



Keeping Online Spaces Open

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State of Internet Freedom in Zambia Report

5th Edition

Theme: Advancing Zambia's digital future, bridging the digital divide while fighting for freedom



A Bloggers of Zambia In-country Digital Rights Initiative for Promoting Digital Democracy





Bloggers of Zambia is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that was established in the year 2017. Our thematic areas of work are; Digital Rights, Press Freedom, Civic Tech and Media and Information Literacy.

CURRENT AND PAST PROJECTS

Some of the current and previous projects that Bloggers of Zambia has undertaken under our four thematic areas include;

- a. Digital Rights
 - Promoting Digital Rights and Democracy in Zambia, supported by German Development Corporation GIZ (2022 – 2024). The objective of the project is to influence and monitor enactment and implementation of cyber legislation in Zambia.
 - Expanding the Space for Freedom of Expression and Digital Rights, supported by National Endowment for Democracy (2022 – 2024). The objective of this project is to expand protections and citizen awareness around digital rights, freedom of expression, and access to information in Zambia.
- b. Press Freedom
 - Strengthening Police and Media relations for the safety and security of journalists in Zambia supported by the German Federal Foreign Office through the German Embassy in Lusaka (2019 – 2022). This is a project focused on safety and security of journalist from police work/ violations.
 - Bloggers of Zambia is also the secretariat for the National Organising Committee for World Press Freedom Day 2023 and 2024.
 - With support from our partners, Bloggers of Zambia has trained members four press clubs in digital literacy and online safety and security.
- c. Civic Tech
 - Journalism X. This is a prototype online tool for newsroom collaboration on fact-checking and verification and artificial intelligence education supported by Duetsche Welle (2023 – March 2024).
 - Safe City Project in collaboration with Red Dot Foundation. This is a crowd mapping tool for reporting online and offline gender based violence in Zambia. This project is on-going.
- d. Media and Information Literacy
 - Bloggers of leveraging internal tools and skills in addition to a cohort of young creative content producers to make and popularise various types of online content such as animations, short videos and skits, podcasts and illustrations covering topics such as digital literacy, online safety and security for different stakeholder groups for education and awareness purposes.

MISSION:

An open society where digital rights and the rights-based offline and online media platforms are guaranteed and protected

MOTTO:

Our motto is, 'Keeping Online Spaces Open'.
Hashtag #OpenSpaceZM

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CONTACTS

Website: <https://bloggersofzambia.org/>

Facebook: www.facebook.com/zambloggers

Twitter: www.twitter.com/zambloggers

Telephone/ WhatsApp/ Signal: +260975174238

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Executive Summary



It is with great pleasure and honour to deliver the annual State of Digital Rights in Zambia Report.

The 2025 Report presents an analysis of the digital rights landscape in Zambia, highlighting the progress, challenges, and opportunities as emerged in the year 2024.

- This report also comes amidst the rapid digitalization that is taking place in Zambia but also the adoption and influence of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, with an increased interest and the responsibilities of platform owners, ethical use

and also the development of laws, policies and regulations. processes have been moving very fast to comprehend while the majority of citizens have to keep up with the trends. The report comes at a time when political and legislative activities have intensified and citizens have to quickly learn and engage over the issues in Zambia.

The 2025 report comes under the theme, 'Advancing Zambia's digital future, bridging the digital divide while fighting for freedom'.

Zambia transitioned from an environment that thrived on fear and repression to a relatively open and freer space in the digital democracy and investments were made in advancing Zambia's digitalisation agenda and citizens are still waiting for Internet freedom and other benefits such as enhanced literacy and security. In 2024, efforts have gone in advancing Zambia's digital future in an effort to bridge the gaping digital gap, while an Internet ecosystem that provides freedoms such as expression and privacy continued to be elusive even after passionate pledges. Our view is that the internet freedom that was promised in early 2021 has not necessarily been fulfilled, but instead, the environment risks deteriorating due to anti Internet freedom tendencies. There are delays in key reforms on law and policy but at the same time, digital rights challenges have persisted as there are still major challenges to the enjoyment of free expression, access to information, access to internet and this has been compounded by the intensive rationing of grid electricity, further widening the digital divide.

Achievements recorded in 2024 include launch of the artificial intelligence strategy, Electronic Government strategy and the revised National ICT Policy. The Closed-

Circuit Television Public Protection Bill was also drafted in readiness for legislative process at parliament.

Additionally, two bills were drafted; the Cyber Security Bill and Cybcerimes Bill to repeal and replace the Cyber Security and Cybercrimes Act number two of of 2021.

The 2025 report is an important product for stakeholders such as policymakers, digital rights advocates, media, technologists and parliamentarians in the technology and governance sectors who are aiming to foster a more inclusive, secure and equitable digital environment for all Zambians.

The digital transformation in Zambia has accelerated, with increasing internet penetration at 64%, the adoption of emerging technologies, and the proliferation of digital platforms are among the highlights. While these advancements offer significant benefits, they also pose new challenges to digital rights, including privacy, freedom of expression and access to information. This report evaluates these dynamics and provides actionable recommendations to address the identified issues.

The 2024 Zambia Digital Rights Report highlights the importance of a tolerant, collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach to advancing digital rights in Zambia. By addressing the identified challenges and leveraging the opportunities, Zambia can create a digital environment that is secure, inclusive, and conducive to the realization of all digital rights. This report serves as a call to action for continued commitment and collective effort in safeguarding the digital future of Zambia.

Key Findings

1: Innovation and entrepreneurship

Progress: Positive and significant strides have been made through investments in digital infrastructure and services. Innovation and entrepreneurship is being supported through the Ministry of Technology and Science with plans to set up a venture capital fund to commercialise start-up ideas and a Start-up Bill was drafted in view of these plans.

