

The Missing Balance: Freedom of Expression as a Right and as an Area of Legislation in Sudan

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Abstract

After reviewing a few theoretical positions and clarifying some basic concepts, this paper argues that we cannot, as well as we do not need, to impose strict censorship on the Media to curb the spreading of mis/disinformation. That is applied to both traditional Media and the field of New media; this is due to the large and unprecedented spread of these means in Sudan and the atmosphere of lawlessness that these areas of new media have been enjoying. Because of that, we need, as the paper argues, to develop a responsive legal framework so that it becomes more reactive to the mentioned rapid change. We also need to enforce the law to restrain these media from harming individuals or the wider community as we have seen the catastrophic impact of exercising this inexhaustible freedom in many of the violent events the paper refers to. For society to move to the discipline stage, it must be pushed a little to the destination needed, and this must be done through legal education, which must precede the law enforcement stage.

Keywords: censorship, disinformation, legal education

التوازن المفقود: حرية التعبير كحق وكمنطقة للتشريع في السودان

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المستخلص:

بعد إستعراضنا لبعض المواقف النظرية وتوضيح بعض المفاهيم الأساسية، تحتاج هذه الورقة بأنه لا يمكننا، كما أننا لسنا بحاجة، إلى أن نفرض رقابة صارمة على وسائط الإعلام لكبح انتشار المعلومات الخاطئة/المضللة. وهذا ينطبق على وسائل الإعلام التقليدية أو في مجال وسائل الإعلام الاجتماعية على حد سواء، ويرجع ذلك إلى الانتشار الكبير وغير المسبوق لهذه الوسائل في السودان والأجواء الانفلات التي ظلت تتمتع بها هذه المجالات من وسائل الإعلام الجديدة. ولهذا السبب نحتاج، كما تجادل الورقة، إلى وضع إطار قانوني متجاوب بحيث يصبح أكثر تفاعلاً مع التغيير السريع المذكور. كما نحتاج إلى تطبيق القانون لمنع وسائل الإعلام هذه من إلحاق الأذى بالأفراد أو المجتمع الأوسع والدولة، كما رأينا الأثر الكارثي لممارسة هذه الحرية غير المتناهية في العديد من أحداث العنف التي أشارت الورقة إلى بعضها. ولكي ينتقل المجتمع إلى مرحلة الانضباط، لا بد من دفعه قليلاً إلى الوجهة المطلوبة، ولا بد من

القيام بذلك من خلال التربية الإعلامية وتكامل الدورين الرسمي والشعبي، وتطوير مبادرة قانونية متوازنة الي جانب التثقيف القانوني الواسع، الذي يجب أن يسبق مرحلة إنفاذ القانون.
الكلمات المفتاحية: رقابة، معلومات مضللة، تثقيف قانوني

1. Introduction

Since the start of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict on February 24, 2022, and even before that, a state of press manipulation has spread by both countries to defend their respective positions in this major European crisis, which has expanded rapidly. This was done in an effort by each of them to convince the world of the soundness of the political and legal position of each or just to mislead for strategic and military reasons. The same thing we saw with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic for the first time in the Chinese city of Wuhan in 2019, which has spread around the world since that time. We saw how the United States and China rushed to strategies of disinformation and tried to deny the accusation against each of them so as not to take responsibility and to try to attach it to the other. It was clear during the Covid-19 crisis, how the spread of fake news about the nature of the disease and its effects on the human genome in the long term and its alleged impact on the sexual abilities of those who accept vaccines that have been linked to New media to conspiracy theories encouraged many people not to accept vaccination and put governments to convince the reluctant public of the usefulness, necessity, and non-danger of vaccination (Apuke and Omar 202 p 2.).

These occurrences and others raise profound questions about the spread of the phenomenon of misinformation and disinformation in recent times until the current period as “an era of fake news” (Schapals 2018, p 1).

