



# TOMORROW'S INTERNET— THE JELLO IS ON THE WALL

A Review Essay by  
Tara Flores and Philip Hall

*AI Super-Powers: China, Silicon Valley and the New World Order*  
Kai-Fu Lee. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018

*The Great Firewall of China: How to Build and Control  
an Alternative Version of the Internet*  
James Griffiths. Zed Books, 2019

*Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era  
is Transforming Politics in Kenya (African Arguments)*  
Nanjala Nyabola. Zed Books, 2018

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*In the new century, liberty will spread by cell phone and cable modem. Now there's no question China has been trying to crack down on the Internet. (Chuckles.) Good luck! (Laughter.) That's sort of like trying to nail jello to the wall.'*<sup>1</sup>

Bill Clinton, 2000

*Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather.*<sup>2</sup>

John Perry Barlow, 1996

*Over the last 15 years, Facebook and Instagram have helped people connect with friends, communities, and interests in the digital equivalent of a town square. But people increasingly also want to connect privately in the digital equivalent of the living room.*<sup>3</sup>

Mark Zuckerberg, 2019

## The new new media

When a right-wing gunman recently opened fire on a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, the massacre was streamed live and uncensored on Facebook to a community of like-minded zealots. Condemnation of the attack was swift. It was followed almost as quickly by condemnation of the role Facebook had played.

'To give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected' was Facebook's original mission statement. It reflected the optimistic thinking of most internet pioneers: information could not be contained; it wanted to be free and would lead to freedom. Events like those in New Zealand have now demanded a rethink of this attitude. Facebook's new mantra is 'Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together.'<sup>4</sup> The company and its social and digital media peers in the West are moving towards a different model that will have profound implications for strategic communications: a model that is regulated, not free; and ever more closed, not

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Clinton, *Speech on the China Trade Bill*, 9 March 2000.

<sup>2</sup> John Perry Barlow, *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, Electronic Frontier Foundation, 8 February 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Zuckerberg, Mark, *A Privacy-Focused Vision for Social Networking*, Facebook Notes, 6 March 2019.

<sup>4</sup> *About Facebook*, Facebook, founded 2004, latest update 2019.

open. It is also a model that is fully-formed in China. In this current period of uncertainty, it is far from clear which internet model—West or East—will prove more influential. An examination of internet infrastructure and regulation in East Africa is, however, instructive.

### **Information wants to be free-ish**

When Tim Berners-Lee invented the world wide web in 1989, it was conceived as an open, information-sharing tool; a utopian facilitator of democracy that would help people win freedom across the globe, like a hyperlinked version of the photocopied pamphlets that helped undermine communist regimes. In the last few years, however, this vision has shifted and concerns about the internet's current and future model abound.

The idea that 'open always wins out'<sup>5</sup> is now considered to be verging on 'glib'.<sup>6</sup>

Berners Lee used his annual letter this year to reinforce his opinion that legislation is now a required safety pin to ensure that the internet does not rip apart the fabric of society.<sup>7</sup> The letter went so far as to compare this current era to the period of history when the Law of Sea and the Outer Space Treaty were created. For Berners-Lee, the internet is not an abstract concept that cannot be tamed. Rather, it is as tangible a terrain as any other that has been conquered by mankind. Just as in the past it has been possible to 'preserve new frontiers for the common good',<sup>8</sup> he calls on the world to preserve and legislate this new global territory with which we are all still grappling. John Perry Barlow's 'weary giants of flesh and steel' are newly reenergised.

This shift towards closed and regulated networks is not only being called for by Silicon Valley elites. It also reflects the demands of online users themselves.

Governments are now revving their regulatory engines.<sup>9</sup> After the tragic terrorist attack in New Zealand, there was a widespread demand that Facebook and other tech giants such as Google (who own YouTube) take responsibility for removing

5 Ram Shriram, Netscape executive, cited in Tim Berners-Lee, '30 years on, what's next #ForTheWeb?', Web Foundation, 12 March 2019.

