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Executive Summary

The expansion of the Internet has been a boost to the way individuals, media outlets, state institutions and corporate organisations communicate nowadays. In West Africa, internet penetration has facilitated the expansion of online newspapers, and empowered citizens' engagement and participation in social and public debates in recent years. However, the improvement in internet access and the exercise of internet rights by citizens to demand accountability for the use of public resources does not sit well with all governments.

As citizens' engagement online is steadily on the rise, coupled with the massive use of ICT-enabled devices and social media platforms, so has the crackdown and repression of civil and political rights in the digital space by intolerant governments increased. The right to freedom of expression online has become the target of attacks, and has sparked a heated debate around data protection and privacy, data cost, cybersecurity, the digital divide between the urban and rural areas.

As part of its mission to defend and promote freedom of expression both offline and online, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) has been monitoring violations of freedom of expression online and reporting on internet-related developments. The present report covering October, November, and December 2019, presents the findings of the monitoring exercise of the internet space in West Africa by the MFWA. It presents findings of the monitoring exercise across the 15 ECOWAS countries plus Mauritania. It is the last of a series of four reports on internet related issues across the sub-region in 2019.

The current report highlights incidents of digital rights violations and discusses the challenges confronting internet access and use in 12 countries – Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Togo. Three out of the twelve countries recorded incidents of digital rights violations.

In all, eight incidents considered to be digital rights violations were recorded during the quarter. Arrest, detention and sentence of a journalist and intimidation were the types of violations recorded.

The report also highlights the emerging trend of introduction of repressive laws and interpretation of existing laws to crack down on digital freedom and internet-related developments in West Africa.

The report concludes with some recommendations for improving internet access and use in West Africa.

Introduction

Digital rights are human rights associated with security and safety in the use of Internet and other ICT devices. Digital rights are often related to internet governance, digital democratisation, amongst other issues. In the past two decades, there has been a significant expansion of the internet space and innovative advancements in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

The internet has evolved at a phenomenal pace, putting information literally at the doorstep of people and enabling them to communicate in an instant and efficient manner that was a distant dream only two decades ago. With advances in digital communication, as evidenced by the increasing access to gadgets such as smartphones and other internet-enabled devices, people are now able to communicate in real-time. West Africa is enjoying a relative reasonable share of the boom in communication technology.

However, the dividends of the digital boom have not been evenly distributed. Varying degrees of gaps exist within the various social strata in individual countries, while disparities remain among the various countries in West Africa with regard to access, cost, quality of internet service and safety online. Besides, the West African region (41%) has less internet penetration than the average penetration rate in Southern (51%) and Northern Africa (50%)¹.

For instance, a report² launched on October 17, 2019, at the World Bank/IMF Annual Meetings said that in Sub-Saharan Africa, about a third of the population remains out of reach of 3G networks compared to about 2 percent in North Africa.

Added to this is the challenge of inadequate policy frameworks and digital infrastructure and high cost of broadband data, which constitute impediments to citizens' full enjoyment of their digital rights.

Despite these challenges, the overall coverage and impact of the internet in West Africa has been positive. The internet has improved civic and political rights in the region and contributed to empowering citizens' participation in public discourses. Social media is increasingly being used to convene online gatherings to demand good governance and transparency.

However, not all governments have a progressive view of these developments. Autocratic regimes rather feel threatened by the digital empowerment of their citizens and devise all manner of means to repress online freedoms. They do these through repressive laws, arrests, detention, and harassment of their outspoken critics on digital platforms and even through internet shutdowns at critical moments such as elections and mass protests.

As an organisation that works to promote freedom of expression online and offline, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) has been monitoring and reporting on internet issues to help to consolidate the gains and push back against the repression.

The reports from the monitoring are published periodically as The West Africa Internet Rights Monitor and are intended to provide credible reference material for internet rights advocacy and policy dialogues at the national, regional and international levels. This edition of The Internet Rights Monitor covers twelve countries – Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Togo.

The methodology, findings, and recommendations from the three-month (October -December 2019) monitoring are presented below.