Although the spread of disinformation and media misinformation is not new, as it seems to have started since the discovery of printing and perhaps earlier, the invention of the Internet and its heavy spread worldwide has been a major reason for the spread of this phenomenon these days (Wu et al., 2022; Hernon 1995).

This paper argues that the age in which we live has increasingly been governed by technology and that there is no way to stop that ever-evolving stream in which technology nearly permeates all aspects of our lives, but at the same time, this technology has opened unprecedented possibilities for the spread of faked news, that is to say, disinformation and misinformation at the global level. This phenomenon cannot be stopped but can be dealt with as a byproduct of technological progress, and we can, as the paper argues, set limits through legal action to achieve the greatest blockage of the phenomenon

and to place it in the narrowest possible range.

This paper relied on reviewing the written literature on the phenomenon through the most important writings that dealt with it, then tried to assess the state of media and information disinformation in Sudan by reviewing a brief history of the phenomenon in Sudan and then trying to touch upon its aspects on public life, and finally, it tries to track the legislative work that attempts to curb it.

2. Dealing with the Confusion of Terminology

There is clear confusion in concepts when using the expression misinformation. It is usually treated as a synonym for other concepts such as disinformation. We have to address this conceptual challenge first. We note that Wu, et al., (2019) have defined misinformation as “false or inaccurate information that is deliberately created and is intentionally or unintentionally propagated”. That would involve sharing rumors, false stories, and inaccurate data without confirming their authenticity. Whereas they defined disinformation as inaccurate misinformation, that created by an individual, or a group, or State to mislead and deceive target(s). The two concepts differ mainly regarding the intention and method of deployment of fake news or incorrect information in order to fabricating reality. This seems to be in line with Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) as well. There is no specific concept of freedom of expression, but rather diffuse definitions of it, as many jurists have tried to challenge it. Freedom of expression can be defined as the outward expression of internal thought and expression, usually in speech, deed, speech, writing, and publication, as well as in gestures, images, and drawings. This is done without any governmental oversight, provided that the method and content of the ideas do not represent a violation of the laws and customs of the State or the group that allowed for freedom of expression. Another group defined it as the ability of a person to form his opinion liberally based on his thinking, without subordination or imitation of anyone, or out of fear of anyone, and have full freedom to express that opinion in the manner he sees fit.

Several justifications are offered as the basis for freedom of expression: Human nature: The basic premise of democracy is that people can choose the opinion they believe in their health from a set of opinions (Messina 2020). Freedom of speech is a way to discover the truth: Touching freedom of expression keeps us from changing a wrong attitude with a healthier one. Preventing the injustice of power: Power doesn't always have the truth, and it does curtail free speech may prevent necessary constructive criticism of the regime.

Self-realization: The silencing of mouths is a serious affront to human dignity and freedom.

The right to freedom of expression is linked to other rights and freedoms, some of which must be relied upon, and others of their manifestations and means of exercise. We cannot imagine exercising this right without freedom of information, freedom of thinking, freedom of the media in all its forms: print, video, audio, and electronic - or freedom of peaceful assembly. However, there is still controversy over what could be considered freedom of expression, and what is considered a violation and an assault on the freedoms of others. Expressions of opinion are Freedom of printing and publication. The right to printing and publishing is one of the first rights enshrined in international covenants and conventions of great importance, they are confirmed, and States are obliged to provide for them in their domestic constitutions. The basic guarantee of democratic regimes is the freedom to print books, magazines, and daily newspapers. Through them, civil writers, intellectuals, and activists can write and communicate their views on various aspects of social and political life to the public either with mainstream or new digital means of communication. Through them, communities can be influenced and motivated to close ranks and sharpen their concerns and press toward correcting public policies.