6 Ibid.

7 Tim Berners-Lee, '30 years on, what's next #ForTheWeb?', Web Foundation, 12 March 2019; Alex Hern, 'Tim Berners-Lee on 30 years of the world wide web: 'We can get the web we want'', *The Guardian*, 12 March 2019. Notably, at last year's Web Summit in Lisbon, Berners-Lee called for a 'contract for the web'.

8 Berners-Lee, '30 years on, what's next #ForTheWeb?', Web Foundation, 12 March 2019.

9 Cecilia Kang, 'F.T.C. Is Said to Be Considering Large Facebook Fines', *New York Times*, 18 January 2019.

the offensive footage.<sup>10</sup> Facebook, hit hard by this and other incidents,<sup>11</sup> announced a new policy of banning content that supports white nationalism and white separatism,<sup>12</sup> and called for governments around the world to consider regulating the digital realm.<sup>13</sup> This is a giant leap for a company whose first steps on the global stage were firmly against any attempt to constrain its behaviour.<sup>14</sup>

The structural shift towards closed networks is also accelerating. Facebook was always essentially walled off from the rest of the web, but now—spurred on by concerns around the sharing of personal data<sup>15</sup>—it is making walls a core feature of its business offer. In a blog post published on 6 March 2019, Mark Zuckerberg used the word ‘private’ 29 times, the word ‘privacy’ 22 times, and announced Facebook’s new commitment to creating a ‘privacy-focused vision for social networking’.<sup>16</sup> Wholly-closed networks such as WhatsApp or Telegram are on the rise.<sup>17</sup> Even old-school media outlets are now explicitly basing their business models on closed networks. Reaching nationwide populations (and bringing advertisers along with them) is no longer the goal of newspapers such as the *New York Times*; instead it is to monetise a silo of subscribers.

The tech giants of Silicon Valley were conceived with the belief that ‘information is for sharing’. They have, until very recently, been perceived as reluctant to be tamed by any form of regulation or legislation. A different way of thinking is now seen as essential.<sup>18</sup>

### The alternative universe

The concept of attempting to ‘contain’ the internet is not new. Back in 2000, Bill Clinton lauded the democratising potential of the web, claiming freedom would

10 Issie Lapowsky, ‘Why tech didn’t stop the New Zealand attack from going viral’, *Wired*, 15 March 2019.

11 This is not the first incident in which tech companies have been asked to bring down violent footage. Other recent incidents of violent footage online include the murder of Robert Godwin in the US in 2018, the violent killing of an 11-month-old by her father in Thailand and the murder of a young Danish woman in Morocco in 2018–19. Sarah Ashley O’Brien, ‘Facebook hit with lawsuit over murder posted online’, *CNN Money*, 30 January 2018; Steve Almasy, ‘Thailand baby killing: Facebook removes video’, *CNN*, 25 April 2017; Jack Guy, ‘Denmark prosecutes 14 people who shared murder video’, *CNN*, 7 March 2019.

12 Lois Beckett, ‘Facebook to ban white nationalism and separatism content’, *The Guardian*, 27 March 2019.

13 Mark Scott, ‘Facebook’s Clegg: Politicians must regulate to avoid ‘Balkanized’ internet’, *Politico*, 31 March 2019; Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook post, Facebook, 30 March 2019.

14 Laura Kayali, ‘Inside Facebook’s fight against European regulation’, *Politico*, 23 January 2019.

15 Staff, ‘Cambridge Analytica Files’, *The Guardian*, article series starting 17 March 2018; Staff, ‘Facebook fined £500,000 for Cambridge Analytica scandal’, *BBC*, 25 October 2018.

16 Some remain sceptical of the authenticity of Zuckerberg’s claims. Indeed, at the same as Zuckerberg wrote his blog on the importance of privacy laws, Facebook appealed the £500,000 fine imposed against it by the UK Information Commissioner’s Office for contravening the UK’s privacy laws.