¹ We are social (2019, January). Internet penetration by region. Retrieved from <https://wearesocial.com/blog/2019/01/digital-2019-global-internet-use-accelerates>

² The World Bank, IBRD,IDA (October 17, 2019). Connecting Africa to Broadband: A Roadmap for Inclusive Growth. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/digitaldevelopment/publication/connecting-africa-to-broadband-a-roadmap-for-inclusive-growth>

Methodology

This report is the result of the monitoring, documentation and reporting of internet-related issues, especially violations against online expression, recorded in West Africa from October to December 2019. The monitoring is undertaken by MFWA's internet right monitors and national partner organisations across West Africa.

The quarterly report focuses on countries in which abuses and other developments were recorded during this quarter.

The monitoring and reporting are guided by an internet rights monitoring tool which was developed by the MFWA and shared with its national partner organisations and internet rights monitors. A user manual that provides tutorials on the monitoring tool also provides additional guidance to the monitors who send monthly monitoring reports to the MFWA. The various country reports are then analysed into quarterly reports, which are published as The West Africa Internet Rights Monitor.

General Findings

In all, three countries recorded internet rights-related violations. Other countries recorded other developments related to the promotion of inclusive digital rights, capacity building on protection from cybercrime and data protection. Two journalists were arrested and detained in Nigeria while another is being hunted by the police in Nigeria for his online publications. Another was arrested and detained by the security forces in Benin before being expeditiously sentenced by a court for his social media engagements. One activist was also arrested and detained for his critical post on social media in Burkina Faso.

Victims of internet rights violations were mainly journalists (four) and one social media activist. All the violations recorded during the period under review were perpetrated by state security agencies and state officials.

Further, as part efforts to curb the growing trend of cybercrime, cyber bullying, misinformation, and disinformation, Facebook embarked on a continental project on fact-checking³ in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Ghana to combat the issues on its platforms; including Instagram.

Country-Specific Findings

Benin

Mobile internet subscribers were estimated at around 6,319,090⁴ as of September 30, 2019. Out of this figure, only 521,401 subscribers were using 4G/LTE services. As of October 2019, mobile broadband services users in the country were reported to be below 5%⁵ of internet users. Mobile broadband is highly expensive. One gigabit cost USD 4.28.⁶

³ KINDO Noufo (2019, October 9). Facebook: le programme de fact-checking débarque au Burkina Faso. Retrieved from <https://www.burkina24.com/2019/10/09/facebook-le-programme-de-fact-checking-debarque-au-burkina/>

⁴ Tableau de bord internet au 30 Septembre 2019. (Septembre 30,2019). Evolution et Répartition du parc internet mobile par opérateur. Retrieved from <https://arcep.bj/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Tableau-de-bord-Internet-au-30-Septembre-2019.pdf>

⁵ Bohoun, A. (October 2019). Internet: le Plan du Gouvernement pour Etendre le Haut Débit au Benin. Retrieved from <http://www.ortb.bj/index.php/societe/5592-internet-le-plan-du-gouvernement-pour-etendre-le-haut-debit-au-benin>

⁶ Mobile broadband pricing. Data for Q2 2109. Price in USD. Retrieved from https://a4ai.org/extra/mobile_broadband_pricing_usd-2019Q2

In Benin, the digital divide between the urban and rural areas is widening. The government in an attempt bridge the gap has revealed a plan to deploy 24,500 km of fiber optic to connect 77 communities across the country in order to expand broadband internet services.

The country recorded an incident of violation during the period. Ignace Sossou a journalist working with an online media was arrested and detained on December 20, 2019, by officials of the central office for the suppression of cybercrime. The day before his arrest, Sossou posted on his Facebook and Twitter pages remarks made by the Public Prosecutor, Mario Metonou during a forum on fake news in Benin. He was accused of misquoting the public prosecutor and sentenced to 18 months in prison and fined CFA Francs 200,000 (about USD400) for sharing remarks on social media.

In other developments during the period under review, telecommunications and mobile internet users in MTN Benin encountered internet disruption due to technical faults. As a result of the disruption, calls and access to the internet and social platforms were not available between 10am and 3pm on October 17, 2019, and on October 19, 2019. Following the disruption, the communication regulatory body, Autorité de Régulation des Communications Electroniques et de la Poste (ARCEP) together with the consumers association, Association des Consommateurs Partenaires (ACP) demanded⁷ the telecommunication company, MTN Benin, to award free credit to its subscribers as compensation.

