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1. Introduction

Liberia got its first internet connection about 21 years ago. The dial-up connection that was introduced to the country at the time was a novelty even though it was painstaking slow. About a year after the first connection, satellite-based internet was introduced. Though this was faster than the dial-up internet, it was still relatively slow and most especially unaffordable for the average person. At the time, it cost about US$10 for an hour of internet browsing. There was a single service provider that existed in the country at the time. The internet and mobile phone businesses were monopolies controlled by members of the ruling party at the time. The cost of voice calls was also astronomically high for the average Liberian.

Two decades since the early days of the internet, the service is quite ubiquitous in the country. The internet is now largely mobile and can be found in every one of Liberia's 15 counties. Between 1999 and 2013 the cost of using the internet in Liberia considerably decreased and the speed of the service also astronomically increased.[1] In 1999 it costs US$10 for an hour of internet browsing at the only internet café run by Data Technologies Solutions (Data Tech). With the internet market being open up starting in 2003, Data Tech started providing internet services via satellite to a small clientele with prices ranging from US$75 per month for a 32/56 Kbps connection to US$3200 per month for a VSAT connection.[2] By 2013 when the fiber optics cable became fully functional, the cost of using the internet reduced to just about US$1 for 2GB of data. The landing of the fiber optics internet cable brought relief to Liberians as it greatly lowered the cost and considerably increased the speed.[3]But starting in 2018, as the economic situation in the country worsened, the government increasingly saw levies on mobile phone usage as an attractive source for tax collection to address the huge shortfalls that it was experiencing because of the withdrawal of the huge United Nations Missions from the country. The UN peacekeeping mission had spent the previous decade in the country.

There is very little legal framework that exists to govern the operations of the internet in Liberia. This is especially the case when the issue of crimes related to internet usage are considered. The Liberia Telecommunication Authority (LTA) has broad regulatory authority over the sector as it has an overall mandate to oversee the telecommunication sector of the country. Though there is no current legal

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[1] Liberia Telecommunications Authority, 'Public Consultation Document on the Definition of Relevent Telecommunications Markets' (2016) 1 <https://www.emansion.gov.lr/doc/CONSULTATION-DOCUMENT.pdf> accessed 13 December 2021.

[2] Kolubahzizi Howard, 'A REVIEW OF TELECOM SECTOR REFORM IN THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA' 18 <https://www.academia.edu/4143262/A_REVIEW_OF_TELECOM_SECTOR_REFORM_IN_THE_REPUBLIC_OF_LIBERIA> accessed 15 December 2021.

[3] 'Liberians Prepare for Fast Speed and Affordable Internet Connectivity' (*World Bank*) <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2012/04/17/liberians-prepare-for-fast-speed-and-affordable-internet-connectivity> accessed 15 December 2021.

framework that governs the internet, there are efforts to pass a cybercrime law that will govern aspects of internet usage. There are also ongoing consultations to draft and subsequently pass a data protection law.

The Ministry of Post and Telecommunication, in 2019 released a five-year ICT Policy for the country. The policy, which draws on the ECOWAS ICT Policy is geared towards "the promotion of the development of economic and technological infrastructure."[4] The government's ICT Policy aims at addressing "the limited availability and high cost of ICT infrastructure in Liberia."[5]

While there has been a great improvement to internet access for many Liberians, access to the services remains relatively low especially between urban and rural areas. This report is part of a larger project that seeks to increase public awareness and respect for online rights especially women's rights in the online space in Liberia. More specifically it seeks to assess the state of internet freedom in Liberia.

2. Methodology

In the process of carrying out this analysis of the state of internet freedom in Liberia, this research relied on desk review of sources on internet access and affordability in Liberia. The researcher reviewed online sources of information and in some instances assessed hard copies of documents that were available from government sources.