17 Josh Constine, ‘WhatsApp hits 1.5 billion monthly users. \$19B? Not so bad’, *TechCrunch*, 31 January 2018.

18 Editorial Board, ‘Global standards on Big Tech are sorely needed’, *Financial Times*, 1 April 2019.

be spread by mobile phones and cable modems. He famously chuckled at the idea of China trying to ‘crack down’ on the internet. It was, he thought, ‘sort of like trying to nail jello to the wall.’<sup>19</sup> Nineteen years later, it is clear that China had a bespoke hammer up its sleeve.

Over 1.3 billion people in China have a completely different online experience to those in other similarly technologically advanced countries. Most Chinese teenagers have never heard of Google or Twitter.<sup>20</sup> As James Griffiths outlines in his recent book, *The Great Firewall of China*, China has, from the start, treated cyberspace as any other territory or commodity—and indeed, has regulated it as such.

Contrary to the original utopian, trans-border conceptualisation of the internet, China has followed the strict concept of ‘cyber-sovereignty’.<sup>21</sup> China’s internet ecosystem, protected by the Great Firewall, is renowned for being one of the most tightly controlled censorship systems in the world. This system essentially reflects and ‘emanates from a stance of deep suspicion about the web and its potential risk to state power.’<sup>22</sup> However, as Griffiths astutely highlights, this alternative vision of cyberspace is one ‘that is far more coherent and persuasive than many of us would like to admit.’<sup>23</sup> While there are many reasons not to laud the Chinese model,<sup>24</sup> there is certainly no denying that it has been successful in achieving its objectives. It has also rapidly caught up with, and is now potentially on the verge of superseding, the Western model.

In his 2018 book, *AI Super-Powers: China, Silicon Valley and the New World Order*, Hai-Fu Lee sets out the extent to which China has caught up with America over the last five years. The book analyses in great detail the technological, economic, and human trajectory that has brought both the US and China to where they are today, while providing predictions on the future of the current ‘great race’. In particular, Lee details how China has leapfrogged America when it comes

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19 Bill Clinton, *Speech on the China Trade Bill*, 9 March 2000.

20 Li Yuan, ‘A Generation Grows Up in China Without Google, Facebook or Twitter’, *New York Times*, 6 August 2018. A Chinese teenager did recognise the name Facebook, but only due to its likeness to Baidu.

21 Griffiths is not the first to discuss the concept of cyber-sovereignty. However, his recent book juxtaposes neatly the bifurcation of the cyberlibertarians in the West and the cyber-authoritarianism of China.

22 James Griffiths, *The Great Firewall of China: How to Build and Control an Alternative Version of the Internet* (Zed Books, 2019), p.8.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Elizabeth C. Economy, ‘The great firewall of China: Xi Jinping’s internet shutdown’, *The Guardian*, 29 June 2018.

to data gathering, transforming into the ‘Saudi Arabia of Data’.<sup>25</sup> China is the world’s largest producer of digital data and it is extending its lead by the day. Key to the author’s argument on the future of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is that deep learning algorithms require computing power, technical talent, and data. The latter, he contends, is the most important. And the more of it the better.<sup>26</sup>

Crucially, China’s data points are not just superior in their quantitative, but also in their qualitative nature. Chinese apps are able to collect data not just on people’s online lives, but on their offline lives as well. To an extent, Facebook does this by tracking what people have ‘liked’, what they have searched for, and which sites they have visited. Chinese apps however relate to ‘real-world’ decisions and data (as we discuss in more detail below): how much money users handle per day, their transportation choices, and even their meals. This is, crucially, where China has been able to jump ahead and create a truly closed network, impermeable to the naively idealistic forces of the outside world.

Despite the country’s rapid progress, a wilful blindness—and perhaps arrogance—lingers in many government quarters about how far China has come.

When Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, gave testimony to the US Congress in April 2018, a sympathetic senator tried to set up an easy question by praising the company and saying ‘Only in America, would you agree? ... you couldn’t do this in China.’ Zuckerberg replied, ‘Well ... there are some very strong Chinese Internet companies.’ The Senator was flabbergasted: ‘You’re supposed to answer yes to this question!’ he exclaimed—perfectly capturing a lack of understanding that the Western online hegemony is not the inevitable status quo.

