <https://hbr.org/2021/01/social-media-companies-should-self-regulate-now>.

<sup>20</sup> Bob Murphy, *A 5-Minute Tour of the Fediverse*, OPENSOURCE.COM, Mar. 21, 2023, at <https://opensource.com/article/23/3/tour-the-fediverse>.

<sup>21</sup> Rens et al., *supra* note 1.

to participate in the global digital economy and create their own communities and networks that reflect their diverse cultures and interests.

The Fediverse presents a unique opportunity to redefine the virtual village square in Africa – promoting a more inclusive, democratic, and open digital public space. By embracing decentralized social networks, African communities can empower diverse voices, enhance citizen participation, and address the challenges of censorship and misinformation. However, realizing the full potential of the Fediverse requires collective action, continued dialogue, and a commitment to promoting democratic values in the digital age. Furthermore, although the Fediverse may provide advantages in terms of decentralization and user autonomy, it is crucial to acknowledge the possible drawback of mis/disinformation sharing within silos or echo chambers, thereby undermining the shared body of knowledge essential for meaningful public discussions. This has the potential to result in increased division and diminished communication between different groups, which would make it more difficult to tackle shared problems. Therefore, it is essential to devise ways to minimize these risks and promote inclusive, evidence-based conversations.

Enforcing platform regulation is a challenging task. It lacks clear-cut distinctions. As Mary Ann Franks puts it, “To avoid perpetuating power imbalances, we must go beyond unregulated public squares and intentionally design online spaces that promote democracy.”<sup>22</sup>

The prevailing belief that the negative effects of platforms can be simplified into a binary categorization is flawed. It is not always a matter of "if it is correct, leave it up" and "if it is incorrect, take it down." The African environment necessitates nuance and careful consideration. In essence, Africans are the most suitable individuals to govern the African village square, and the Fediverse offers the chance to restore the authority of debate and moderation to the users themselves. The digital village square in Africa is a vibrant and expanding space where platforms, social values, and the promotion of democracy come together. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that platform regulations uphold the rights of individuals to engage in civic dialogue and participate in democratic processes. However, it might be opportune to abandon centralized platforms.

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<sup>22</sup> Franks, *supra* note 3.