3. Findings

The findings of this research highlight the state of internet freedom in Liberia. Specifically, it covers the country context, regulation of the internet space, issues of affordability and access, privacy rights, freedom of expression online and women's rights online. Below are the details of the findings.

i.   Country Context

Liberia witnessed its first peaceful democratic transition of government from one elected president to another in 2018 when President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf turned over power to President George Weah after the elections of October/November 2017. This was the first time such a transition had happened since 1944. Mr. Weah won

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[4] 'ICT | Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)' <https://ecoslate.github.io/ecowas-sectors/ict/index.htm> accessed 22 October 2021.
[5] 'LTC | Mobile' 19 <http://www.new.libtelco.com.lr/ict_policy> accessed 21 October 2021.

after a runoff poll against the incumbent vice president.[6] His ascendency marked the end of Mrs. Sirleaf's 12-year rule of the country. Mrs. Sileaf became president in Liberia in 2006 following a historic election in 2005 when she became the first female elected president of an African country.

The country is one of the poorest in West Africa. It is home to about 5.06 million people, according to World Bank[7] estimates. Liberia fought two very brutal civil wars between 1989 and 2003. Since the second civil war ended in 2003, the country has remained peaceful.

ii.   Regulation of the Internet Space

The regulation of the ICT sector in Liberia relies on two main players. These are the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication, and the Liberia Telecommunication Authority (LTA). Each of these two institutions has a different role to play in the administration of the country's technology sector. The Ministry is responsible for the formulation of general policies that guide the sector and serve as the policy point of focus among other government agencies, the private sector, and civil society, while the LTA is an independent regulator of the sector that puts in place the rules that govern it.[8]

As part of its regulatory obligations, the LTA in 2015 issued an order establishing the Universal Access Fund.[9] The UAF is a pool of 2% of all levies collected from licensed operators in the country.[10] The country's decision to set up the UAF followed the UN Broadband Commission's call on world leaders to prioritize universal connectivity to the internet.[11] This policy was reiterated in the country's ICT Policy released in 2019. It called for the implementation of the UAF and set the benchmark of every Liberian having local access to voice and data services.[12]

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[6] Clair MacDougall and Helene Cooper, 'George Weah Wins Liberia Election' *The New York Times* (28 December 2017) <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/28/world/africa/george-weah-liberia-election.html> accessed 29 October 2021.

[7] 'Population, Total - Liberia | Data' <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=LR> accessed 28 October 2021.

[8] 'LTC | Mobile' (n 3) 12.

[9] 'Universal Access' (*Liberia Telecommunications Authority*) <https://www.lta.gov.lr/universal-access/> accessed 28 October 2021.

[10] Privacy Policy and others, 'The Internet Is Unaffordable in Liberia: Action Is Needed to "SET" the Agenda for Positive Change' (*Alliance for Affordable Internet*, 16 December 2020) <https://a4ai.org/the-internet-is-unaffordable-in-liberia-action-is-needed-to-set-the-agenda-for-positive-change/> accessed 22 October 2021.

[11] webmaster, 'Broadband Commission Calls on World Leaders to Prioritize Universal Connectivity as Fundamental to Sustainable Development & Global Recovery' (*Liberia Telecommunications Authority*, 23 September 2020) <https://www.lta.gov.lr/news/broadband-commission-calls-on-world-leaders-to-prioritize-universal-connectivity-as-fundamental-to-sustainable-development-global-recovery/> accessed 28 October 2021.

[12] 'LTC | Mobile' (n 3) 9.