That status quo is being challenged at two levels: the ‘app layer’ that sits as software on top of existing operating systems and, as the online world we know increasingly splinters, at the foundations of the internet itself.

### **The app layer**

One of Zuckerberg’s ‘very strong Chinese internet companies’ is Tencent, whose remarkable success is based on their all-consuming app, WeChat.

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<sup>25</sup> Kai-Fu Lee, *AI Super-Powers: China, Silicon Valley and the New World Order* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> Lee, Chapter 1.

WeChat has a similar look and feel to Facebook's WhatsApp. It has evolved however to facilitate far more than just messaging. In China, it is now also relied upon—in fact, often required—to book taxis, order food, transfer money, make appointments, organise dates, and more. It is often said that it is nearly impossible to operate in some Chinese cities without using WeChat.

WeChat's goal—and its business model—is to become the most embedded app in its users' lives, central to the 'mobile lifestyle'.<sup>27</sup> At the heart of this model is its payment system. The integration of a payment system within the app has enabled WeChat to harvest a wealth of data on its users' preferences and habits, and to leverage this data to provide a tailored online ecosystem. Ultimately, the app has created a network that a user has no need or reason to leave.<sup>28</sup> As Griffiths writes, this has created a 'privacy nightmare' for users of an app that can simultaneously access everything from selfies and inane status updates to utility bills and doctor's appointments.<sup>29</sup>

Critically, WeChat is a comprehensive closed platform that can be layered upon existing online infrastructure, and that its users rely on continuously throughout the day. It does not depend on a specific operating system or handset, and fundamentally bypasses the world wide web as it was originally created. Berners-Lee, its founder, sees this shift as worrisome. As he recently stated 'The crucial thing is the URL. The crucial thing is that you can link to anything ...if, from the user's point of view, there's no URL, then we've lost.' In this protected space, it is possible to retain far greater control of users and content.

## Splinternet

At the other end of the spectrum is the Chinese Great Firewalled internet. There is, clearly, a consensus that China has developed a distinct 'alternative' cyber-sphere. This divergent model has led to speculation as to whether we will ultimately be faced by a 'splinternet'.<sup>30</sup>

The 'splinternet' concept is based on the idea that the internet is on a trajectory to divide into different models, determined by varied national standards of privacy

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<sup>27</sup> Griffiths, p. 279.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 279–80.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>30</sup> Staff, 'What is the "splinternet"?', *The Economist*, 22 November 2016; Evgeny Morozov 'The case for publicly enforced online rights', *The Financial Times*, September 2018. Some also refer to this as 'digital Balkanisation' although Eugene Kaspersky, the founder of his eponymous company, denounced the 'Balkanisation' of the internet in November 2018.



and digital rights. Recently, the Head of Global Policy and Communications of Facebook argued that there is a need for a global consensus on digital regulation if we are to avoid the ‘Balkanization’ of the internet. If each country imposes different regulations onto the tech companies, then internet usage will differ greatly across the world.

As the senator’s question revealed, there is perhaps an assumption that Western norms would nonetheless remain the de facto gold standard should such Balkanization take place. It is far from clear that this is the case.

Benedict Evans, an analyst for Andreessen Horowitz, an American venture capital firm, recently pointed out that it is likely that content regulations will be passed in major countries where big platform companies must operate, and that some of these regulations will conflict with the American constitution. Evans notes that ‘...those countries will not know or care. For at least some of these regulations, big platform companies might decide that they have to apply these new rules across their entire global operations. The fact a US court wouldn’t uphold them means nothing. Other countries have courts too.’<sup>31</sup>

Evans concludes with an insightful twist on a well-known saying: ‘Old: War is how god teaches Americans geography. New: Internet regulation is how god teaches Americans geography.’

