Gibs Media Leadership Think Tank launch - Social media, internet shutdowns, incitement and democracy

"A pluralistic, diverse media on multiple platforms assists people to exercise their rights and hold the powerful to account. But, it also has the potential to enable the spread of misinformation and wreak havoc on an already disrupted world," Professor Tawana Kupe, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Pretoria, said at the launch of the Gibs Media Leadership Think Tank.

There is a need for a "sustainable, credible, pluralistic and diverse media that allows people to assess threats and regain their sense of direction. We must reimagine a new media landscape for our new societies and reposition the media as central to society to regain trust," he added.

Michael Markovitz, Head of the Gibs Media Leadership Think Tank, said digital platforms have transformed the planet for the majority of the global population who have access to the internet. "They have changed our education, how we work, even our health, but mostly how we access information."

While the internet and social media have had a transformative impact on society and continue to play a positive role in enabling access to information, this has entangled with unchecked power, misinformation, and hate speech.

"Misinformation and disinformation have been used by digital authoritarians to shut down the internet, and questions of liability and internet governance all have human rights at the centre," Markovitz said.

The launch of the GIBS Media Leadership Think Tank convened a panel of international media experts to explore the power of social media platforms, claims of censorship and incitement and de-platforming. The question of whether content shared on these platforms was a factor in the recent unrest in South Africa was discussed, as well as the internet and social media shutdowns seen recently in Nigeria, eSwatini, Zambia and Uganda.

Professor Kupe said media education and training programmes must have a thorough understanding of local and global issues, with critical social debates placed at the centre of their teaching. "We need a new vision, not for a media focussed on fighting fake news, but to reinvent an institution vital for the rebirth of society."

Dr Morris Mthombeni, interim dean of Gibs, said the Media Leadership Think Tank would help to amplify the school's leadership role as a public institution and was "part of the evolution to protect and enhance our freedoms."

Online misinformation as a threat to democracy

Following the election of President Donald Trump and the unexpected Brexit referendum results in 2016, there was a moment of "global panic" and the realisation that "disinformation online was a real problem," Dr Anya Schiffrin, director of the Technology, Media and Communications specialisation at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, said.

This resulted in a number of divergent solutions: An increase in fact-checking and media literacy; and increased funding for good journalism to provide audiences with quality information.

Alternatively, China, as well as some countries in Latin America and Africa chose to enact laws to hold people to account for fake news, while others such as Germany, imposed fines on tech companies if they were found to have consistently spread misinformation.

With regards to the regulatory framework around disinformation and misinformation, the United States "hid behind the First Amendment, which allows for freedom of speech, while legislation in the European Union is more progressive," Schiffrin said.

Liability and de-platforming

Professor Dario Milo, leading South African media lawyer and member of Columbia University's Global Freedom of Expression Initiative, said, "In many cases, the law is a blunt instrument to deal with some of the online speech issues we are faced with."

The United States law on was an extreme, he explained, where online media giants have legal immunity for the content produced by third parties, with emphasis rather placed on self-regulation.

When asked whether South Africa's July riots were a failed insurrection with roots in social media narrative manipulation, and whether evidence of such could be used to de-platform individuals and suspend their social media accounts, Milo explained that any decision to de-platform a South African would have to comply with Section 16 of the Constitution which guarantees the right to freedom of expression.

Freedom of expression and internet shutdowns

Juliet Nanfuka, digital rights researcher with the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), said some governments had gone so far as to employ network disruptions and internet shutdowns in an attempt to supress expression, especially during times of public interest such as elections and protests.

"Telecommunications companies often go silent and follow the instructions of the state. However, some are starting to respond to the plight of citizens and take a stand, and we are seeing a shift away from merely protecting the interests of business towards better business practice," Nanfuka said.

It was also good to see more media institutions taking a position of advocacy against the issue, she added.

Fatou Jagne Senghore, Gambian human rights activist, women's rights activist and lawyer, said the legal foundation for the protection of freedom of expression is contained in Article 19 of the African (Banjul) Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

While the Charter protects freedom of expression, it had "created a lot of problems" as many governments had tried to use Article 19 to suppress freedom of expression and to legitimise their restrictions by using Paragraph 2, which allows for restrictions on expression based on national legislation, Senghore said.

She had been "encouraged by activism and citizen engagement across the continent for the right to freedom of expression", although there was a need to strengthen the framework so as to reflect the evolving nature of freedom of expression.

Senghore concluded that internet shutdowns were an extreme measure and there was a need to mobilise against them as a major problem in the region. "We must revisit our regulatory bodies. We are facing such an important challenge and many are not up to the task."

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