Considering the lacuna in the Liberian law as it relates to cybercrimes, the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications, between 2017 and 2019 led efforts to draft a Cybercrimes Bill. The draft Bill, though, leaves a lot to be desired. The Bill largely focuses on the issue of computer misuse and attacks on critical infrastructures. It largely ignores the aspects of cybercrimes related to privacy. The draft Bill, though, has provisions on cyberterrorism, child pornography, racist and xenophobic offenses, etc. The draft Cybercrimes Bill has as objectives the provision of an effective and unified legal framework for interdicting cybercrimes; ensuring the protection of the country's critical infrastructure; and promoting cybersecurity with the intention of protecting intellectual property rights, etc.[13] The process of drafting the Cybercrimes Bill for legislative action, as noted in the country's ICT Policy, further aligns with Liberia's obligation to adapt criminal laws and procedures to address cybercrimes as per the 2011 ECOWAS Directive on Cybercrimes.[14]

The Liberia Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Policy released by the Liberian Government in 2019 has its stated objective as wanting to support economic development through fully integrated Information Communication Technology that ensures total social inclusion for all Liberians.[15] This objective aligns with the ICT policy of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) which seeks to promote the development of economic and technological infrastructure in and between its member states.[16] The Policy also seeks to address the significant disparities that exist in access and affordability of ICTs in the country.[17] The government notes in the Policy that it is essential for modernizing and globalizing the country's economy; ensuring wide-ranging participation of Liberians in the country's governance and development processes.[18] The government also sees the development of the ICT sector as essential to ensuring that the country becomes more informed.

Generally, the laws in Liberia have little coverage of technology issues especially as it relates to current technologies. The country's business laws for example, have little or no safeguards or provisions that cover business transactions involving the use of technologies. The criminal law, on its part, may not be applicable to cybercrimes even though the provision in the country's Penal Law on intrusive surveillance is written in a blanket fashion to cover any use of technology. The provision in question, though it was passed half a century ago is sometimes relied on by the authorities to interdict cyber-related issues.

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[13] Draft Cybercrime Act 2017/2018 34, pt 1 Section 1.
[14] 'LTC | Mobile' (n 3) 18.
[15] ibid 3.
[16] 'ICT | Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)' (n 2).
[17] 'LTC | Mobile' (n 3) 4.
[18] ibid 7.

iii. Affordability and Access

In 2021, the cost of using the internet increased because of a change in surge charges by the government. The government had, in late 2020, imposed another surge charge levy that increased the cost of making calls and using the internet in the country. Liberia was reportedly the country with the 5th most expensive internet in the world in 2019.[19] The increase in cost has made the internet largely unavailable to most Liberians. Most people have cut down their usage to compensate for the massive increase in the cost. According to the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), I the poorest 20% of Liberians spend over 47% of their monthly income to use the internet in Liberia.[20] This is especially burdensome for people who are low-income earners. The average salary in Liberia is about US$512 with those on the low side earning about US$130 per month.[21] The average cost of accessing the internet for one month varies between the two service providers.[22]

The affordability issues surrounding the internet in Liberia also extends to smartphones and other devices. Globally, the availability of smartphone technology to the average person is still unaffordable. The Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) found that the average household spends a disproportionate share of their monthly income to acquire the cheapest smartphones in poor countries.[23] The A4AI concludes that the cost "remains one of the biggest barriers to internet access."[24] Considering that smartphones are the main vehicles for internet connectivity for most people, the high cost of smartphones implies that most poor people in a place like Liberia will lack access. The affordability rating for smartphones in Liberia was put at 40% with the cheapest device being priced at about $20.[25]

The Alliance for Affordable Internet estimates that the average Liberian must labour for at least 13 days to be able to afford the cheapest smartphone on sale in the country.[26] While this cost varies across countries, it is also informed by the quality of devices that are available in some places. Stringent rules on the type of quality products that can be imported have an impact on the floor price of the devices that are available for the public to choose from. While the Liberian market is flooded with

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[19] 'Liberia Is the Fifth Country in the World with Expensive Mobile Data for Internet' (*FrontPageAfrica*, 28 November 2019) <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/news/liberia-is-the-fifth-country-in-the-world-with-expensive-mobile-data-for-internet/> accessed 20 October 2021.

[20] Policy and others (n 8).

[21] 'Average Salary in Liberia 2021 - The Complete Guide' <http://www.salaryexplorer.com/salary-survey.php?loc=121&loctype=1> accessed 13 December 2021.