Burkina Faso

As of December 2019, Burkina Faso had more than 19,731,861 mobile subscribers (active SIM Cards)⁸ with 37%, access to mobile broadband services is relatively low. The cost of broadband mobile is also high. One gigabit of mobile broadband data costs USD 4.28⁹.

During the quarter under review, Burkina Faso recorded one violation of digital rights. On November 12, 2019, the police arrested and detained activist Naim Toure. The police accused him of attempting to demoralize the army following a comment he published on Facebook about appointments in the military.

This is the fourth time, Toure has faced prosecution for comments for his activism online. On July 3, 2018, he was arrested and later sentenced to two months in prison after he criticized what he termed as the neglect of a soldier who was wounded while fighting a terrorist group. In 2017, Naim was convicted for insulting the special advisor of the former speaker of parliament, Salif Diallo. In 2016, he was detained in custody for 3 days for posting on Facebook, the health concerns of a military man who was incarcerated for allegedly participating in a coup attempt in 2015.

Digital illiteracy and unequal access to the internet in rural and urban areas are part of the challenges hindering the expansion of Burkina Faso's internet space. To bridge this gap, the government has initiated an annual event to create public awareness comprising of discussion forums and capacity- building, among other activities to equip the youth and the general public with skills and knowledge on internet and ICTs. From November 19 to 23, 2019, a number of activities were undertaken to promote technology innovations and financial transactions, internet rights and digital inclusion. The event was organised in Bobo Dialosso, the second biggest city in

⁷ ARCEP Benin. (October 23, 2019). ARCEP Benin exige de l'Opérateur une réparation objective des préjudices causes. Retrieved from <https://arcep.bi/arcep-benin-exige-de-loperateur-une-reparation-objective-des-prejudices-causes/#>

⁸ ARCEP Burkina Faso (2019), Parc des Abonnements Actifs, page 6. Retrieved from <http://www.arcep.bf/download/observatoire/observatoire-mobile/2019-T11er-Trimestre-2019-OBSERVATOIRE-MOBILE- VF.pdf>

⁹ A4AI (2019). Burkina Faso, Affordability Drivers Index. Retrieved from https://a4ai.org/affordability-report/data/?_year=2019&indicator=INDEX&country=BF

Burkina Faso, under the aegis of the Ministry of Digital Economy Development and Postal Services.¹⁰

Other efforts aimed at fighting misinformation during the country's elections in 2020 included an initiative by the Canal France International, a French development agency,¹¹ on December 17.

Côte d'Ivoire

As of June 2019, internet users in Cote d'Ivoire were reported to be about 11, 953, 653¹², with one gigabit of mobile broadband data costing USD6.85. Out of the 11, 953, 653 internet users, 4,741, 000 were on Facebook as of December 2019.

During the period under review, the country did not record any violation of digital rights. Rather, some important social media-related incidents and developments were registered.

On October 31, 2019, Facebook took down a network of individuals spreading fake news targeting some African countries, including Cote d'Ivoire, from its platform. These users were said to be manipulating public opinion through Facebook and Instagram in favour of Russia.

To curb the growing trend of misinformation and disinformation in the run-up to the country's general election in 2020, some 15 media outlets gathered in Abidjan, November 26 to 29, 2019, to deliberate on how they can use their platforms to counter the menace both online and in the traditional media¹³. Participants were equipped with skills on how to detect and fight false information, as well as to produce quality election monitoring content.

Ghana

As of November 2019, mobile data subscriptions with 2G/3G services in Ghana were reported to be 26,661,592. Mobile internet users have limited access to broadband services. Only 2,153,075 people have access to 4G services with the cost of data very high and quality of services low. In October 2019, mobile broadband pricing of one gigabit of data was USD 3.60.

During the quarter under review, the country did not register any digital rights violations. However, other developments were recorded regarding data protection and the rise of data cost.