Challenges: Despite these efforts and existing support programmes, there is a limited pool of entrepreneurs focusing on innovations outside the financial sector. There are few innovations to deliver services such as telemedicine, smart agriculture, climate smart solutions, transportation, and e-education, among others. Additionally, most innovation hubs are concentrated in Lusaka and the Copperbelt province leaving other regions with limited or no access to the innovation hubs. There are also limited linkages between industry, academia and skilled innovators. These challenges are a realisation of the massive potential and opportunity in this area as is evident from innovators such as Arnold Nyendwa of AFNON Tech Industry LTD, Immanuel Mwanza of E-Mark and others.

2: Digital Governance

Progress: Zambia has continued to make significant progress in the formulation and implementation of legal and policy frameworks on digital governance. The government has developed a robust digital governance policy and regulatory framework for effective public sector digital transformation. The government launched the AI Strategy, Electronic Government strategy, the revised National ICT Policy and the National Digital Transformation strategy to govern Zambia's digitalisation or digital governance agenda. The Closed-Circuit Television Public Protection Bill Number 1 of 2025 was also drafted in readiness for legislative process at parliament. The Road Transport and Safety Agency has tapped into the CCTV camera system and deployed AI for the management of road safety in regions where the cameras are installed.

Additionally, progress has been made on the digital identity where the government is implementing the Integrated National Registration Information System (INRIS). The digital ID and trust services framework establishes a secure and reliable platform for the identification of Zambians in order to help them get access to public and private sector services.

A total of 1500 government services are earmarked for online access on the government portal and in 2024, 322 were available in this agenda¹.

Challenges: Despite investments in law and policy, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and learning remain key milestones to achieve. Enacting laws and policies needs to be coupled with effective implementation for substance and benefits to citizens. The challenge is that these policies must be coupled with development and deployment of digital infrastructure and for effective delivery of services. There is also the need for investment in digital skills and interactive platforms, innovations and the adoption of emerging technologies. An emphasis has also been on safety and security on digital platforms, including robust data protection measures. In addition to this, there must be continuous training of all relevant staff to build local capacity for managing a digital identity platform and reducing reliance on external support.

3: Digital Rights

Progress: The usage of digital platforms, social media and messaging applications in particular have continued to be popular and importances spaces for citizens engagement. There were 12.6 million active internet subscribers at the end of the first half of 2024 and of these, there were 12.5 million mobile internet subscribers over the same period². The increase in internet subscriptions was mostly attributed to increased demand especially linked to social media use as well as the increased segmentation of offers tailored to diverse income groups and usage needs and trends³. Facebook by Meta was the most preferred platform with Instagram and X (formerly called Twitter) platform, respectively being the second preference for socialising and free expression, association, assembly and access to information.

Challenges: There is some contention regarding the enjoyment of freedom of expression, association and assembly in Zambia. Legislation has been used as a guise to restrict legitimate speech by citizens and oppositional voices who have attempted to exercise their constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech and expression to critique the government's approach to solving socio-economic problems facing the country. This has been done through arrests and prosecutions. There is a need to balance legitimate national security concerns and protection of citizens rights, especially expression online and offline, which if left unchecked could otherwise risk mass self censorship and content moderation.

4: Cyber Security

Progress: Zambia conducted its first National Cybersecurity Risk Assessment (NCRA) in 2022 by the Zambia Information and Communication Technology Authority (ZICTA)⁴. Zambia has recorded significant progress in the Global Cybersecurity Index (GCI) 2024⁵ scoring 92.6% compared to 68.8% in 2020. The GCI launched by the International Telecommunication Union measures the commitment of countries to cybersecurity development across five pillars: legal, technical, organizational measures, capacity building and cooperation⁶. Progress in the 2024 GCI shows achievements and investment in cyber security as a priority area in order to safeguard the digital economy. Malware and Phishing are among the highly rated threats with the most common cyber threat actors being cyber criminals. Other threat actors that were identified to cause potential harm to critical assets are cyber terrorists.

Challenges: More investment is required to sustain growth and improvement in the cyber security sector. Additionally, the challenge of inadequate capacity and technical measures continues to characterise the sector. In addition, education, awareness and public information is not sufficient to garner citizen support and collaborations where partnerships are possible.

5: Financial Technology

Progress: The value of mobile money transactions increased exponentially in 2024. Particularly, the value of transactions increased from ZMW 199.5 billion in the first half of 2023 to ZMW 222.8 billion in 2024. Also according to the Information and Communications Technologies Sector 2024 Mid-Year Market Report published by the Zambia Information and Communications Technology Authority (ZICTA), Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) increasingly grew in Zambia and this has benefited the ICT sector as the demand for digital services have also increased. Initiatives such as entrepreneurship training, financial support from government and private entities, digital solutions for tax reporting etc, have assisted SMEs to grow their businesses while relying increasingly on digital services for efficiency in their service provision.

Challenges: The implementation of electricity rationing significantly affected the provision of ICT services as there has been a significant decrease in the site performance of towers, server rooms and other points of presence. Consequently, the quality of services has declined resulting in an increase in the cost of providing services as operators install alternative sources of energy. Furthermore, operators continued to highlight the challenges associated with the prevailing macro-economic environment. Notably, the depreciation of the local currency, rising inflation and high interest rates increased the cost of acquiring key inputs for operations as well as limited prospects on profitability.

6: Law and policy frameworks

Progress: Efforts have been made to enhance the legal, policy and regulatory frameworks in cyber security and cybercrimes, enhance data protection and public security by introducing new bills and drafting rules and regulations around data management.

Two bills were drafted; the Cyber Security Bill and Cybercrimes Bill to repeal and replace the Cyber Security and Cybercrimes Act of 2021.

The government launched the AI Strategy, Electronic Government strategy, the revised National ICT Policy and the National Digital Transformation strategy to govern Zambia's digitalisation or digital governance agenda. The Closed-Circuit Television Public Protection Bill was drafted in readiness for legislative process at parliament. The Road Transport and Safety Agency has tapped into the CCTV camera system and deployed AI for the management of road safety in regions where the cameras are installed.