[22] Kelli Miller, 'Liberia Internet Packages & Data Plan of 2021' (2021) <https://internetpkg.com/liberia-internet-packages/> accessed 20 October 2021.

[23] 'Alliance for Affordable Internet_Device Pricing_PUBLIC' (*Google Docs*) 4 <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YFXbUr-W0LTOAXs9QEtlf8oEBsrakQ_lLeHUyb-6oEY/edit?usp=embed_facebook> accessed 22 October 2021.

[24] ibid 27.

[25] ibid 28.

[26] Policy and others (n 8).

cheap smartphones, these phones can hardly be termed as affordable for the average low-income earners. The government's aggressive desire to collect taxes provides little room for lowering the prices of these devices. Paradoxically, Liberia's ICT policy sets the goal of providing support to ensure that the internet is affordable and available to all in the country.[27]

While device affordability is an issue, the actual cost of using the internet on daily basis is a totally different issue. Device cost is usually a one-time payment, but the average data bundles are sold for periods ranging from one day to a month. It is the kind of recurring cost that seriously affects income, especially for low earners. For those who can afford it, the cost of using the internet is high, but it does not affect the monthly income as it does the people who are low-income earners. For example, the average internet cost for using just 1GB of data is roughly 48% of the monthly income for low earners, while it is largely negligible (at just 8%) for high-income earners in Liberia.[28] Currently, it costs US$2 to access 1GB of data for a week. It also cost US$25, US$50, and US$99 to respectively access 10GB, 25GB, and 60GB of data on the Orange mobile phone network. On the MTN network, US$25.00 gives 9.3GB, while
US$50.00 gives 23.3GB. Not surprisingly, just 19% of Liberians were reported to have access to the internet in 2020 according to the A4AI.[29] Just a year earlier, the World Bank's estimate of people with access to the internet stood at 22%.[30] The drop may be attributable to the increased tariffs on voice and data services that were introduced in the country in 2020, but the situation points to how stark the country's internet connectivity/access/affordability problems are.

The government's Liberia Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Policy (2019-2024) sets ambitious targets in its quests to meet the UN Broadband Commission's affordability threshold of 2% of income. The policy promises to adopt an affordability target of 1GB of mobile prepaid data priced at less than 2% of average monthly per capita income; ensure that about 15% of Liberians regularly access and use mobile broadband services; and that 10% of Liberians access and use fixed broadband services.[31]

The internet penetration issue in Liberia shows that the country is far from meeting the targets set by the UN Broadband Commission's affordability threshold. The internet penetration in Liberia stood at just 14.9% in January 2020 with just about 761,000 internet users in the country.[32] The number of internet users in Liberia

[27] 'LTC | Mobile' (n 3) 1.
[28] Policy and others (n 8).
[29] ibid.
[30] 'Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population) - Liberia | Data'
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=LR> accessed 29 October 2021.
[31] 'LTC | Mobile' (n 3) 8.
[32] 'Digital in Liberia: All the Statistics You Need in 2021 — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights'
<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-liberia> accessed 30 October 2021.

increased by 22% between January 2020 and January 2021.[33] There were just 530,000 social media users in the country in January 2020, with the country's social media penetration being just about 11%.[34] These figures, though, do not account for single individuals that access the internet using multiple devices or individuals with multiple online profiles.

The overwhelming majority of people, accounting for about 99%, who use the internet in Liberia do so using mobile connections.[35] Liberia also has 3.39 million mobile connections amounting to 66.3% of the population of the country.[36] Again, this statistic does not take into consideration multiple mobile numbers registered to an individual.

iv.   The Right to Privacy

The Penal Law treats the violation of privacy as a misdemeanor. It defines unlawful surveillance as trespassing with the intention of subjecting the occupants of a property to eavesdropping. It goes on to make it illegal for anyone to install "any device" in such a place with the intention to capture information about the occupants. The law also makes it illegal for such surveillance to be done from outside the property provided the information the person carrying out the surveillance is capturing cannot ordinarily be heard from such a location.[37] The law defines a private place as somewhere that someone may reasonably expect to be safe from casual or hostile intrusion or surveillance. The Penal Law's provisions on privacy do not take into consideration the issue of invasion of privacy that is not physical. This presents a serious gap in the law especially when internet-related issues are considered.