On October 1, 2019, the telecommunication companies in Ghana announced increases in the cost of both voice and data communication. This was as a result of the government revising the Communication Service Tax from 6% to nearly 10%¹⁴.

The increase in communication and data cost sparked an outcry from mobile telecommunication and data consumers, leading to the launch of a campaign on social media with the hashtag: #Saveourdata¹⁵, with more than 1700 people signing on. As a result of the public backlash, the Ministry of Communication, Ursula Owusu Akufu, directed all mobile network operators to stop the deduction of the 9% levy from customers' airtime charges. She also directed the Telcos rollover

¹⁰ Le Faso.net (2019, November 24). Semaine du numérique : des récompenses pour terminer les activités en beauté. Retrieved from <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article93366>

¹¹ CFI (2019, December 17). Un forum sur les enjeux des infox au Burkina Faso. Retrieved from <https://www.cfi.fr/fr/projet/verifox-afrique>

¹² Internet Users statistics for Africa. (2019, June 30). Retrieved from <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>

¹³ AIP. (2019, November 17). Un forum sur les infox en période électorale s'ouvre mercredi à Abidjan. Retrieved from <https://news.abidjan.net/h/666403.html>

¹⁴ Goldstreet Business (2019, October 28). Government and Telecom Companies go to war over CST. Retrieved from <https://goldstreetbusiness.com/news/government-and-the-telecom-companies-go-to-war-over-cst/>

¹⁵ Change.org (2019). Save our data. Retrieved from <https://www.change.org/p/mtn-ghana-save-our-data>

customer's unused data and not put expiration limits on them. Following the directive by the ministry, the Telcos ceased the upfront deduction and incorporate the charges in their rates.

During the quarter, the publication of a report by the Auditor General raised concerns over data protection and sparked heated debates. The report allegations were raised against the National Electoral Commission of making voters' ¹⁶information available to a third-party, a private software development company, Bysystems Limited. The Electoral Commission, however, denied the allegations.

Also, as part of the third edition of West Africa Media Conference & Awards (WAMECA), held from October 17 to 19 in Accra, Ghana, the Media Foundation for West Africa brought together, journalists, media professionals, editors, academics, freedom of expression advocates, diplomats and the business community across the region to deliberate on how Social Media and Fake News are impacting on elections in Africa. The participants made recommendations to sanitise the digital landscape with quality and accurate information, especially on social media, before, during and after elections.

Guinea

As of December 2019, Facebook users in Guinea were estimated to be around 1,985,000¹⁷ people. This represents an increase of 73, 200 users from September 2019. Access to mobile broadband services, including 3G/4G shared 36% of the mobile internet connectivity. The broadband coverage across the country is irregular; with a wide divide between the rural and the urban areas. The cost of data remained unaffordable to many with one gigabit data bundle costing about USD 3.65.

During this quarter, Guinea did not record violations related to online freedom despite a bloody crackdown on a series of protests against President Alpha Conde perceived attempts to seek a third mandate.

Guinea Bissau

As of December 2019, the country had 1.6 million mobile telephone users. This represents 8.91% growth in terms of sim penetration (80%)¹⁸. Only 37% of mobile subscribers had access to broadband mobile internet, including 3/4G LTE services. Access to mobile internet service remains a challenge, cost of data bundle is extremely high as one gigabit costs about USD12.8. Even with this high cost of data, internet connectivity is poor, with uneven internet coverage, and rural areas heavily marginalised.

During the quarter under review, the country held its presidential elections. Internet and social media were kept on, before, during and after the first and second-round of the polls. No digital platforms/social media related violations were reported.

¹⁶The Independent (2019, October 23).EC sells voters' data to private company-Auditor-General reveals. Retrieved from <https://theindependentghana.com/2019/10/ec-sells-voters-data-to-private-company-auditor-general-reveals/>

¹⁷Napoleoncat.com. (2019, December). Social Media Users in Guinea. Retrieved from <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/social-media-users-in-guinea/2019/12>

¹⁸GSM Intelligence (2020). Data Markets Africa Guinea Bissau, Data dashboard. Retrieved from <https://www.gsminelligence.com/markets/1416/dashboard/>

Liberia

As of December 2019, the mobile telephone SIM penetration was estimated at 83% of mobile telephone connections. Mobile connections were around 4.1 million. Facebook is the most popular social media platform used in the country, accounting for 85.31% of social media users. As data pricing remains a challenge to most of the population in the country, less than fifty percent of mobile internet users subscribed to broadband services. Like the other countries featured in this report, internet services delivery in Liberia leaves much to be desired and data cost are high. One gigabit of mobile data costs USD8.63.

