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African jitters over blogs and social media

By Karen Allen Southern Africa correspondent, BBC News

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African governments are turning to more sophisticated techniques to block internet sites and bloggers who they perceive to be a threat.

That is the conclusion of The Committee for the Protection of Journalists, who together with the internet giant Google SA, have gathered African journalists together in Johannesburg's financial hub Sandton to take stock in the wake of the North African uprisings.

In recent months we have seen the traditional means of blocking content continue.

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"Start Quote

Governments now have unprecedented access to the wires and pipes of the internet"

End Quote Danny O'Brien CPJ

Uganda, for instance, turned off social networking sites in April during the peak of the "walk-to-work" campaign.

Though it denied doing so at first, the Uganda Communications Commission wrote to service providers asking them to "block the use of Facebook and

Twitter" and "to eliminate the connection and sharing of information that incites the public".

The BBC saw a copy of the letter.

In June, the Rwandan site Umuvugizi was blocked as its editor was sentenced in absentia to more than two years in jail for insulting the President Paul Kagame in an opinion piece.

And in Swaziland, SMS and the Facebook site were suspended during the much-trumpeted protest marches that failed to take off at the start of April.

But these "technical blocks" are fast becoming surpassed by "more sophisticated and targeted tools using Malware", says Danny O'Brien from the CPJ.

Cloning websites

He says a tactic that was previously used in China, Malware enables an individual's website to be infiltrated via a virus or spyware designed to damage a user's system and "suck out important content".

The Tanzanian government has not commented on allegation it is cloning the website Jamiiforums

It also enables the "infiltrator" to clone the original system and send out information that would be hard to detect as being fake.

There is evidence that this sophisticated tool is being used in Tanzania and Sudan, according to Tom Rhodes, CPJ's East Africa lead.

JamiiForums, a Swahili language version of Wikileaks, is being "cloned" by Tanzania's government to disrupt conversations of opponents, he says.

There has been no comment from the Tanzanian authorities on this.

Nevertheless with Chinese influence in Africa growing rapidly, should journalists and bloggers be more concerned?

Google thinks so.

The company has found its search engine periodically blocked by China over the past decade and Ory Okolloh, its feisty government relations manager, is a trailblazer for media freedom.

She was the brainchild behind **the Kenyan site Ushahidi, which used mapping technology and mobile phones to help identify sites of post-election violence in 2008**.

Given the events in the Middle East and North Africa, Ms Okolloh argues that there is a "growing need among individuals and organisations in the forefront of online freedom of expression, to learn about the complex issues surrounding news technology products and social media tool".

Journalist defence networks agree.

"Governments now have unprecedented access to the wires and pipes of the internet," says Mr O'Brien.

No longer sci-fi

What is more, with 80% of those Africans using the internet accessing it via mobile phones, the breadth of information that can be gleaned is much greater.

Mobile phones require government licences and greater co-operation between providers and the authorities, and so the pressure to suspend services cannot be underestimated

Anger over the arrest of Uganda's opposition leader during his "walk-to-work" protest in April led to riots

Internet accessed by smart phone users not only tells a hacker what sites are being monitored and who they are talking to, but it will also gather information on their precise geographical location and what they are seeing.

This is no longer the stuff of sci-fi movies but the everyday reality of citizen journalists everywhere.

Timothy Kalyegira was in a Ugandan prison cell facing charges of criminal libel last week.

A few days later the Ugandan journalist and blogger was out on bail as one of the delegates of the meeting in a plush hotel in Sandton.

Mr Kalyegira's "crime" in the eyes of the Ugandan government was to stray into the sensitive territory of security issues.

On his website, **the Uganda Record**, he questioned whether it really was the Somali Islamist organisation al-Shabab that was behind last year's World Cup bombings in Kampala.

He faces criminal charges.

Some will undoubtedly appreciate Uganda's argument that is an issue of national security, but many of the other delegates who joined Mr Kalyegira in Sandton have felt the strong arm of the law for what may seem far more "benign" reasons.

For instance simply posting a view on Facebook, publishing a cartoon or publishing a few tweets on Twitter.

These men and women earn a pittance from their online work; they do not enjoy the diplomatic cover that big news organisations receive when things go wrong; but they are rapidly becoming the voices of dissent.

Just like the "samizdat" illegal publications in cold war Europe were the engine of change in the late 1980s, so the voices of the Rwandans, Ethiopians, Ivorians and Nigerians gathered in Sandton are making contributions that are rattling governments continent wide.