The Draft Cybercrimes Bill on its part provides a different definition of privacy. It defines it as the right of a person to make decisions concerning intimate issues away from the intrusions of others. It is unclear why the draft Bill does not just provide a comprehensive definition that repeals aspects of the Penal Law as it relates to illegal surveillance.[38]

The Liberian Constitution prohibits the violation of privacy. It specifically, under Article 15, prohibits the interference with someone's privacy of their home, family, or correspondence unless by the order of a properly constituted court. While this is generally respected, it is not uncommon for the police to carry out a search of

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[33] ibid.
[34] ibid.
[35] ibid.
[36] ibid.
[37] Penal Law - Title 26 - Liberian Code of Laws Revised s 19.1.
[38] Draft Cybercrime Act 2017/2018 pt 1 Section 2.

someone's property without a court warrant under the pretext of being in hot pursuit of a criminal, sometimes months after the occurrence of the crime in question.

Currently, Liberia has no personal or general data protection law.[39] The Press Union of Liberia and its partners were holding consultations for the drafting of a data protection law during the year. It is hoped that the process will culminate into the drafting of a bill that will be presented to the Liberian Legislature for passage into law. While the process is being led by journalists, it brings together diverse groups and interests. It is being carried out across the country to include the views of a wide range of stakeholders.

v.   **Freedom of Expression Online**

In the third quarter of 2021, the Inspector general of the Liberia National Police issued a warning to people in the country for using Facebook and other social media to spread what he termed as falsehoods around ritualistic killings in the country. The police even arrested the member of an opposition party for posting on his Facebook page allegation of one such murder.[40] He was kept in detention for a few days and charged to court.[41] The individual was charged with raising false public alarm under Liberia's Penal Law.[42] A reading of the provision in the Penal Law, though, does not correspond with the alleged crime. Under the Penal Law, false public alarm involves a lot more than just stating something that may not be true. The Inspector General's declaration was widely seen as an illegal attempt at stifling free speech online.

In 2021, the country did not experience any internet shutdown or disruption. In June 2017 the government shut down the internet during the largest anti-government demonstrations the country has seen in many years.[43] While it was disruptive in the early hours of that day, many people quickly reverted to using virtual private networks (VPN) to bypass the restrictions.

In January 2018 Liberia achieved its first transition from one democratically elected president to a different democratically elected president in about 74 years. Although the country reached that significant milestone on the political front, over the last

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[39] Deloitte, 'Privacy Is Paramount: Personal Data Protection in Africa' (Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Limited 2017) 5 <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/za/Documents/risk/za_Privacy_is_Paramount-Personal_Data_Protection_in_Africa.pdf> accessed 30 October 2021.

[40] 'Liberia: ANC Stalwart Arrested for Allegedly Posting Misinformation of Ritualistic Killing of Facebook' (*FrontPageAfrica*, 1 October 2021) <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/front-slider/liberia-anc-stalwart-arrested-for-allegedly-posting-misinformation-of-ritualistic-killing-of-facebook/> accessed 28 October 2021.

[41] '(19) Liberia National Police - LNP - Posts | Facebook' <https://web.facebook.com/theLNP/posts/875709956416586> accessed 28 October 2021.

[42] Penal Law - Title 26 - Liberian Code of Laws Revised s 17.4.