Freedom and Electronic Publishing: these freedoms are taking their place recently as a result of the great and widespread development of new digital means of communication, the spread of the World Wide Web, and the emergence of New media such as in particular net –applications as social media like Face-book, Twitter, and YouTube,... “, beside Electronic-sites and bloggings ..etc, which have provided citizens with large spaces for the dissemination of information by ensuring its speed of access to the largest number of readers and recipients in very short periods, while ensuring wide areas of influence and interaction by readers and followers anywhere in the world

The right to information: This right is considered to be one of the inherent rights of individuals and groups and is a gateway to the exercise of the other manifestations of the right to freedom of expression. Enabling individuals and groups to receive and facilitate the process of circulation of various information enriches the information of individuals and helps to codify their attitudes to exercise the right to express, demonstrate and participate in advocacy campaigns (Janssen 2012).

The protection of human rights in general and freedom of expression in particular, are among the most important issues on the international scene

within the framework of the United Nations system, especially after the end of the Second World War. This was clear with the attainment of independence by peoples, the building of their States, the emergence of bodies and organizations of the international community concerned with human rights and freedoms and their protection, the codification of these principles and rights in many international declarations and conventions in various fields and the establishment of international mechanisms for the protection and promotion of human rights (Stewart 2008).

4. Restrictions on Freedom of Expression

Human rights and freedoms in the general face several restrictions in their exercise, including freedom of expression. Joseph and Castan (2013; 590-601) assert that such freedom is restricted by a set of legal restrictions to regulate its exercise, ensuring respect for the rights or reputations of others, or for the protection of national security, public order, public health, or morals. This has been confirmed by all international conventions, for example, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 19/3 states that “the exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article entails special duties and responsibilities and may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but only if they are specified by law and are necessary: a. for respect of the rights or reputations of others.. (b) To protect national security, public order, public health, or morals”

Joseph and Castan add that Paragraph 19 (3) establishes conditions, which may only be imposed by observing them, such that restrictions must be “provided for” by law and the text in the law must be so clear and precise that it allows any individual to know when certain acts are contrary to law. Restrictions may be imposed only for one of the objectives set out in paragraph 3, subparagraphs (a) and (b); they must be “essential” to secure one of those goals. It is necessary to protect the right of a person to express his or her opinion or not to disclose such views. It is not permissible to coerce someone into disclosing their views.

Accordingly, although not absolute, the restrictions contained in this paragraph, as an international standard, must be minimal, both to control individual practice and to prevent its exploitation in a very different way from the objectives for which it was established, namely, the achievement of an equitable balance between the rights and freedoms of the individual as rights also, in a democratic society. They are also an indication of State respect for this right, since the interaction between the principle of freedom of expression and these restrictions illustrates the actual scope of the individual’s free-

dom, and they must be prescribed by law.

Some “legitimate” restrictions and exceptions to freedom of expression, such as other rights and freedoms, are contained in the text of article 29 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 19, paragraph 3, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which collectively protects the rights and reputations of others, national security or public order, or public health and morals (Glendon 2004; 9). The protection of these purposes is a legitimate restriction on the right to expression and, in particular, the freedom of the press. Article 10, paragraph 2, of the European Convention on Human Rights, stipulates that: “The exercise of these freedoms, which require the duties and responsibilities of certain formalities, conditions, restrictions or infringements determined by the law and which in a democratic society are necessary for the preservation of the safety of the homeland and its territory, public security, the protection of public order, the prevention of crime, the protection of health and morals and the protection of others and their reputation may be subject to such measures as to prevent the disclosure of confidential information or to ensure the authority and integrity of the judiciary.”

5. In the Search for a Bottom Line

We conclude from the above that freedom of expression is one of the most important human rights, and is the foundation of development and the democratic system of any State in the world. This is clear from the Charter of the United Nations, which stipulates that freedom of expression is connected to the purposes of the United Nations, including the maintenance of international peace and security. This shows the universality and importance of this freedom; although this freedom is restricted by certain restrictions and procedures to protect its means of practice and regulate its use from side and preserve national security, public morals, public health, public order, the rights of others, etc. from the other hand.

