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“Current challenges in internet policy and regulation: content, platforms and AI”

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Context

- Research ICT Africa - Digital policy & governance thinktank
- Commissioned by UNESCO for its “Guidelines for Platform Governance” conference and project



- RIA researchers reviewed +800 sources =>
- In one place, you can find analysis & recommendations
- All based on global evidence

Outputs



Why lies & hate proliferate



Platform policies, practices



Possible solutions



UNESCO Policy Brief

Perspective of Global South:

state-led regulation can harm human rights *even more* than the platforms on their own – so what's to be done?

Part 1: Why (lies/hate proliferate)

Platform landscape – big, small, layered – has problems with content that can, & does, harm human rights, at a time when credible journalism is under threat and overshadowed...

Causes:



1. Attention economics & microtargeted content (incl ads):
= Curation drives content, Moderation is 2ndary level
2. *Automated advertising exchanges fuel content harms*
3. External manipulators exploit platform affordances
4. *Platform spending patterns: lobbying yes, clean-up no*
5. Knowledge deficits: govts and citizens are ill-informed

Cause 6: Platform policy, practice

Unclear “theory of harms”

Other features:



1. Policy silence about when moderation meets curation
2. *Moderating atoms; missing narrative wood for factual trees*
3. Black boxes & limits of automated moderation
4. *Hidden and unequal policies (shadow bans; “cross check”)*
5. Multiple implementation inadequacies
6. *Linguistic and regional imbalances*
7. Lack of risk assessment that would otherwise inform implementation preparedness for policy enforcement

Part 2: What governance solutions?

Problem	Key solutions?
Attention economics	
Ad-tech	
Manipulators	
Policy	
Spending	
Expertise	

Some answers?

Problem	Key solutions – broadly speaking
Attention economics	Markets policy, consumer protection, interoperability
Ad-tech	Privacy laws, transparency laws
Manipulators	Rule of law, access to researchers
Policy	Independent regulatory stds, audits
Spending	Regulatory sanctions, Required HRIA
Expertise	AfriSIG 😊 + Media & Info Literacy

Part 4: Hybrid system



We need a *minimum* of human rights standards for all platforms & applying to the full array of regulatory arrangements

Issues and options:

1. **Solo-enterprise regulation** isn't working; **industry self-regulation** doesn't exist. But: there are big risks in **solo-official regulation**.
2. *+ a strong risk of privatized censorship in co-regulating "harmful" (though lawful) content, so this shouldn't be only arrangement.*
3. Let's recognize media, whistleblowers, civil society, academics
4. And support decentralized and non-profit platforms
5. Plus promote **multi-stakeholder engagement** in digital governance – in norms, principles, *AND in regulation*: rule-making, enforcement, monitoring etc. in relevant arrangements

4. Modularise!



- Power imbalance for every country re Big Tech
 - + African challenges (eg. languages) + regulatory capacity
- So stakeholders could choose ONE top issue and key focus:**
- Eg. health, OR Eg. elections, OR Eg. violence
 - Eg: content producers / Tech vectors / audience literacy
- *Leadership: an alliance led by an accountable regulator*
 - Co-ordination with other relevant regulators, incl self-regulatory bodies
 - Set and monitor targets with civil society, media, academia
 - Leverage AU & regional organisations for negotiations
 - *Keep offshore actors informed...*
 - If platforms won't work in public interest, assess if "free services" are worth the externalities – or rather pack n go?

A last thought:



What about governing AI?

Mirroring the platforms (& intersecting with them), AI has (questionable) business models & operates different layers:

1. *Foundation* models (data mining, LLMs) (GPT as one)
2. Applications riding on these (ChatGPT)
3. Users (Disinfo-for-hire, anyone?)
4. The public as affected (e.g. microtargeted, deepfake)

Problems need addressing at ALL levels, not just 3 & 4

- *Can a modular African approach tackle big tech & AI?*