[43] 'CPJ Calls on Liberian Authorities to Ensure Access to Internet and Social Media Services' (*Committee to Protect Journalists*, 7 June 2019) <https://cpj.org/2019/06/cpj-calls-on-liberian-authorities-to-ensure-access/> accessed 28 October 2021.

three years, it has experienced steady declines on the press freedom front. The country has generally stagnated in the Partly Free zone of the Freedom House Rankings for 2021.[44] For its part, RSF ranks Liberia 98th in its 2021 ranking with a score of 33.36.[45] The US State Department's Human Rights Report for 2020 noted that the government generally respected the people's right to be critical of it. The report, however, highlighted favored tactics of government officials to use the country's stringent libel laws that cowed media outlets into self-censorship.[46] Government officials are also known to harass media organizations and journalists.[47] These kinds of harassment are more prevalent in the countryside against community radio stations.

A prominent government critic, Mr. Henry Costa, whose radio station was closed in 2019[48] was denied airtime on other radio stations during the year on the orders of the Ministry of Information and the chief prosecutor of Liberia. According to the government, Mr. Henry Costa cannot be allowed to broadcast in Liberia because he is not present in the country. They also claim that he is a fugitive from justice in Liberia.[49] Mr. Costa has, however, continued broadcasting online, but the high cost of internet data for the average person means that his listenership has considerably dwindled.

vi.   Women's Right Online

There is gender disparity in accessing and using the internet in Liberia. The average male is more likely to have access to the internet than the average female. A4AI estimates that Liberian men are 49% more likely to use the internet than their female counterparts.[50] "Liberia ranks 95th out of 100 countries in relation to gender gap in internet access."[51] The statistics on the gender disparity on internet usage is emblematic of the country's greater gender access problems. The government's ICT Policy hopes to bridge the gender gap using ICTs.[52]

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[44] 'Liberia: Freedom in the World 2020 Country Report' (*Freedom House*) <https://freedomhouse.org/country/liberia/freedom-world/2020> accessed 28 October 2021.

[45] '2020 RSF Index: Future of African Journalism under Threat from All Sides' (*RSF*, 19 April 2020) <https://rsf.org/en/2020-rsf-index-future-african-journalism-under-threat-all-sides> accessed 9 October 2021.

[46] US Department of State, 'LIBERIA 2020 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT' (2020) 13.

[47] ibid.

[48] 'Liberian Radio Station Closed, Another Attacked by Protesters | Reporters without Borders' (*RSF*, 14 October 2019) <https://rsf.org/en/news/liberian-radio-station-closed-another-attacked-protesters> accessed 29 August 2021.

[49] 'Liberia: Government Warns Radio Bushrod Not to Host The Costa Show; Says He's a Fugitive' (*FrontPageAfrica*, 17 January 2021) <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/front-slider/liberia-government-warns-radio-bushrod-not-to-host-the-costa-show-says-hes-a-fugitive/> accessed 29 August 2021.

[50] Policy and others (n 8).

[51] ibid.

[52] 'LTC | Mobile' (n 3) 1.

There have been many instances of revenge porn in the country. In each of such instances, the alleged culprits have been arrested and charged with multiple offenses. Earlier in 2021, a female student in the country's southeast became a victim of this situation.[53] In 2017 a similar situation occurred with a sex video involving a lecturer at the University of Liberia and a female journalist having been released on social media.[54] The few instances of revenge porn that are reported far pales in comparison to those that are not reported since often women are too ashamed to come forward. Many of such women suffer in silence and allow themselves to be blackmailed by the culprits.

The coverage of female circumcision in the country's media is another issue regarding women that is a hot one that many media organizations tend to avoid. The cultural sensibilities that accompany issues related to one of the dominant cultural practices in the country see some media organizations avoid covering it.[55] Despite threats to one of its female journalists[56] for covering female circumcision issues, the Front Page Africa Newspaper continues to cover it in both its print and online editions[57].

4. Recommendations

Internet penetration is low in Liberia for several reasons. Chief among these is the affordability of access devices like smartphones and the actual cost of getting connected. The country has a great opportunity to close its digital divide — starting with sound, forward-looking government policies and a commitment by the government, private sector, and civil society stakeholders within the country, to collaborate in developing the ICT sector, particularly in areas outside Monrovia. The following recommendations are, thus, directed at relevant stakeholders in the internet ecosystem in Liberia aimed at improving internet access in the country.