Challenges: There was limited time allocated to stakeholders to conduct research and make meaningful and comprehensive submissions on the ramifications of the two bills. Also, some definitions are purposely vague and broad, some penalties are disproportionate while establishment of the cyber security agency is a welcome development, appointments of the director general and support staff, functions and operations can be a major challenge in view of transparency and accountability standards. Implementation of the law will become a challenge if it does not meet minimum best practices.

7: Information disorders

Progress: The misinformation landscape evolved, shaped by increased internet access, political dynamics and the rise of social media as a primary source of news. 2024 saw the growing trend of information disorders especially political exchanges and false alarms⁷. In 2024, progress was made on efforts to combat the rising challenge of misinformation. Efforts went towards education and awareness raising on the consequences of misinformation, disinformation and other information disorders especially on social media. Journalists were trained in fact-checking and verification strategies, while other efforts went towards media and information literacy activities. The government, civil society and other stakeholders joined efforts to raise concerns about the negative effects of misinformation on democratic governance.

Challenges: Challenges of low digital literacy still remain on the ability of citizens to adequately fact-check and be able to identify false information. There is the need for continuous education and awareness raising on misinformation. Additionally, ambiguities in the revised cyber legislation has the potential for far reaching consequences even over legitimate speech that power brokers may not necessarily tolerate. There is the need to monitor implementation of cyber legislation to avoid such excesses.

Purpose and Scope of the Report

The 2024 State of Digital Rights Report in Zambia is an annual in-country civil society monitor of key developments and trends in Zambia's within digitalisation agenda.

This is the fifth edition designed to provide an overview of issues that are related to digital rights and Internet governance in Zambia. The primary objectives of this report are to;

1

Debate and dialogue

The report serves as a tool for identifying multistakeholder issues and a platform for debating and shaping laws, policies and regulatory frameworks.

2

Assess and evaluate

The report aims to assess the current status of digital rights standards in Zambia, including the examination of the legal, policy and regulatory frameworks in place, the implementation of digital laws and policies and the overall protection of Internet freedoms. The report seeks to evaluate the impact of digital rights on various sectors such as health, education, governance, the economy and social inclusion.

3

Awareness and Advocacy

The report is also a tool for education and awareness raising among various stakeholders, policymakers, civil society organizations, the private sector, and the general public about the importance of digital rights. The report is intended to serve as an advocacy tool, providing evidence-based recommendations for the enhancement and protection of digital rights in Zambia.

4

Monitoring and Accountability

The report functions as a monitoring tool to track progress and identify challenges in the realization of digital rights in Zambia. It aims to hold relevant authorities and institutions accountable for their roles in protecting and promoting digital rights.

5

Capacity Building

The report is intended to enhance the capacity of stakeholders to understand digital rights and Internet governance standards in order for them to better protect and advocate for best practices and also as an educational resource for training and awareness programs focused on digital rights issues.



innovations have empowered citizens to engage with public institutions, monitor government performance and amplify their voices in public discourse.

On the other hand, digitalization has also posed challenges related to the digital divide where millions of citizens remain offline, limiting access for rural and marginalized communities, threatening inclusive participation. Additionally, online surveillance, cyberbullying, misinformation and delays in implementing data protection frameworks undermine trust in digital platforms while restricting freedom of expression.

The demand for ICT services is projected to remain positive, driven by the increasing importance of services such as mobile money, government services and social media. It is estimated that the number of active mobile cellular subscriptions will

- reach 22.4 million by the end of 2024⁸.
- Mobile money transactions also saw significant growth in the first half of 2024 compared to the same period in 2023, with the value of transactions rising from ZMW 199.5 billion to ZMW 222.8 billion, marking a 12 percent increase, while transaction volumes surged from 976 million to 1.4 billion, a 44 percent increase⁹.
- The total number of active mobile network subscriptions was at 20.0 million in 2023 and surged to 21.9 million in 2024 showing an increase of 8.9 percent. Mobile Penetration rate stood at 102.4 million in 2023 and rose to 109.2 million in 2024, showing an increase by 6.7 percentage points. The total number of active internet thus, mobile and fixed subscriptions was at 11.5 million in 2023 and went to 12.6 million in 2024 showing an increase by 10.2 percent points¹⁰.

Overview of Zambia's digital landscape in 2024

Zambia's digital landscape is developing rapidly and in view of that, it has shown ongoing opportunities and challenges for inclusion, innovation and service delivery. There is the need to address digital inequalities, strengthen regulatory enforcement and promote a rights-based approach to digital governance, ensuring that digital transformation is inclusive, transparent and democratic, which is key to shaping a resilient and equitable digital future for Zambia.

Digital access and connectivity

Zambia has made notable strides in expanding internet access, especially through mobile broadband. Mobile phone penetration increased from 58.5 percent in 2023 to 60.5 percent in 2024¹¹. The rural-urban disparities persist with rural areas facing limited infrastructure, low quality of service and high data costs especially for groups like women and girls, youths, college and university students. The introduction of low cost smartphones and expanding 4G network coverage is helping close the digital divide, but challenges of affordability and digital literacy remain in place.

Electronic government and digital public services

The government has scaled up efforts to digitize services through e-government platforms, including online tax filing, business registration and e-procurement systems under the electronic government procurement platforms in a bid to improve public service efficiency¹². The Smart Zambia Institute continues as the lead on digital policy and coordination but challenges such as interoperability of systems, digital literacy and low awareness of digital services are obstacles to the full utilization of the processes¹³.

Digital economy and innovation

Zambia's digital economy is growing, inspired by the flourishing financial technology, especially mobile money and technology startups. There are youth-led innovation hubs and accelerators are emerging, particularly in Lusaka and the Copperbelt provinces.

