

Extended Abstract: Regional Internet Governance and Postcolonial Consciousness: A Nkrumahian Analysis of the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms

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Theme

Human rights and advocacy in favor of their realization are a core tenet of Internet governance. Well before the UN officially recognized that human rights apply online as they do offline (UN Human Rights Council 2012), various actors and groups within the Internet governance ecosystem advocated for better protection of rights online, including during the WSIS (Franklin 2016; Jørgensen 2013; Jørgensen & Marzouki, 2015; Mueller 2010). In doing so, they furthered digital constitutionalism, the ideology or movement “translating the core principles of contemporary constitutionalism in the context of the digital society” (Celeste 2023: 76). Crucially, in contrast to the constitutionalism of nation states, digital constitutionalism advocates for power limitations of states and powerful digital corporations (Celeste 2019; Suzor 2010, 2019). Declaratory documents, so-called Internet bills of rights are a key advocacy tool for (transnational) advocacy networks in the field of Internet governance. In recent years, hundreds of different Internet bills of rights proposals emerged around the world (Celeste 2023). Some of them, such as Brazil’s Marco Civil have been translated into law (Moncau & Arguelhes 2020), whereas others, such as the Feminist Principles of the Internet remain advocacy tools (Redeker 2018). In this paper we examine a regionally focused Internet bills of rights initiative, the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms, which was published by the concurrently formed AfDec Coalition in 2014. We do so by deploying a qualitative content analysis to eight in-depth interviews with involved activists, and we analyze how the creation, the advocacy and success of the African Declaration relates to the concept of Nkrumahian consciousness i.e. a postcolonial African perspective.

The African Declaration of Internet Rights and Freedoms has a rich history for an advocacy document that has been published less than ten years ago. Envisioned at the 2013 African Internet Governance Forum in Nairobi, Kenya, the Declaration was officially presented at the IGF 2014 in Istanbul. Subsequently, the pan-African AfDec Coalition brought the document to a number of policy fora such as African Union and African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR), and national parliaments and policy makers across the continent. In Nigeria, for instance, the Declaration served as inspiration for the civil society-based proposal for a Digital Rights and Freedom Bill. The Declaration also became a regular topic at national and regional IGFs, RightsCon and the global IGF.

Postcolonial approaches to Internet governance have rightly proliferated in recent years (Ali 2018; Grover 2021; Hill 2014; Holden & Van Klyton 2016). The great inequalities that follow the great injustices of colonialism defined how Internet governance is done in many countries of the Global South and by whom. Critical studies of socio-economic relations and Internet infrastructure (Gravett 2020) and studies of the representation of Africans and people from the Global South more generally in global Internet governance (Chenou 2010; Grover 2021) help us better understand this nexus. However, it is work rooted in the ideas of Kwame Nkrumah (1965), specifically Nkrumahian consciousness, which we put at the center of our postcolonial analysis. Work on Nkrumahian consciousness offers valuable insights for ongoing policy debates regarding the influence of external norms, discourses, and funding in the development of regional governance frameworks, emphasizing the importance of local agency, context-specific solutions, and strategic acceptance of external support. Langan (2018) argues that Nkrumah’s theory of neo-colonialism offers a critical framework through which development in Africa should be examined, echoing similar arguments by Rodney (2018).

We find that Nkrumahian consciousness is a suitable perspective on the Declaration and the AfDec Coalition. The interviews reveal a strong Nkrumahian consciousness within the AfDec Coalition, as evidenced by the members' focus on providing homegrown solutions to the African continent. Also evident is their resistance to external interference in the continent's governance and their strategic acceptance of external support in the form of funding that aligns with the African continent's interests and in terms favorable to them (cf. Nkrumah 1965). In terms of content of the Declaration, the focus on cultural rights evidences the discussions the drafters had when translating global human rights standards to the Internet and to the African context. The interviewees stressed the importance of national governments and regional organizations such as the African Union as principal stakeholders for their advocacy activities. Even if a significant part of the group's funding stemmed from outside of Africa, discussions e.g. in the European Union on Internet rights topics were said to be of little direct interest for the AfDec Coalition. We find that those involved in the Declaration's drafting and the AfDec Coalition are indeed focused on African-specific solutions that are in sync with the continent's unique political, social, and economic contexts (see also Yusuf 2022). This approach, which is strongly rooted in Nkrumah's postcolonial perspective, emphasizes the importance of self-determination and local agency in addressing challenges and opportunities of digital governance in Africa (Nkrumah 1965).

This paper makes critical contributions to the literature on postcolonial internet governance studies by highlighting the role of Nkrumahian consciousness in the advocacy efforts of the AfDec Coalition. It explores how a postcolonial perspective can be critical in shaping a Internet bill of rights document and in developing Internet governance policies that place emphasis on local agency, solutions that are context-specific, and strategic embracing of external support. The study also contributes to continuing policy debates about the effects of external rules, norms, discourses and funding on the creation of regional governance frameworks (Börzel & Risse 2012). The need for Afro-centric approaches to Internet governance is highlighted as well as the significance of navigating the intricacies of postcolonial contexts, such as the interactions between foreign players and local stakeholders, the power dynamics at play, and most crucially, the need for Afro-centric approaches to Internet governance (A-APRP 2023; Nkrumah 1965). Our findings further stress the importance of national and regional IGFs as places that can nurture paradigmatic initiatives at the nexus of Internet governance and human rights.

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