Google’s recently reported business plan for China neatly illustrates how this could play out. Considered to be perhaps the epitome of the Western internet, the company was founded on the utopian ideas of an ‘anarchic egalitarianism’<sup>32</sup> and very publicly withdrew from China in 2010 due to concerns regarding censorship.<sup>33</sup> In the last year however, evidence of ‘Project Dragonfly’ has leaked and it has emerged that Google is in the development stages of an entirely separate model to launch in China.<sup>34</sup> It is not inconceivable that, one day, the Dragonfly model will become the Google norm—not, as the techno-optimists once hoped, the other way around.

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31 Benedict Evans, [Twitter thread](#), Twitter, 8 April 2019.

32 Evgeny Morozov ‘[The case for publicly enforced online rights](#)’, *The Financial Times*, 27 September 2018.

33 Kaveh Waddell, ‘[Why Google Quit China—and Why It’s Heading Back](#)’, *The Atlantic*, 19 January 2016.

34 Alexia Fernández Campbell, ‘[The employee backlash over Google’s censored search engine for China, explained](#)’, *Vox*, 17 August 2018. In December 2018, Google announced that it had ‘effectively ended’ this project and had no immediate plans to launch a Chinese search engine, largely due to internal pressure from Google employees who disagreed with the company’s conformity with censorship. Jen Copestake, ‘[Google China: Has search firm put Project Dragonfly on hold?](#)’, *BBC*, 18 December 2018.

## China in Africa: One Belt, One Road, One Internet?

In these discussions over future internet models, there is little mention of the world's most rapidly expanding digital population—in Africa.

As Lee argues in his book, analysts have been blind once before to world-class innovation led by China. When American tech companies were trying but failing to enter China, foreign analysts focused on why this was the case. As introspective questions were asked, China was busy developing Weibo, Didi, and Toutiao—platforms that rival and often out-perform their American equivalents of Twitter, Uber, and BuzzFeed.<sup>35</sup>

There is perhaps the risk of a similar blindness today. Discussions of the potential splintering of the internet are typically framed as the US-led world standard vs China. In the meantime, Africa is quickly adopting a Chinese-based telecommunications infrastructure.

At the latest Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, China pledged to invest a total of \$60 billion in the African continent.<sup>36</sup> This investment is part of its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative.

Much of this investment is specifically for the burgeoning communications sector. According to the telecommunications trade body, GSMA, there is a \$700 billion opportunity for African countries over the next five years if the mobile gender gap is closed.<sup>37</sup> By next year, GSMA also estimates that there will be 500 million mobile internet users in Africa.

Chinese companies have not only spotted the huge business opportunity of the telecommunications market across Africa, but they have also developed bespoke offers for these markets. In contrast to American companies, which have simply attempted to market their products to different audiences, Chinese companies have tailored their products to each audience.<sup>38</sup> Their approach is paying off.

Transsion is not a company many in Europe will have heard of. It is Chinese owned and run but does not have a single store in China. Since launching in

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35 Lee, p. 40.

36 Shannon Tiezzi, 'FOCAC 2018: Rebranding China in Africa', *The Diplomat*, 5 September 2018.

37 *Connected Women. The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2019* (London: GSMA, 2019).

38 Lee, p. 39.

2006, it has left both Samsung and Apple trailing in its wake across Africa.<sup>39</sup> Following the company motto of ‘think global, act global’, Transsion products (often sold under their flagship brand, Tecno) have been specifically tailored to the needs of different African markets.<sup>40</sup>

This bespoke approach includes popular features such as multiple SIM cards in each phone (to avoid charges for calling different networks) and a focus on ample battery life (as states often deliberately shut down electricity supply to conserve power). In addition to this, keyboards for regional African languages have been added,<sup>41</sup> and cameras have been optimised for darker skin complexions. Finally, Transsion phones also sell for \$15 – \$200, which is significantly less than Apple and Samsung and a reflection of the average annual income in Africa of \$2,041.