The essential elements of freedom of expression are:

1. Freedom to hold opinions without interference (freedom of opinion);
2. Freedom to seek, receive and broadcast news and ideas (freedom of speech and freedom of information).
3. Using audio, written, or printed works of art
4. Through whatever media (freedom of the media)
5. Without being bound by geographical boundaries (freedom of international communication).

6. The Needed Formula in Sudan

Sudan is a complex country that has not yet been nationally formulated. It is a country that is facing several challenges, including building a state that is based on citizenship and individual and collective freedoms within the framework of the law. In this context, it may be said that freedom of expression is very necessary for this type of society, because it will lead to a situation in which people can air their political struggles in a healthy atmosphere through legitimate and well-established political channels, in the presence of a free press, free mass media in general, and a society that encourages development and advancement in all areas and fields through free discussions and constructive arguments in a framework of transparency like other democratic societies. However, some believe that in a society that has not been formed nationally like Sudan, it is difficult for public freedoms to be in the way they are practiced in Europe or the United States of America and in the way approved by International Human Rights charters that we discussed above. Freedom of expression in this type of society is dangerous for society itself, this view claims. Especially at the moment when we have an armed society, armed tribes, and armed ethnicities, so we need, because of this diversity, to restrict freedom of expression to some extent to ensure stability and security in the State. This last position must be the position of the military regimes that have ruled for more than half a century of history in this country.

Since the previous regime has been removed from power in April 2019, a large number of problems have emerged that faced attempts to restore stability, the foremost of which was the great disintegration of institutions, especially the institutions of establishing and enforcing the law. But more important than that is the chaos that swept the media field, in which some activists felt that they are almost unquestioned in everything that was broadcast, published, and written about the political issues facing the country, which posed a real threat to the country's unity and cohesion and the ability of its people to coexist peacefully and threatened the national unity and exposed the country's national security to a great risk. Now, much of the hate speech is being broadcast through the media - such as Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook in video, audio, and text forms - which is genuinely threatened by the ability of the Sudanese people to live together peacefully.

And while the official media seem more careful and professional in both its public and private channels in many issues related to the abuse of freedoms available in the field of media, New media currently seems full of chaos and operates without accountability or supervision. To indicate the im-

portance of the last point, we need to note that the political parties in Sudan today have almost stopped mass rallies and have become dependent on the presence of their activists on social media to deliver the political message that they want to deliver to the populace. It is clear at present that each political party or political group has its activists who express and defend its positions on New media, of which Facebook and WhatsApp are particularly famous and familiar in Sudan. Naturally, this atmosphere is the most suitable for spreading lies and rumors, promoting propaganda, and distorting the image of political opponents intentionally, regardless rightly or wrongly. This gives us an idea of the extent of the chaos in which the country is currently living.

Although the atmosphere that followed the fall of the former regime allowed this amount of freedom, and these freedoms were required to conduct a civilized dialogue about the future that the Sudanese people want for themselves, this freedom turned into chaos and became worthy of serious treatment, so that it would not end with an increase in the levels of ethnic and tribal confrontations that occurred in eastern, western and southern Sudan. New media was one of the most important means used to fuel these conflicts in particular social ones, as many articles written in daily newspapers said. To reach that middle region between the chaos in the field of freedom of expression and ensuring the absolute right to expression as one of the basic human rights, there are currently a lot of discussions among the Sudanese about the most effective means to achieve this. Specialists have the bulk of this discussion about the extent of freedoms that should be allowed and how they can be controlled to ensure that they are not swept into chaos. The role of law is particularly important and frequently mentioned in these discussions.

There is no doubt that the approach required in Sudan includes efforts to impose political stability in the country, restore the institutions of law on the one hand, and stop chaos in the media with the institutions of law enforcement. But we also need comprehensive societal awareness, not only in terms of the rights and freedoms that the new era allows and the civil and legal rights that it provides but also an awareness that rights are offset by responsibilities and that the exercise of freedom also requires consideration of the freedoms of others. And it requires a dual effort of institutions after political stability has occurred because, in the current state of chaos, it's very difficult to do that or even think about it.

