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THE VOICES OF AFRICAN CHILDREN

Chika Anyanwu

Introduction

Children’s use and engagement with information communication technology (ICT) is informed by a myriad of different stakeholders, including, on a grand scale, national and multinational telecommunication corporations, and, on a local level, governments, communities, schools, and parents. Cost of access set by telecommunication service providers, the terrestrial access set by governments, and the device usage at both home and at school as set by parents and teachers, all inform the way in which children adopt and use ICT. Yet the major stakeholders themselves, the children, can be at the receiving end of the negotiations or at times completely absent. In an African context specifically, cultural hierarchy plays an important role in absenting the voice of the child in these negotiations. For example, in the Igbo culture of Nigeria, age plays a pivotal role in the dynamics of social power, with children needing to be subservient to adults and parents. It is therefore important to identify a cultural context through which children can be empowered by elders to represent their communal interests in online environments.

This chapter examines in detail the sociocultural, technological, and economic challenges that African children face in engaging with ICT and in forging their own digital identities. As Third, Bellerose, Diniz De Oliveira, Lala, and Theakstone identified in their report for The State of the World’s Children 2017 Companion Report, there were three key barriers to connectivity among those from the Global South: quality of internet connection, cost of access, access to power supply and battery capacity (2017, p. 40). Furthermore, age, socioeconomic status, geophysical location, gender, and level of literacy all impact the degree to which people not only have access to, but also the extent to which they engage in, ICT.

Discussion in this chapter will first consider how the sociocultural principles of Ubuntu and Asuwada influence children’s participation in an online environment. It will then consider the technological challenges that limit children’s participation, identifying that slow mobile technology and a lack of reliable power supply are the primary prohibiting factors. Consideration will also be given to the socioeconomic limitations that African children face, recognising that, for both economic and cultural purposes, the concept of individual mobile phone access does not exist among African families, but rather within a shared mentality. This discussion will be supported throughout by data collected from The State of the World’s Children 2017 Companion Report (Third et al., 2017) and the South African Kids Online report (Phyfer, Burton, & Leoschut, 2016), as well as a number of United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Country...
Office reports from recent years. This chapter will conclude with a range of suggestions to support African children’s digital agency.

Recent Investigations into African Children’s Engagement with ICT

Africa is a continent of 54 countries with different cultural, linguistic, economic, and geopolitical systems. Although the research samples analysed in this chapter are mere snapshots of a complex continent, the global and transgressive nature of digital platforms arguably cross geocultural and political landscapes, therefore making it necessary to analyse the voices of African children in relation to their international peers. In this respect, analysis in this chapter is localised through an African sociocultural lens. However, it is important to note that ICT adoption and access in African countries is not homogeneous. Rather, there are different levels of adoption and access among the 54 countries themselves, and also between those living in urban, regional, or rural communities within those countries.

The data examined in this chapter are drawn from a number of international research studies that investigated children’s online activities. Third et al. (2017), for example, carried out a 26-country survey of 490 children’s perspectives in the online environment and, while it does not focus exclusively on African children, the African sample population within the report covered six African countries (Burundi, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Tunisia, Senegal, and Nigeria) and thus covered three of the five regional zones of Africa: North Africa, West Africa, and Central African Republic.

Another study, South African Kids Online (Phyfer et al., 2016), provided data for a fourth regional zone: Southern Africa. These research projects were facilitated through the UNICEF Country Offices, who used their network to coordinate the workshops and run focus group sessions of 13 participants each. The project of Third et al. (2017) is also aligned with the UNICEF report, *State of the World’s Children 2017: Children in a Digital World* (2017), which offered a comparative analysis of children’s experiences, especially through a socioeconomic and cultural lens.

Sociocultural Challenges Faced by African Children

Many communal societies in Africa can be understood from Akiwowo’s (1986) sociological theory of Asuwada: the myth of creation. Within this theoretical framework, individuals are composite units of a family and indivisible from its familial unit. In Southern Africa specifically, communities are also understood from the Zulu concept of Ubuntu. In Ubuntu “each individual’s humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others” (Mabovula, 2011, p. 40). These close communal societies leverage their existence through collective resilience and competitive practice, where people collaborate in order to collectively compete against common threats.