On December 2, 2019, the Center for Media Studies and Peacebuilding (CEMESP), trained 25 journalists on researching and understanding key regulatory frameworks related to freedom of information, access to information, and cybersecurity¹⁹.

Mali

As of December 2019, there were an estimated 1,636,800²⁰ Facebook users in Mali. Just like many countries in the sub-region, data prices remain high. One gigabit of mobile data costs about USD 6.85.

Mali did not record any violations during this quarter. Some good developments were recorded in terms of capacity building on data protection and privacy and improving e-learning in the country.

From November 30-31, 2019, the national institution in charge of protecting people's personal data, l'Autorité de Protection des Données à Caractère Personnel (APDP),²¹ trained focal persons of public services and institutions on the legal framework of data protection and privacy. The training equipped the beneficiaries with knowledge of the procedures of data collection, data storage, and disclosure.

On November 7, 2019, the Internet Society Foundation announced that it has granted funding support for the implementation of a study project. The \$30,000²² grant aimed to respond to the need of reliable statistical data on Internet use, in particular on the use/misuse of social media in both in rural and urban areas.

To foster access to quality tertiary education for millions of Malian citizens, an e-learning platform was launched by Groupe Famib, a group of trainings institutions, on November 7²³.

Nigeria

Nigeria has one of the highest internet penetration rates in Africa. As of December 2019, the number of connected lines was 269,717,158 in the country. However, real active lines are estimated

¹⁹ Aline Dunbar (2019, December 5). Liberia: CEMESP Trains 25 Media Professionals on Researching and Cybersecurity. Retrieved from <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/liberia-cemesp-trains-25-media-professionals-on-researching-and-cyber-security/>

²⁰ NapoleonCat (2019, December). Social media user in Mali. Retrieved from <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/social-media-users-in-mali/2019/12>

²¹ Foudaisa El Ansari (2019, November 7), formation des points focaux des departement ministeriel. Retrieved from <https://apdp.ml/formation-des-points-focaux-des-departements-ministeriels/>

²² Internet Society Foundation (2019, November 7). State of Internet and Social Networks in Mali. Retrieved from <https://www.isocfoundation.org/project/state-of-the-internet-and-social-networks-in-mali/>

²³ Voixdubamako (2019, November 22). Lancement de l'Universitaire Virtuelle du Mali: Une Offre Sociale d'enseignement Supérieure du Groupe FAMIB. Retrieved from <https://voixdebamako.com/lancement-de-l-universitaire-virtuelle-du-mali-une-offre-sociale-d-enseignement-superieure-du-groupe-famib/>

at 184,699,409²⁴. Mobile connections were around 168.8 million with 59%²⁵ of people using mobile broadband data. Mobile data pricing remained relatively affordable in Nigeria, compared to other countries in West Africa. One gigabit of mobile data costs about USD 2.78²⁶. Facebook alone has 262, 900, 000 million users²⁷, making it the most popular social media platform in the country.

While internet penetration and usage are increasing in the country, the authorities have always sought to stifle this fundamental freedom online.

On November 5, 2019, an anti-social media bill, called “Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulations Bill 2019” was introduced before the Senate by Senator Mohammed Sani Musa. The Bill if passed, would give state security agencies the power to shut down the internet, and limit access to social media. The Bill also prescribes an imprisonment term of up to three years for people who publish false information online about the government.

If the Bill is passed into Law, it would constitute a hindrance to free speech online. Although there has been an overwhelming condemnation and outrage by freedom groups and different appeals for it to be dropped, the Bill has passed its second reading.