7. Media and Misinformation: a Closer Glimpse on Sudan

Misinformation could be defined as presenting a part of the truth or building erroneous construction on clear, stable, and documented facts to

achieve the goal of the faulty construction or misconception or to confuse two or more concepts as synonyms of one meaning in the absence of the concept of each element of the mixture. If the media can spread knowledge and provide people with information and facts to expand their horizons, it can also falsify the facts, and then it can impose on people concepts and views that are contrary to their aspirations for lofty social goals and values. Some scholars (Al-Dulaimi 2010) point out that the concept of media misinformation means providing the media with false information that exaggeratedly fabricates reality so that falsehoods cannot be distinguished from the truth. The term was only rendered in English in the 1960s to refer to “intentional leakage of misinformation”, but in France, it first appeared in 1974, and entered the French dictionary in the early 1980s with essentially political connotations: the intention was to mislead the public opinion and keep it completely ignorant of a serious problem, or not enlighten it enough about important matters (Posetti & Matthews 2018). The aim of disinformation is usually to spread negativity, empty intense emotions, direct culture, obscure facts, and justify and reinforce the status quo, especially at the political level.

With this description, we can say that media disinformation has always been practiced in Sudan in earlier periods, and the motive behind it for long periods was political competition. We have known in our history that matter during periods of intense partisan competition since the dawn of independence, or even before that. With the deepening of the national crisis and the unelected military regimes taking power for long periods, they began to defend their political visions and positions by using the official government media to spread lies about opponents and distort their image in front of the masses, which greatly shook confidence in those agencies. This is especially noticeable during the period of former President Nimeiri, who used to describe his opponents as traitors and mercenaries lying. These political opponents of President Nimeiri’s regime had no choice but to resort to unconventional means to defend themselves and tarnish the image of the May Regime led by Nimeiri. These unconventional means were represented in their use of cassettes, especially in the recordings of the dissident at that time, Sharif Hussein al-Hindi, whose audio recordings attacked the regime, describing it in the worst terms, and spreading rumors about its leaders. The penalty for trading such empty tapes was heavy in that era.

After the fall of Nimeiri, we noticed the use of direct mass broadcasting that was not subject to the authority of the state, which was initiated by the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement when it established a private radio that

covered a large area of Sudan and was promoting its ideology and political positions. This continued until the 1990s when the former regime took advantage of the official media and turned them into partisan platforms that only adopted the positions of the ruling party and distanced them from nationalism. In the same period, competing media platforms were launched from the state of Eritrea, in which was called opposition National Democratic Gathering was operating during the same period.

With the proliferation of the Internet and satellite channels, starting in the nineties, both methods had found resistance from the authorities in the first place, because they create information flows outside the control of the existing regime. Indeed, since that period, information and various positions began to flow by breaking the Sudanese government's monopoly over the media as the sole source of information at the national level. Throughout the nineties, it was only competing with BBC Arabic Radio. The Internet played a pivotal role in being one of the important sources of information at the beginning of the current century. Facebook, in the first decade of the new century, revolutionized the Sudanese people in the field of communication, especially among the politically enthusiastic youth looking for new ideas and visions. Later, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and other social platforms emerged as sources of information, in addition to being new media with other goals.

It is noticeable that the regime in Sudan paid attention to the danger of these alternative media sources and tried to contain them for a certain period, and when the matter was difficult, he established what was called the battalion of electronic deterrence and brought in experts from outside Sudan to improve the use of New media to promote the regime and thwart the plans of its opponents to completely seize cyberspace. . However, this electronic deterrence battalion did not seem to succeed, and the Internet has already turned into a stable and main platform in the sweeping attack on the regime, its ideas, its leaders, and their ideology, until activists succeeded through new media, especially Facebook, in overthrowing the regime with a revolution in which Facebook played the upper hand.