Asuwada emphasises contextual relationships between social beings who make valuable contributions to societal survival, community integration, and development (Omobowale & Akanle, 2017). Within Asuwada, there is a social expectation from all to associate or co-exist by internalising and rightly exhibiting values which enable community survival and development. Similarly, Ubuntu espouses a fundamental respect of the rights of others, as well as a deep allegiance to the collective.

In this context of collective responsibility and fundamental rights, concerns regarding children’s online safety and cyberbullying take on a new level of importance. African children’s engagement with cyberbullying was considered in a South-African focus group (Byrne, Kardefelt-Winther, Livingstone, & Stoilova, 2016) made up of girls aged between 11 and 12. The girls maintained that there was little difference between their online social interactions with other girls...
and their physical ones. One girl remarked “girls gossip about each other” but in an online environment “you don’t put your names there” (Byrne et al., 2016, p. 61). These comments are in line with the concept of what Nigerian youths call yabis. Yabis is a form of competitive performance where young people make fun of and ridicule each other publicly while bystanders voyeuristically enjoy and urge the contestants on. Although far from the principles espoused in Ubuntu, this form of bullying existed before African children could engage with ICT and, in this sense, the evidence of cyberbullying could be seen as an online extension of physical actions.

In Ubuntu, according to Omobowale and Akanle, “there exists a symbiotic relationship between the individual and their community. Without the contribution and participation of constituent individuals, the community becomes void, and likewise, the community gives meaning to an individual’s being” (2017, p. 45). This interdependent relationship between the individual and its community is similar to the social network perspective of Qun, Jiming, and Juan (2009, p. 326), who used the work of Tönnies and Loomis (1957) to argue that individuals who share values and beliefs are linked by social ties. Such social ties in the African perspective become important economic assets which yield network success (Kadushin, 2012). It could be argued that under Ubuntu, children begin to look after each other once they understand their interconnectedness.

As the online environment is still predominantly Western-dominated by content and structure, the social relationships fostered within it have limited cultural signifiers for African children. This can make some African parents develop anxiety over the impact such a medium can have on their children’s cultural and moral education. This fear is compounded by the ubiquity of ICT, which has many unintended consequences. For example, in a focus group survey undertaken in 2016, South African parents stated that they had “lost our culture ... our culture is lost” as a result of their children’s engagement with ICT (Le Mottee, Leoschut, Leoschut, & Burton, 2016, p. 39). In a Pew Research report, parents also complained about how their children were losing the ability to communicate face-to-face with their families or peers (Silver et al., 2019, p. 12). If these concerns are analysed using the lens of Asuwada and Ubuntu, it could be argued that African parents and elders fear their children are losing a physical connection with community. This would be concerning because community enables cultural transmission, and losing community could threaten cultural survival.

Concerns were also raised about the security and safety of children’s online participation. A 2017 UNICEF report in Ghana found that the children maintained security consciousness in an online environment. For example, a 14-year-old girl from Upper West claimed: “I don’t accept friend requests from everyone ... ignoring unofficial messages ... I always want to chat with only people I know” (UNICEF, 2017, p. 61). She continued: “I blocked somebody who started sending me pornographic pictures” (UNICEF, 2017, p. 61). Interestingly, and in line with Ubuntu principles, the report also showed evidence of altruism and care among the children interviewed. One 14-year-old girl said: “I helped a friend to accept friend request ... I also helped a friend to block a bad friend ... I helped my friend to post a picture on facebook ... my sister helped me to block someone” (UNICEF, 2017, p. 96). These interdependent relationships demonstrate that the key principles of Ubuntu, collective responsibility and respect, can be developed and encouraged within an online environment.