As a result, Transsion controls over 50% of the African telecommunications market. And it is not just commercially successful. It is also the seventh most admired brand in Africa.<sup>42</sup>

The Chinese influence on telecommunications infrastructure is equally impressive. The investment is not just R&D funding, but the development of physical assets such as telecommunications cables.<sup>43</sup>

To an extent, therefore, we can transpose the debates around the One Belt, One Road initiative to Chinese investment in Africa.<sup>44</sup> On the one hand, China’s opponents are suspicious of the high levels of funding and are concerned about how indebted developing countries are becoming. This debt is a concern due to its scale,<sup>45</sup> but there is also a latent fear of repossession and talk of a new kind of colonialism.<sup>46</sup>

On the other hand, many African leaders are grateful for the funding from the East and claim that it is desperately needed, especially when other sources are

39 Jenni Marsh, ‘The Chinese phone giant that beat Apple to Africa’, *CNN Business*, 10 October 2018.

40 Other well-known Transsion brands include Infinix and Intel.

41 These include Amharic, Hausa, and Swahili.

42 According to the 2017–18 Brand Africa 100 report, published by *African Business* magazine.

43 Enguérand Renault, ‘Djibouti, un micro-État ultraconnecté’, *Le Figaro*, 30 November 2018.

44 It is important to note that the debate around OBOR investments is not only relevant to Africa. It is a debate occurring around all Chinese investment. Most recently, it was evident following Chinese investment in Italy.

45 Staff, ‘Reality Check: Is China burdening Africa with debt?’ *BBC*, 5 November 2018.

46 In 2018, Sri Lanka handed over the port of Hambantota, following a debt of over \$1 billion to China. Maria Abi-Habib, ‘How China Got Sri Lanka to Cough Up a Port’, *New York Times*, 25 June 2018.

not so forthcoming.<sup>47</sup> In a period in which the budgets of IMF and World Bank are under increasing scrutiny, they have a point.

As we have seen, the physical infrastructure of the internet—cables and phones—also underpins policy decisions. In September 2018, Eric Schmidt, former CEO of Google, directly equated these issues. He stated that there is a ‘...real danger that along with ... products and services comes a different leadership regime from government.... Look at the way [OBOR] works... It’s perfectly possible those countries will begin to take on the infrastructure that China has with some loss of freedom.’

### **On the verge**

East Africa is often seen as one of the most progressive regions of the African continent. The economies of Tanzania, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Rwanda are cited as among the most dynamic in Africa, and the region frequently features in discussions around the future of the continent.

At the same time, however, this region is arguably at the sharp end of the debate around what online communications should look like: free or regulated, open or closed.

In her recent book, *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics*, Nanjala Nyabola highlights the transformative effect that the digital ecosystem has had on politics, and on Kenya specifically. She paints a broader picture of the African continent where 12 countries shut down the internet at some point during 2016.<sup>48</sup> Of the four East African states we look at below, all but one has seen its position in the World Press Freedom Index drop in the last year. The only one to improve its ranking is Rwanda, which sits in the lowest position of the four, at 156 out of 180.

Across different countries, the change has come in different forms: regulatory, political, and physical. One tool in particular has been brought to bear—the letter of the law.

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<sup>47</sup> Ben Blanchard and Christian Shepherd, ‘China says its funding helps Africa develop, not stack up debt’, *Reuters*, 4 September 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Nanjala Nyabola, *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Politics in Kenya (African Arguments)*, (Zed Books, 2018), pp. 8–9. This is out of a total of 27.

## *Rwanda*

In the recent revision of its penal code, Rwanda imposed a law that banned any writings or cartoons that ‘humiliate’ lawmakers, cabinet members, or security officers. The content is not only banned but there are severe punishments for anyone brave or foolish enough to step over the line. Any content that is deemed offensive could lead to two years in prison, or a fine of up to one million Rwandan francs. Anything considered defamatory towards the president could lead to an even stronger sentence, up to seven years in prison and a fine of seven million francs.

This latest legislative move is not the first sign of a worrying media space in Rwanda.