The observer of the activity of the regime through its electronic battalion or the observer of the activity of its electronic political opposition, which had succeeded in undermining the legitimacy of the regime at the hyperspace level before its actual overthrow in the year 2019, it is noted that everyone has adopted misinformation strategies as a means to mobilize the masses with varying degrees of success.

8. The Legislative System and the Follow-Up of Media and Information Disinformation

Although Sudan's laws began to deal with the phenomenon since it became widespread due to the Internet in 2007, and then several amendments were made to these laws, the most important of which was made in 2018, and then the last amendment in 2020. However, this work parallel to the spread of smart devices in the hands of the people and the increasing reliance on them in Sudan as a source of news and information was not without criticism. Most of the criticism was directed at the nature of strengthening authoritarianism in society by harsher punishment for those crimes related to spreading misleading news about the government itself.

Article 24 of the law criminalizes the dissemination of lies and "false news": Any person who uses a communication network, information, application, or any other communication tool to spread rumors, news, or reports knowing that they are fake aimed at spreading fear among people, threatening public peace or diminishing the prestige of the public will be punished for one year, a fine, or both».

Some believe that these and other articles are mainly directed at criticizing the authority and spreading lies about it and not at protecting the security and societal stability that may threaten false news. It has become necessary to enact a law that keeps pace with technological development, taking into account appropriate legislation and penalties. But these reforms, which are needed after the change in 2019, must be for the general good, because everyone in Sudan, as experience in the past years, has shown, has come to realize the danger of leaving New media without legal control, which has been the cause of many bloody conflicts in many areas of Sudan in the last four years.

There is, of course, a need to tighten the articles of the law and make them more comprehensive, but they are not to be Article 5.3 reads: Any person who accesses an information network or a direct or remote communications network to obtain data or information relating to national security, national economy, telecommunications infrastructure or sensitive information shall be punished for 10 years or a fine or both", for it is clear that terms such as "National security" and "Sensitive information" lack definition.

Now, it seems that we now have a long way to go to create appropriate legislation that is not authoritarian in nature or designed to serve the authority and its grip on power. This legislation should be aiming at curbing the phenomenon and at the same time allow as much freedom as possible to criticize

the government the corrupt practices, whatever they may be. And this is the balance that we are asking for at present and we must work to achieve it.

9. Conclusion

The paper argues that in light of the complexities of the current Sudanese situation, the widespread use of New media and smart cell-phones, and the great culture of freedom that has taken root for many years among Sudanese political activists with their various orientations, a reality that has been further rooted in the recent revolution, there is no way to control electronic New media except through the legislative work that lays down laws that can deter the uncontrolled use of space to pass partisan and ethnic political agendas using media and information misinformation without deterrence or fear of accountability. Not only setting laws is what we must, but also activating them, ensuring that their provisions are applied, and working hard to avoid impunity, which has been an essential feature of dealing with this phenomenon in Sudan, even if cases reached the courts, especially what was known as the Informatics Court, which continued to hear many cases without reaching its rulings fully implemented except in a few cases.

The paper also believes that there is no hope that any kind of central censorship will succeed in this context, and that it is not necessary in the first place, due to the culture that has been socially rooted and has long treated the sphere of space as an uncontrolled field. We have seen the catastrophic impact of the exercise of this inexhaustible freedom in many of the violent events to which the paper refers. For society to be moved to the stage of discipline, it is inevitable to push it a little bit to the destination we want, and this must be through cooperative and integrated role come from deferent sides of both civic society and State, media literacy and at the same time and line legal education and developing a balancing legal initiative, which must precede the stage of the law enforcement, because if people themselves do not realize the danger of uncontrolled freedom to use New media, which is widespread nowadays, the law alone as a means to impose a new reality, will be an attempt whose success is shrouded in many doubts.

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