Cybersecurity and data protection

Two bills were introduced in 2024, the Cyber Security bill and Cybercrimes Bill¹⁴. The two bills once enacted will repeal and replace the Cybersecurity and Cyber Crimes Act number two of 2021¹⁵. The Data Protection Act of 2021 remains in place, but in 2024, the office of the Data Protection Commissioner (DPC) under Ministry of Technology and Science (MoTS) developed rules and guidelines for its implementation. The DPC initiated implementation of the Act by for instance advertising a call for all public and private entities involved in data management to register¹⁶.

Civic space, digital rights and freedom of expression

Social media platforms remain central to civic engagement, activism and independent journalism¹⁷. However, digital civic space is under pressure due to online surveillance and increasing harassment of activists and journalists, vague cyber laws and growing concerns around content regulation. Civil society groups continue to advocate for transparent and rights-based internet governance, especially ahead of the 2026 general elections. Coupled with the battle against misinformation, freedom of expression is constantly under attack using ambiguous cyber legislation.

Emerging technologies and AI

Interest in Artificial Intelligence is growing, mainly in media, civil society, academia, tech circles and also the government. The MoTS launched a national AI strategy in 2024¹⁸. Public discourse on ethical and rights-based AI use is limited mainly because of literacy issues but the situation is improving rapidly¹⁹.



Digital Democracy

Legal and Policy Changes and Developments

Introduction of 2024 Cyber Security Bill and Cyber Crimes Bill

The Cyber Security Bill and the Cyber Crimes Bill were introduced in 2024. The bills once enacted will repeal and replace the Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Act number two of 2021. The 2021 law is aimed at protecting the

Zambia digital cyberspace, including individuals and critical infrastructure. The law continues to face resistance from stakeholders based on its overly broad and vague language and definitions, unclear powers and functions of cyber inspectors. The civil society petition against the law remains in Court²⁰.

The 2024 bill separated the 2021 Cyber Security and Cybercrimes Act into two and that once enacted, the Cyber Crimes component will be administered under the Minister of Home Affairs and Internal Security while the Cyber Security aspect will be under the Minister of Technology and Science. Just like the 2021 law, the 2024 bills faced sustained resistance from civil society, journalists and opposition politicians. In December 2024, the National Assembly of Zambia was prompted by the government to defer the two bills based off stakeholder submissions which raised several concerns that the proposed laws were promoting digital authoritarianism²¹. The report from the committee on Media and ICT recommended the Speaker of the House to have the bills suspended pending revisions based on stakeholder submissions²².

Anti-Terrorism Bill

The Anti-Terrorism and Non-Proliferation (Amendment) Bill, 2024²³, introduces amendments to the Anti-Terrorism and Non-Proliferation Act, 2018²⁴. Once revised, the Bill will be among three laws that will oversee the cyber space in Zambia. The bill revises the functions of the National Centre for the Prevention of Terrorism, renames the office of the Director to Director-General, and incorporates offences related to nuclear materials under international conventions. The revisions include new penalties for terrorism, proliferation and financing such activities. Offences include those that can take place on online spaces, cyber terrorism. Civil society organisations have raised concerns over the terminologies and provisions of the bill highlighting issues such as offences described in the bill are vague and the penalties are not proportionate to some of the online offences. Also on suspicion of terrorist, the bill allows for surveillance and suppresses freedom, human rights and democracy in the country.

Independent Broadcasting Authority- IBA Bill

The Bill facilitates the continuation of media pluralism, diversity in the broadcasting industry. It provides for the protection of rights of consumers, regulation of broadcasting, repeal and replacement of the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act No. 17 of 2002²⁵. This process is necessary to reflect the fast evolving broadcasting industry with the rapid advancements of technology and media landscape. There have been concerns around the assurance for the protection and safeguarding of entity's and citizen's rights such as free expression, to share and hold opinions, and press freedom. Heavy handed regulation greatly impacts these rights negatively and there is the need for balance. These freedoms need to be explicitly covered in the proposed legislation framework. The Internet of Things (LoT) has accelerated and enhanced these freedoms and how people participate in democracy. The proposed bill has provisions to regulate online broadcasting, specifically section 20 and 21 in Part Three, Licensing of Broadcasting Services. This has the potential to negatively impact the freedoms stated above. This provision has the potential to unjustly regulate citizen content on social media and illegitimately suffocate free expression. The government should allow for a multistakeholder approach in the process of drafting this Bill to cure problematic provisions and ensure legitimacy of the law once enacted.

Start-ups Bill

Due to technology facilitated advancements, an innovative environment needs to be encouraged for digital solutions. The largest stumbling block has been the lack of capital financing to support innovators. The Government through the Ministry of Technology and Science announced that the government was engaged in a process to resolve these challenges by

enacting policy and legislation that will provide an enabling environment to support innovators and entrepreneurs. The Start-Up Bill is intended to support innovators and enable them to commercialise their ideas. According to the Minister of Technology and Science, Mr. Felix Mutati, the Bill will also include a venture capital fund meant to boost innovations from the trial stage. This would also boost innovation in sectors such as agriculture, energy and health where Zambia has faced various challenges²⁶.

Access to Information Bill

Enacted in December 2023, this law grants citizens the right to access unclassified government information. However, its implementation has not been done, although the Minister of Information and Media signed the commencement order in 2024²⁷.