According to Freedom House’s *Freedom of the Press 2016*, Rwanda is classified as ‘Not Free’ in regard to its press freedom and has been a site of increasing government censorship over the last few years. Outlets that are not overtly pro-government or are actively aligned with the opposition have struggled to stay open and accessible. Websites such as *Inyenyeri News*, *Veritas Info*, *The Rwandan*, and *Leprophete* are among those to have been closed down.

When considering the media context in Rwanda, the recent tragic history of the country cannot be ignored. Some journalists self-censor and have even accepted that censorship is a necessity to avoid the sectarianism that destroyed the country 20 years ago.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, this trend can also be seen in other countries, which benefit from a less tragic recent history.

## *Tanzania*

The Tanzanian government has taken a strong legislative approach to tackling what it perceives as a dangerously exploding communications market.

The government announced sweeping new communications regulations in March 2018. The Electronic and Postal Communications Regulations gave the government unprecedented control over the internet, requiring all online content creators in the country to be certified and to pay \$930 US in licencing and registration fees.<sup>50</sup> In a country where the gross national income per capita

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49 Harber, Anton, ‘Legacy of Rwanda genocide includes media restrictions, self-censorship’. Committee to Protect Journalists, 2014.

50 *Tanzania: Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Regulations 2018*. (London: Article 19, April 2018).

is \$900 US, this fee most affects independent bloggers.

The regulations further demand that all bloggers or news sites must store the details of any contributors for 12 months and must be able to identify any financial sponsorship sources. Similarly, cyber cafes were required to install surveillance equipment to identify anyone posting remotely and supposedly anonymously. Failure to comply with these regulations incurs a fine of TZS 5 million (\$2,200 US), imprisonment for a minimum of 12 months, or both. In September 2018, Tanzanian legislators also passed amendments to the 2015 Statistics Act. The act seeks to govern the collection, analysis, and dissemination of any data without the prior authorisation from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS).

The legislative crackdown against open communications in Tanzania has been roundly condemned. Six human rights groups, media platforms, and independent publishers filed a joint case in Tanzania's High Court against the communications regulations.<sup>51</sup> The World Bank publicly stated that it was 'deeply concerned' about the amendments to the 2015 Statistics Act.<sup>52</sup>

### *Kenya*

In May 2018, President Kenyatta signed into law the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act 2018. According to Clause 12 of this law, the publication of false or fictitious information can result in a 5 million shilling fine (\$50,000 US), or a two-year jail term. The law also criminalises abuse on social media and cyber bullying. President Kenyatta has defended the law, stating that it provides a legal basis on which to prosecute cybercrimes including child pornography, fraud, and identity theft. However, it has been roundly condemned by journalist unions and the media sphere as an infringement on freedom of expression and a threat to the right to privacy, property, and a fair hearing.

### *Uganda*<sup>53</sup>

The Ugandan parliament passed the Excise Duty (Amendment) Bill 2018 in May 2018. This law, which has become popularly known as the 'social media tax', introduced a levy of 200 shillings (\$0.05 US) per day for access to online

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51 They lost this appeal.

52 Staff, 'Tanzania law punishing critics of statistics "deeply concerning": World Bank', *Reuters*, 3 October 2018.

53 For a more extensive overview of President Museveni's hostility towards social media, see Griffiths, pp. 285–305.

services and applications including Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Google Hangouts, YouTube, and Skype. The tax was implemented by the country's telecommunications companies as of 1 July 2018.

President Museveni proposed the tax on social media, saying the revenue would help the country 'cope with consequences of *olugambo* [gossiping]'. Nonetheless, the tax has been criticised by Ugandans, international human rights activists, and economic analysts. The law is largely viewed as a way of silencing free speech and reducing the number of Ugandans operating in spaces where information is freely exchanged. In the face of heavy criticism and a lawsuit, the Constitutional Court was petitioned to overturn the government's unpopular tax. However, lawmakers voted to maintain the tax in October 2018.