Attempts to muzzle freedoms online are not a novelty among governments in Africa, and Nigeria is no exception. More than a year ago,

This is not the first in recent times that the Nigerian Senate has attempted to introduce a repressive-freedom of expression and speech Bill to regulate freedom on the internet and social media in Nigeria. On June 26, 2018, Abdul Fatai Buhari, Chairman of the Senate Committee on ICT and Cybercrime said that the Nigerian government had laid before the Senate a Bill to regulate social media “because many Nigerians are misusing it.” As a matter of fact, Nigeria has already, in addition to the Constitutional provisions, a Cyber Crimes Act and the Anti-Terrorism Act, which cover many of the offences the new bills seek to address.

In another development, plain-clothed police officers from Kwara State on October 29, 2019 stormed the Abuja residence of Gidado Yushau, Editor of the online newspaper *NewsDigest*, and whisked him away to the Wuye District Police Station in Abuja. Yushau’s arrest came five days after some police officers in Lagos State, on October 24, 2019, arrested Adebowale Adekoya, the webmaster of the *NewsDigest*. A third-person, Alfred Olufemi, the author of an investigative story published in May 2018 on a scandal at the factory of a former governor of Central Bank of Nigeria was also hunted by the police during this quarter in connection with the said story. The arrest and detention of Yushau and Adekoya were in connection with Olufemi’s story.

Senegal

As of December 2019, mobile connections stood at 17.6 million. This high connection rate can be attributed to the fact that many mobile telephony subscribers are using more than one SIM card. Out of this figure, 52% were using broadband data to access the internet on the telephone and other gadgets. One gigabit of mobile data is estimated at USD3.43. Facebook users were estimated to be about 3,356,600²⁸.

²⁴ Nigeria Communications Commission (2019, December). Statistics & Reports, Subscribers Data. Retrieved from <https://www.ncc.gov.ng/statistics-reports/subscriber-data#monthly-subscriber-technology-data>

²⁵ <https://www.gsmaintelligence.com/markets/2481/dashboard/>

²⁶ A4AI (2019, June). Mobile broadband pricing. Data for quarter 2, 2019. Retrieved from https://a4ai.org/extra/mobile_broadband_pricing_gnicm-2019Q2

²⁷ NapoleonCat (2019, December). Social media users in Nigeria. Retrieved from <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/social-media-users-in-nigeria/2019/12>

²⁸ NapoleonCat (2019, December). Social media users in Senegal. Retrieved from <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/social-media-users-in-senegal/2019/12>

During the quarter, the country did not record any violations. However, the country hosted a very significant event related to internet use in the banking sector that brought together key banking and finance players within the West African francophone speaking countries.

The Central Bank of West African States (BCEAO) held its second edition of the Semaine de l'Inclusion Financière dans l'UEMOA (Week of Financial Inclusion in WAEMU). The event was organised at the headquarters of BCEAO in Dakar from November 18-23 2019. It was under the theme: "Digitalisation for financial sector inclusion: challenges in the financial sector and within WAEMU member states"²⁹. Participants discussed challenges associated with the digital payment systems in the financial sector, and fashioned ways to safeguard consumers of financial services.

Sierra Leone

The use of mobile telephone represents the main point of access to the internet and social media in Sierra Leone. About 6.9 million people are connected to the internet. This figure is a result of a 7.57% growth in mobile connections in recent times. Mobile broadband data connections remained low and relatively unaffordable for many. One gigabit of mobile data costs about USD 4.11 with quality service and unequal coverage being a major challenge.

During this quarter, the country did not record any violations.

In an effort to bolster the country's digital acceleration and development, the government on October 31, 2019, launched the National Innovation and Digital Strategy (NIDS) policy. This framework seeks to achieve the promotion and development of digital science and technology and the digitalization of the country to accelerate development.³⁰

Togo

Mobile connection in Togo is estimated to be 6.5 million with 48% of the citizens accessing the internet through mobile broadband. As of December, the figure of people accessing Facebook was 653 900³¹. One gigabit of data costs about USD7.19.

On October 9, 2019, the government authorized the ratification³² of the African Union Convention on Cybersecurity and Data Protection. According to the government, the ratification of the convention is aimed at fostering Togo's legal frameworks in order to position the country as a digital and logistical hub in the West Africa while reinforcing its capacity to face the security challenges posed by the digital age.