Development and launch of AI Strategy

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has rapidly become a constant in most people's lives through its application in commerce, education, health, public service delivery, communications, governance, agriculture, and manufacturing. Although most AI tools originated in the United States, Europe, and China, interest in developing and adopting AI is increasing in Southern Africa, Zambia in particular. AI tools have the potential to address some critical issues in Africa by promoting economic growth, enhancing agricultural systems, enabling higher-quality education, and addressing health and climate challenges. The evolution facilitated by emerging and rapidly developing technology prompted the government in Zambia to develop and launch the National Artificial Intelligence (AI) Strategy for the duration covering the years 2024 to 2026. The strategy is expected to leverage AI for economic development, enhanced public service delivery and to improve the quality of life for Zambians. The development of the AI Strategy

has been led by the MoTS. The MoTS coordinated multiple stakeholders across other government line ministries, government agencies, private sector, academia and cooperating partners on how AI can be used for sustainable development, especially in key socio-economic sectors such as agriculture, mining, health, education, finance and the public sector. Central to the strategy is the establishment of a governance framework that supports ethical AI deployment, protects data privacy, and ensures fairness in AI-driven decisions. The strategy facilitates the formation of a National AI Council and the creation of sector-specific Technical Working Groups (TWGs). These bodies will oversee the implementation of AI initiatives, ensuring that Zambia adheres to international best practices such as the African Union's AI strategy and UNESCO's ethics recommendations. Stakeholders are monitoring implementation on the identified how challenges will be addressed. The AI ecosystem comprises startups, private enterprises applying AI to their businesses, academic institutions, and government. The ecosystems are relatively fragmented, limiting the synergies an integrated ecosystem would bring. There is no centralized platform for AI data aggregation or model deployment and coordination among stakeholders is limited. There are inadequate data ecosystems and absence of standardized data-sharing frameworks hinder AI development, there are limited public data sets. Further, insufficient digital infrastructure, especially in rural areas, impedes widespread AI adoption. There's also inadequate investment in cloud infrastructure in Zambia, limiting the access to high performance computing. Notably, the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework has been designed to ensure accountability, transparency, and continuous learning with performance indicators, regular reporting and risk management

mechanisms to track progress.

Digital identity

The Presidential Delivery Unit, which was established to fast track development priorities, set a target to register 100 percent of the population over 16-years-old for digital identity (ID) cards within six months of rollout. The government is still in the process of implementing the Integrated National Registration Information System (INRIS) to register 20 million people to have a national digital ID²⁸. The Department of National Registration, Passport, and Citizenship (DNRPC) has digitized nearly 81 percent of legacy civil registration records and enrolled 1.5 million people with biometrics on the INRIS. Currently, over 88 percent of adults aged 16 and older have a physical National Registration Card (NRC). As part of its commitment to a safe and inclusive digital transformation, in June 2024 Zambia joined the 50-in-5 campaign, an initiative to strengthen digital cooperation with other countries, to accelerate its digital progress. Implementation of the digital identity must manage migration risks, infrastructure risks such as biometric registration kits for mass registration, constructing secure data centres and enhancing connectivity, internet penetration risk as Zambia only has a 58.5 percent internet penetration, data safety and privacy risk of security breaches and inconsistent data management practices as biometric information is collected among multiple agencies for their own ID requirements. Coordination risks also among institutions and stakeholders implementing a legal ID system (Ministry of Home Affairs and Internal Security) and the Smart Zambia Institute (digitalization). The digital ID coverage gap may emerge when accelerating biometric enrollment of eligible citizens and providing them with a digital ID which requires enhancing outreach mechanisms with additional registration centres. In June

2024, the Ministry of Home Affairs and Internal Security launched the Legal Digital ID Model Governance Assessment, designed by UNDP, which engages government and civil society to evaluate key governance areas for Zambia's digital ID implementation²⁹. The SMART Zambia Institute (SMART Zambia) is the government body leading the country's digital transformation program unveiled details about the Digital Zambia Acceleration Project (DZAP), which includes improving the efficiency of government operations through a digital government ecosystem, and promoting regional trade facilitation through the trusted digital ID. A total of \$6 million was sourced from the World Bank as the project advances and resources will be used to pay for goods, works, non-consulting services and consulting services to be procured under the project. The total amount of the project is a \$100 million grant, with a \$20 million add-on in the form of unguaranteed commercial financing³⁰.

Content Monetization Policy

The Zambia Association for Musicians (ZAM) called for the government to support monetization for the music industry by way of putting a policy framework in place. ZAM President Davison Munsanda highlighted the importance of monetizing digital platforms for Zambian artists, enabling them to generate revenue through music streams and online sales³¹. On the 20th November 2024, the Parliament of Zambia welcomed proposals for legislation that would facilitate for the monetisation of social media, paving way for more income avenues after the ICT sectors contribution of only 2.6% to the country's GDP in 2023³². The Zambian government has been in the process of repealing and replacing the Independent Broadcasting Authority 2002 (IBA Act) which partially governs social media activity³³. The Minister of Information and Media proposed reforms to the legislation governing

social media assuring that the aim is to create a conducive environment for monetisation and digital innovation. Overall monetization on media platforms will be advantageous as it will allow for vloggers, artists, writers, gamers, media houses to earn revenue while enabling the government to collect taxes. Furthermore, it will contribute to employment creation in Zambia as more job opportunities will emerge especially for youths.

Development of rules and regulations for Data Protection

The main focus of the Data Protection Commission (DPC) in Zambia is based on the responsibility and central authority for overseeing and enforcing data protection regulations in public bodies and private institutions through licensing of auditors, registration of data processors and controllers, to ensuring that handling of personal data adheres to the Act (The Data Protection Act of 2021) and best security practices. The DPC ensures the effective enforcement of data protection laws in Zambia, safeguarding the privacy rights of individuals³⁴. Henceforth, the Data Protection (Registration and Licensing) Regulations Statutory Instrument No. 58 of 2021. It outlines the categories of data controllers and data processors. Provisions for acquiring licenses are detailed in the instrument including for Data Auditors and general provisions covering aspects such as the record of processing activities and data protection impact assessment³⁵.