### Looking through the wrong lens

Western commentators are clearly concerned about the technology and communications model being exported by China. There is a clear Chinese presence in African telecommunications infrastructure. There are also increasingly worrying trends in how African governments are treating their media environments and their social media users.

It is important to note, however, that it is not our intention to draw a causal link between current trends on the continent and Chinese investment,<sup>54</sup> or to criticise China's conception of the internet.

There is a strong case to be made for Chinese investment in Africa. Many argue that Chinese companies provide investment flows that have slowed elsewhere.<sup>55</sup> As outlined by the *New York Times* bureau chief in West and Central Africa: 'At least for the time being, Africa doesn't have any other cost or competency alternatives.'<sup>56</sup> Chinese companies are also clearly investing in the local African market. Transsion reportedly has around 10,000 local employees, compared to 6,000 in China.<sup>57</sup> Since 2011, every phone it sells in Ethiopia has been assembled in the suburbs of Addis Ababa.<sup>58</sup>

54 There is an argument that suggests the equivalent is happening in the opposite direction. Reporting on Chinese investment in Africa has hardly been neutral from the likes of CNN and the *Wall Street Journal*.

55 By comparison: China pledged \$60 billion in investments in Africa this year. In 2017, the UK gave Africa £2.6 billion.

56 Amy Mackinnon, 'For Africa, Chinese-Built Internet Is Better Than No Internet at All', *Foreign Policy*, 19 March 2019.

57 'Chinese phone giant'

58 *Ibid.*

On a more fundamental level, it is also important to consider that much of the criticism of Chinese influence in the digital sphere stems from a uniquely Western value system that prioritises the individual.<sup>59</sup> The early idea of the internet being an egalitarian force was heavily based on the equation of egalitarianism with a lack of state interference.<sup>60</sup> While it is appropriate to critique Chinese technology, that critique is often driven by geopolitical concerns. As Griffiths writes: ‘criticism of Chinese policies should not be misconstrued as an implicit endorsement of the policies sought by the Western nations, nor should democratic governments have their failures overlooked...’<sup>61</sup>

The future of Africa, and of its communications model, should not solely be viewed through the US-Sino mirror. The latest US Strategy in Africa has been heavily criticised for being just this—a strategy for Africa concerned solely with China.<sup>62</sup>

The internet, or more particularly the communication platforms that it supports, are at a moment of potentially profound change. However, the analysis of any one model must not be shaped solely by support for the other. As a former US ambassador to Ethiopia and Burkina Faso said, this just increases suspicion for Africans: ‘If the Americans are peddling this argument, they have their own vested interests.’<sup>63</sup>

### **Conclusion: the jello is on the wall**

Western online communications models face a moment of profound uncertainty. A culture historically based on freedom is increasingly calling for regulation. A structure that was built to promote openness now finds itself increasingly comfortable slipping into closed silos.

This uncertainty and change are being driven by many different considerations. The ability for anyone to broadcast their ideas is liberating—but unsettling or even dangerous when those ideas undermine our ability to cohere as a community. Similarly, the ability to create a community of like-minded people

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59 Haidt, Jonathan, *Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Pantheon, 2012).

60 Evgeny Morozov ‘The case for publicly enforced online rights’, *The Financial Times*, 27 September 2018.

61 Griffiths, p. 290.

62 Editorial Board ‘America’s scrambled approach to Africa’, *Financial Times*, 17 December 2018; Cornelia Tremann, ‘The new US Africa strategy is not about Africa. It’s about China’, *The Interpreter*, 20 December 2018, Lowy Institute.

63 ‘For Africa, Chinese-Built Internet Is Better’.



online is inspiring—until that community becomes an echo chamber for hatred or misinformation. Who should manage this, and how?

The answer is likely to be a mix of the structural—hardware and software—and the regulatory—government intervention. China has, for its own purposes, seemingly perfected this. Having nailed the jello to the wall, it is now looking to export its hammer. We should be mindful of who is buying—and why.

This does not mean the Great Firewall will—or should—prevail. But nor does it mean the Western digital status quo will last.