²⁹ BCEAO (2019, November). Direction de l'Inclusion Financière. Semaine de l'Inclusion Financière dans l'UEMOA : édition 2019. Retrieved from <http://www.microfinance.sn/semaine-de-linclusion-financiere-dans-luemoa-edition-2019/>

³⁰ Jane.Williams(2019, October 29). Sierra Leone's Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation marks first anniversary. Retrieved https://www.switsalone.com/32736_sierra-leones-directorate-of-science-technology-and-innovation-marks-first-anniversary/

³¹ NapoleonCat(2019, December).Social media users in Togo. Retrieved from <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/social-media-users-in-togo/2019/12>

³² Suleyman Tobias (2019, October 10). Cyber sécurité: le Togo va ratifier la convention de Malabo. Retrieved from <https://cio-mag.com/cybersecurite-le-togo-va-ratifier-la-convention-de-malabo/>

Conclusions and Recommendations

Unlike the previous quarter when the internet was disrupted in Benin, Liberia, and Mauritania, this quarter recorded no such violations. Despite several anti-government protests in Guinea, the authorities did not interfere with the internet as feared. The internet was also kept on in Guinea Bissau, during and after the country's presidential election.

The internet space is relatively unrestricted in the West Africa region. The rate of internet penetration is also increasing steadily with mobile phones being the major point of access to the internet in most of the countries. Despite the impressive growth, there are concerns about poor service delivery, lack of appropriate infrastructure and technologies, and prohibitive cost of mobile broadband. Equally disturbing are the challenges of access concentration in urban areas with many rural communities marginalised. Social inequalities offline are being replicated online. For example, gaps in digital literacy and incomes limit access to large sections of the population, including women.

Also, while the internet space is largely unrestricted and online safety generally assured, there appears to be a creeping resort to cybercrime laws to suppress the online activities of critical journalists and activists. The arrest and detention of journalists in Nigeria and Benin over their critical online publications as well as the detention of a Burkinabe social media activist based on cybercrime laws illustrate this disturbing trend.

Also disturbing is the obsession of the Nigerian authorities with passing new laws to fight fake news and hate speech, despite having enough existing laws that deal with the phenomenon. This trend has the potential to undermine citizens' demand for transparency, accountability and good governance from public servants.

While the violations are unacceptable, it is important for users to avoid abusing the internet. Abusive use of the internet poses a danger to privacy and data protection, undermines financial and social services delivery and hinders entrepreneurship. Criminal and nefarious use of the Internet provides a pretext for governments to target legitimate use of digital resources that exposes corruption in governance and challenges authoritarian attitudes.

The phenomenon of fake news, hate speech and cyber fraud constitutes the flip side of the promotion of digital rights that provides an excuse for repressive governments to adopt draconian laws to govern cyberspace. These laws often fail to differentiate between the good, social and entrepreneurial use of the internet, including the journalistic uses of the internet, thus, leading to the interference of government with people's online activities through surveillance and sometimes blocking of access to online publications and media portals.

In light of the foregoing, the MFWA makes the following recommendations towards improving the internet freedom environment in West Africa:

- Governments should, at all times, ensure that freedom of expression rights are respected online as well as offline,
- Governments should ensure that violations against online expression are thoroughly investigated and perpetrators duly punished.
- Security should avoid the illegal arrests and detentions of journalists, citizens, and activists for simply expressing their rights to civil and political participation in the debates and discourses on national issues and interests.

- Courts should ensure that the interpretation of laws is compatible with regional and international legal frameworks on internet rights.
- The governments should embark on massive citizens' education on the responsible use of the internet.
- Telecoms communications and digital regulatory bodies should intensify efforts in improving internet delivery services, and offer affordable internet mobile broadband pricing with regard to the Internet Universality Indicators.
- All stakeholders must work pro-actively and collaboratively in addressing online freedom and cybersecurity issues
- Legislation and mechanisms that are human rights-friendly must be put in place, and fully and efficiently functioning to curb the trend of the growing insecurity in the cyberspace.
- Internet users must seek reparation and redress whenever their rights are violated.
- Online platforms and applications should be used responsibly by all.