Government Partnerships with Google

The Government of Zambia through the Ministry of Technology and Science has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Google Cloud, a subsidiary of Google to establish a Centre of Excellence in Digital

Transformation and Innovation. This project is meant to supplement and promote skills development and exchange of knowledge on emerging technology³⁶. Director for Global Strategic Initiatives at Google Cloud, Manuel Greisinger during the signing ceremony in June 2024 announced that Google will connect Zambia to Umoja, a fibre optic project running from Kenya through South Africa to Australia to enhance and accelerate Zambia's infrastructure, connectivity and AI adoption. The AI Centre of Excellence will be set up at the Zambia Research and Education Network (ZAMREN) House located at University of Zambia Great East Road Campus in Lusaka³⁷.

Government Support to Zamren

The government through ICT regulator ZICTA supported Zambia Research and Education Network (ZAMREN) to provide internet connectivity for the University of Zambia (UNZA), the Copperbelt University (CBU) to the ZESCO optic fibre grid. These institutions now have reduced the cost of dedicated bandwidth. An additional 150 higher learning institutions across Zambia have been connected to high-speed internet according to the Minister of Technology and Science, Felix Mutati. ZAMREN is recognized as a specialized Internet Service Provider to advance research and educational infrastructure for institutions including e-learning country wide³⁸. Further, Smart Zambia Institute and ZAMREN have signed an MoU to foster growth of digital technologies and e-government and quality educational content and resources. The areas of collaboration include digital infrastructure development, capacity building and training, educational sector support and digital literacy and awareness.



Digital governance

The National Financial Inclusion Strategy (NFIS 2024-2028)

Was developed by the Bank of Zambia in March 2024. The strategy highlights the creation of an inclusive and robust financial ecosystem that offers accessible, affordable, and sustainable financial products and services to all segments of the population in Zambia.

E-Government Roll-Out

Government continued with digitalisation agenda of taking public services to the Internet through the e-government portal³⁹. The aim is to take 1500 government services to the online portal. As at end of 2024, 334 services were accessible on the online platform⁴⁰.



Internet Access

Fourth mobile network launched

On 9th of August 2024, Technology and Science Minister Felix Mutati launched Zambia's fourth mobile phone operator, Zed Mobile, after it suffered several setbacks in the commencement of operations⁴¹. The services started initially in Lusaka, with an expansion plan for other regions. The launch of Zed Mobile increases opportunities for enhancing Internet access among Zambian consumers.

Digital infrastructure

Digital infrastructure expanded exponentially in 2024 in Zambia as

compared to previous years. Zambia had attracted a total of \$58 million investment in digital Infrastructure following the removal of tax on importation of digital infrastructure from 2021⁴². Digital infrastructure in this regard consists of connectivity, the Internet of Things and data repositories. In 2024 more public services were digitized by the government enabling an increased participation of Zambians in the digital economy. According to the ZICTA 2024⁴³ mid year market report, by mid-2024 mobile network subscription was reaching 2.9 million, reflecting a penetration rate of 109.2%.

Free Internet Access in Public Places

In the last quarter of 2024, the ZamFree National Public Free wifi initiative was launched and this programme gave free Internet at three public hubs namely; Lusaka Intercity Bus Terminus, Kapiri-Mposhi Bus Station and Kitwe's Chisokone Market⁴⁴. This was aimed at bridge the digital divide and empower citizens across Zambia, although hitherto, the wifi remains poor quality and not accessible in three points.

Roll Out of Fibre Connectivity

In March 2024, Paratus Zambia announced the completion of its metro fibre network in partnership with Meta Platforms. Paratus Zambia began the construction of a 700 kilometer open-access metro fibre network that will improve high-quality connectivity in 10 towns and cities⁴⁵. In June 2024, the E-Government Division (Smart Zambia Institute) deployed 89 Starlink kits to post offices and youth resource centers across all provinces in Zambia⁴⁶. With the rapid digitalization of services in Zambia, access to free internet is essential as it enables citizens to have access to critical resources. It is unclear the level of capacity building that has been done to ensure services are accessed without limitation especially in rural setups which are characterized by low levels of digital literacy.

Impact of Electricity Shortage on Internet Access

As of June 2024, the total number of active network subscriptions were at 21.9 million in Zambia, showing a significant increase in connectivity among Zambians in which Liquid intelligence increased broadband infrastructure by extending connectivity to rural communities in 2024⁴⁷. The government announced that 300 communication towers would be completed by the end of 2024 to increase connectivity and enhance the

quality of Internet signal. However, these efforts continue to be overshadowed by the shortage of electricity and increased load-shedding hours. Despite having more network towers constructed, internet speeds continue to be slow in view of electricity shortage. Load shedding has been affecting performance of service towers, server rooms and other points of connectivity, which in turn limits meaningful access to the internet. Reliable electricity plays a major role in internet and technology access anywhere in the world. The increased hours of load shedding have affected online service delivery and access to online services by Zambians. The country has been heavily dependent on hydropower which accounts for 83 percent of installed capacity with only 3% from solar. 43% of Zambians are connected to the national power grid. Therefore, power cuts arising from lack of generation capacity affects many households including service providers. According to a press statement by GSMA, operators like MTN, Zamtel, and Airtel are experiencing significant disruptions. With over 3,500 towers connected to the national grid, prolonged power outages have compromised the quality of service. With prolonged hours of load shedding, accessing energy sources to power devices becomes difficult⁴⁸. This in turn negatively impacts service delivery and access as constant internet disruptions became part of everyday life in Zambia. Going forward, there is the need to integrate energy sustainability plans in most digital strategies. For the internet to be accessible, reliable energy supply is mandatory. Electricity load shedding deepens the digital divide by disadvantaging those with limited financial resources. While wealthier individuals can afford alternative energy sources, those with fewer resources must rely on inconsistent power supply. As a result, their use of digital services is restricted to when electricity is available, limiting their participation in the digital economy.