Government:

  a. Use the Universal Access Fund (UAF). to help ameliorate the chronic lack of access to the internet faced by the rural and urban poor.

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[53] 'Maryland Man Arrested for Releasing Revenge Porn Video on Facebook' <https://bushchicken.com/maryland-man-arrested-for-releasing-revenge-porn-video-on-facebook/> accessed 28 October 2021.
[54] Claudia Smith, 'Liberia: "Revenge Porn" - Another Dimension of Sexual Exploitation' *Liberian Observer* (Monrovia, 5 July 2017) <https://allafrica.com/stories/201707050151.html> accessed 28 October 2021.
[55] US Department of State (n 46) 13.
[56] Roy Greenslade, 'Journalist Who Revealed Genital Mutilation in Liberia Forced into Hiding' *The Guardian* (30 April 2012) <https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2012/apr/30/journalist-safety-liberia> accessed 14 December 2021.
[57] 'Liberia: Woman, 25, Forcefully Taken to Sande Bush for Genital Mutilation' *FrontPageAfrica* (30 April 2019) <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/front-slider/liberia-woman-25-forcefully-taken-to-sande-bush-for-genital-mutilation/> accessed 14 December 2021.

b. Use the UAF to intervene in reducing the cost of internet usage for people in rural communities. A separate pricing regime for voice and data services should be pegged to the locality that someone regularly resides.

c. Put in place policies that will lower the cost of mobile phone devices to enable poorer people have greater access to the internet.

d. Government agencies like the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication, and the Liberia Telecommunication Authority (LTA) should collate and publish data on internet usage in Liberia.

e. Reform laws to specifically target revenge porn. Instead of culprits being charged with the misdemeanor crime of distribution of obscene materials, there is a need for an amendment of the Penal Law to include a provision that specifically covers revenge porn. Also, steps to ensure that prosecutions of perpetrators of revenge porn are speedy and conclusive.

f. Work to ensure that freedom of expression online is respected by protecting the speech of government opponents. In doing this, it must reign in overzealous policing of online speech. It must also allow critics the right to have their online broadcast syndicated to local radio stations without molestation.

Industry Players and Government:

g. There is a need for greater investment in expanding the ICT infrastructure for voice and data across the country. Presently, fiber optic lines extend just about 130 miles away from Monrovia to Gbarnga and about 100 miles from Monrovia to Buchanan.

Government and Civil Society:

h. The Press Union of Liberia, the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication and other CSOs should work together in including clear language in the Cybercrimes Bill on the protection of data privacy for individuals.

5. Conclusion

Liberia remains one of the least connected countries in the world. With just around 19% of the country's population having access to the internet, it has a long way to go to reach the UN Broadband Commission's Universal Access benchmark. The government has made the achievement of this goal a priority in its Liberia Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Policy (2019-2024). In 2020, the government issued regulations through the Liberia Telecommunication Authority that drastically increased the cost of using the internet in the country.

Unless there is a policy reversal on the cost issue, which is unlikely, it would be difficult for the country to achieve the level of access it hopes to in the short run.

Even though the cost of using the internet continues to be an issue, the cost of acquiring mobile devices also remains an issue for most Liberians especially considering that it cost the average Liberian a considerable portion of their income to acquire a smartphone. This is important because most Liberians use the internet via mobile devices. This situation also must change if the country must make progress towards achieving its universal access goals.

Privacy continues to remain a challenge with using the internet in Liberia. Yet the country lacks a cybercrimes and data protection regime though there are efforts to enact legislation on both issues. State harassment of speech also continues to be a source of concern. While there were no internet shutdowns during the year in review, free online speech continued to be violated with at least one person being arrested for posting what police described as false information on Facebook.