Digital Literacy

The call for enhanced digital literacy continued in 2024 fueled by the rapid digitalization of public and private services, growing trends in misinformation and increases in the uptake of social media and access to information demands. Therefore, it is important that every Zambian is made digitally literate. Digital literacy goes beyond people just having access to gadgets, but having actual capacity to use digital tools confidently and navigate online spaces safely and securely. Despite the reported increase in mobile phone

usage, the digital divide in Zambia continues to persist most especially in rural areas affecting women, girls and rural and peri-urban areas.

Digital literacy efforts

In 2024, Zambia intensified efforts to enhance digital literacy by focusing on both infrastructure development and educational initiatives. By 2024, Zambia had 3.5 million social media users, primarily youths, reflecting an increase in digital literacy among young Zambians⁴⁹. To further promote digital literacy in Zambia, a number of educational initiatives were implemented in 2024, including funding to support programs to accelerate digital literacy. The Digital Zambia Acceleration Project (DZAP) lead by

Smart Zambia Initiative which is part of phase two of the Inclusive Digitalization in Eastern and Southern Africa Multi phase Programmatic Approach (IDEA MPA), was approved by the World Bank Board on June 27, 2024, with an overall financing envelope of US\$2.48 billion⁵⁰. Women and girls are among the most marginalized groups in accessing and utilizing empowerment opportunities, including digital empowerment, with gender-based violence (GBV) further widening the digital divide. CAMFED Zambia, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation, launched a transformative initiative to enhance digital literacy and academic performance among young women from marginalized communities pursuing tertiary education⁵¹.

Government and private sector innovation hubs

The government made strides in promoting technology-driven innovation through investing in innovation hubs. The Scottish government supported

Zambia and Malawi with a grant to the tune of one million pounds to establish a technology-driven laboratories to further biomedical and healthcare research. This was aimed at supporting the journey towards advancing human research through scientific research and innovation in Zambia⁵². In December 2024, Zambia marked a historic milestone, breaking the ground for the highly anticipated Timbuktoo MineTech Hub and marking the pre-call to the prestigious Acceleration program. The MineTech hub aims to foster sustainable mining and innovation development in mining sector⁵³. Actors in the private sector also made strides to supplement government efforts through development of innovation hubs. The E- Mark Innovation Hub was opened in November 2024 and offers startups, small business owners, creatives and young tech enthusiasts access to resources, technology and skills development.



Civil Society & advocacy

In 2024, civil society and other advocacy groups including college and university students, church mother bodies and activists made significant success in promoting digital rights, although there are still many challenges that obstruct these efforts.

Despite the challenges being encountered, advocacy groups have exhibited resilience and solidarity with each other, through deliberate local and even regional partnerships and collaborations, capacity building and engagement with

policymakers, parliamentarians and private sector representatives etc. Organizations working in the space remained committed and participated in activities focused on various digital rights issues, these stakeholders offered a variety of support and insights into the state and future directions of digital rights, emphasizing advocacy and collaborative

strategies, providing valuable resources, knowledge and skills to advocate for digital rights effectively. Civil society organizations have actively challenged policies perceived to infringe on digital rights and organizations and individuals with legal background supported processes and activities that required legal knowledge, tools and resources.

In addition to this, organisations with support from regional and international partners provided digital security and resilience support to ensure privacy, protection from surveillance and ensuring processes were not disrupted. Although the advocacy efforts have been successful, major challenges still remain and the aspect of restrictive cybersecurity legislation in which the introduction of the Cyber Security Bill and the Cyber Crimes Bill raised several concerns among civil society organizations and the processes to enact the bills were fast-paced, requiring civil society to urgently get technical capacity to analyse the bills. Additionally, the high internet costs and limited access remain prohibitive and expensive for many individuals and organisation, particularly in marginalized rural communities and among lower-income individuals who were driving the campaign at grassroots level.

The civic space has faced major challenges and has been shrinking over of late and Zambia has particularly witnessed a concerning trend largely attributed to changes in laws and the constitution. This environment posed challenges for advocacy groups striving to promote digital rights.

Collaboration between civil society, government, and private sector

The Zambia CSO Coalition on Digital Rights was established in 2021 to coordinate civil society actions on internet freedoms. The coalition is a composition of local organisations and individuals, lawyers, activists, college and university students who are working in the governance cluster. In 2024, the coalition collaborated and spearheaded various initiatives to engage with policymakers on digital rights issues, particularly the 2024 cyber bills. Coalition members also organised and participated in information sessions and capacity building programmes with Members of Parliament. For instance, on December 9, 2024 coalition members had an engagement meeting with republic President Hakainde Hichilema where various concerns on digital rights, particularly cyber legislation were presented to the Head of State. This resulted in the formation of a joint government-civil society technical working group to review and revise the Cyber Security Bill and the Cybercrimes Bill.



Innovation & Entrepreneurship

The year 2024 showed sustained interest by Zambian businesses, private and state owned to leverage technology to scale up ventures and innovations. The fintech sector showed exponential growth enabling digital payments systems, blockchain solutions and e-commerce platforms to further gain ground in the Zambian startup ecosystem. In August , the Ministry of Technology and Science announced that a budget of k22 million was allocated to support innovators and inventors in actualizing their prototypes, to help address the energy and climate change challenges affecting the country⁵⁴. The Zambia Tech Expo and The Lusaka Internet Meet Up events which were held in 2024 brought together industry leaders, startups, investors, and the next generation of tech visionaries to foster collaboration and ignite innovation in Zambia. The platforms showed commitment by stakeholders to contribute toward promoting technology driven solutions in addressing challenges in Zambia. A number of strategies were also

developed by government institutions to further support innovation and entrepreneurship.

However, despite the strategies being good, the biggest challenge has always been actual implementation. According to the global innovation index, Zambia ranked 30th among 30 lower middle income group economies and 13th among the 27 economies in Sub-Saharan Africa. Zambia's overall ranking on the global innovation index was 131 in 2024. This position indicates a drop as compared to other years⁵⁵. Despite the efforts being made, there is the need to invest in more innovation output, where Zambians can dominate with local innovations that drive tech driven solutions that address challenges in different sectors. Potential innovators need to have easy access to incentives for innovation like grants. We need to show Zambians what other Zambians have created so as to promote public recognition of innovations to encourage and inspire upcoming innovators.

Digital Rights Challenges

Zambia recorded both challenges and opportunities in enhancing internet freedom where there was notable improvement in terms of expression, media freedom, digital literacy and security. Despite this progress, several challenges continue to impede the full realization of digital rights in Zambia.

1 Free expression

There is a slow and often disguised suppression of online expression. Despite the decriminalization of defamation of the President in 2022, authorities continued to issue threats of arrest and warnings to internet users who criticize the president online, contributing to an enduring environment of self-censorship. The 2024 Cyber Security bill and Cybercrimes bill have ambiguous and broad definitions that facilitate surveillance, privacy invasion and suppression of legitimate expression.

2 Restrictive cybersecurity legislation

The introduction of the Cyber Security Bill and the Cyber Crimes Bill in 2024 raised significant concerns among civil society organizations and other stakeholders, who argued that these laws, originally intended to combat cybercrime, may actually facilitate suppression of online expression as they lack adequate oversight mechanisms. Search and seizure provisions and sections of recording conversations lack protections and exemptions for independent journalism and whistleblowers.

3 Digital literacy

Digital literacy remains a major challenge to the enjoyment of digital rights, especially for women, girls, youths and citizens in rural and peri-urban areas. Despite efforts to enhance the situation, the many Zambians are ostracised digitally because of literacy issues and the general incompetence to use gadgets and to competently access and benefit from the Internet resources.

4 Data protection and surveillance concerns

In 2024, widespread awareness and education on implementation of the Data Protection Act remained low even when strides have been made on the operationalisation. This has sustained public lack of trust on personal data issues where citizens have a lot of misgivings, coupled with the narrative around the use of spyware in Zambia. These issues are compounded by the ongoing debate about the rush to enact cyber legislation despite several concerns on the laws.

Cybersecurity

The common cybersecurity threats experienced in 2024 include phishing, malware infections, mobile money theft and cyber bullying and trolling. With the constantly changing digital landscape, new cybersecurity threats keep emerging in Zambia and mobile money scams have become very common with citizens falling victim to simple tricks. In this regard, the government proposed the stand alone Cyber Security law to be administered under the MoTS in order to adequately address issues of cyber security in the republic.



Recommendations

1

Delays in Issuance of Statutory Instruments

Operators reported that delays in the issuance of statutory instruments needed to operationalize the legislation on cyber security, data protection, and electronic transactions had hindered growth. It was anticipated that the implementation of the Cyber Security and Cyber-Crimes Act, as well as the Data Protection Act, would improve compliance among local data controllers, leading to increased use of local cloud storage services, cyber security solutions, and managed services.

2

Increased Load-shedding

the implementation of load-shedding in the first quarter of 2024 significantly affected the provision of ICT services as there has been a significant decrease in the site performance of towers, server rooms and other points of presence. Consequently, there has been a decline in the quality of services as well as an increase in the cost of providing services as operators install alternative sources of energy. Furthermore, the increasing hours of electricity load-shedding have reduced the usage of mobile phones thereby reducing the demand for ICT services.



CONCLUSION

In 2025, Zambia's digital rights landscape reflects both progress and on-going challenges.

Zambia has seen increased internet usage, however, a big part of the population remains offline, highlighting the persistent digital divide.

In terms of legislation, the introduction of the Cyber Security Bill and Cybercrimes Bill aimed at enhancing cyber security and combating cybercrimes. Yet, civil society organizations, technologists, service providers, activists, citizens and youths have raised concerns about vague provisions that could potentially suppress online dissent and infringe on expression and privacy rights.

Freedom of expression remains a critical issue and despite the decriminalization of defamation of the president laws in 2022, in 2024, authorities continued to arrest and imprison individuals for online criticisms,

- promoting an environment of self-censorship. Additionally, there are on-going efforts to expand digital infrastructure and reduce costs and to bridge this gap.

- The ongoing electricity rationing has derogated the digital rights agenda as citizens have major challenges of increasing data costs and accessing the quality Internet because of the lack of energy.

- It is important to balance security concerns with the protection of digital rights in Zambia's quest to advance its digital future, our clarion call is for collaborations efforts among government, civil society and the private sector, which are crucial to ensure that digital advancements do not come at the expense of fundamental freedoms.

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Call to Action for Stakeholders to Prioritise and Protect Digital Rights in Zambia

We urge stakeholders to prioritize and protect digital rights in Zambia to drive economic growth, enhance social inclusion, and strengthen democratic participation. By developing comprehensive policies, strengthening legal frameworks, and promoting digital literacy, we can create a safe and equitable digital environment for all citizens. Additionally, we call for enhanced collaboration among government, private sector, and civil society stakeholders, which is crucial to achieving Zambia's digitalisation goal. Together, let's ensure a thriving digital future for Zambia.

Specifically,

- Civil Society organizations are urged to continue to play an oversight role and provide the necessary checks and balances, including recommendations in the development and enforcement of human rights-based ICT policy and legal frameworks.
- Academia is urged to continue to study the area of digitalisation and how it may marginalise or affect people's rights, including studies on the impact of Artificial Intelligence and emerging technologies to help inform the development of various ICT-related strategies and policies.
- The private sector is encouraged to implement the appropriate cybersecurity and data protection measures, including raising awareness of risks among its customers. In addition, supporting the growth of the ICT sector through increased investments that ensure universal, equitable and meaningful access to ICTs.
- The government is encouraged to expedite the enactment and implementation of rights based legislation that should facilitate for enhanced digital literacy, safety and security and personal data protection