Furthermore, from a social capital analysis, Adams and Hess (2010) point out that social capital is directly related to personal and collective well-being. This collective wellbeing includes “physical and mental health; educational achievement; lower crime rates; and increased capacity for a community to respond to threats and intervention” (Adams & Hess, 2010, p. 141). As communal societies, African people have built strong social capital through reciprocal relationships espoused in Ubuntu and Asuwada. This form of embedded capital has sustained the people through different human and environmental challenges. It is an intangible asset built through the
reciprocity of its constituent memberships. Therefore, the use of ICT within close-knit African communities is often received ambivalently.

With African children facing these sociocultural limitations, the task therefore is how to negotiate and implement ICT policies in Africa in a way that ensures children’s ICT development is taken into consideration, but not at the cost of losing their cultural identity and capital.

**Technological Challenges Faced by African Children**

According to the GSM Association (GSMA), Africa is predicted to have the fastest mobile technology economy by 2025, with almost 50% penetration (GSMA, 2019). This forecast is important, as internet access in many African countries is, due to topographical challenges, through mobile telephony. While this implies that there is more untapped economic potential in Africa, which is the world’s most youthful and fastest-growing population (Kemp, 2019), GSMA in fact represents the commercial interests of mobile telecommunication companies. In this context, their prediction should be read just as much as a commercial opportunity for telecommunication businesses than an affirmation of Africa’s technological development.

Exploring this idea further, as of June 2019, Africa accounted for only 11.5% of global internet usage, North America accounted for 7%, and Europe accounted for 16%. Yet, these statistics change dramatically when they are placed against population ratio. For example, the 2019 United Nations population estimate put North America’s population at 367.4 million, and that of Europe at 747.3 million, making a combined total of 1.1 billion, while that of Africa was 1.3 billion. In this respect, Europe and North America commanded twice that of Africa’s usage. Similarly, internet penetration in Europe sat at 88% while North America was 89%. This is in comparison to Africa, which had an average of 40%, and this varied largely across different regions. For example, 51% in Southern Africa, 49% in Northern Africa, 49% in Western Africa, and 27% in Eastern Africa (Kemp, 2019).

However, as Oyedemi contends, in the case of Southern Africa specifically, “black Africans ... are generally the least positioned to benefit from [the] internet’s potentials for enhancing participation and citizenship” (2015, p. 20), suggesting that generic data can obscure the more nuanced internal dynamics, whether it be in Africa or in Western countries. This obfuscation has occurred more often between ICT-connected urban areas and disconnected rural areas in Western countries, leading to what Park considers “as an eternal dependent relationship between the centre and periphery” (1999, p. 85). In African countries, however, it is often socio-economically determined between the wealthy few who can afford to send their children to well-equipped private schools with internet access, and the poor who depend on public schools with limited infrastructure.

Another important consideration is the state of ICT infrastructure within African countries. The Rwandan private media outlet *The New Times* (“Sub-Saharan Africa’s”, 2019) reported that many countries were operating on 2G networks and were in the process of moving to 3G and 4G networks. This indicates that African children relying on GSM mobile connectivity have the download speed capability of between 64 Kilobytes per second to 2Mbps. This is in comparison to their Western peers who are already transitioning from 4G network connectivity, which offers up to 100 Mbps, to 5G networks which promise an internet speed 100 times faster than its predecessor.

These challenges relating to internet quality, cost of internet access, and power supply were considered by a number of African children in Third et al. (2017, p. 68): “when you connect there is the network issue and it cuts out and when you are connected the battery runs out and there is the problem of credit”. The children also acknowledged that they depended on their parents’ phone to connect. A 15-year-old boy from Greater Accra stated that
the phone is not mine. It is for my mom . . . when you want something fast and the network is slow . . . I waited for long . . . sometimes during some periods from 6am to 12pm. I don’t have the money to buy the bundle . . . paying for the internet bills.

(UNICEF, 2018, p. 41)

Research by Byrne et al. (2016, p. 34) also came across similar challenges to access, with a 12-year-old girl from the Western Cape claiming that “if you don’t have airtime… then you can’t chat… then you get mad… And then you don’t have any pocket-money” (Byrne et al., 2016, p. 34). From these examples it is evident that while African children are keen to participate in online environments, they are hindered by technical challenges.

**Socioeconomic Challenges Faced by African Children**

There is also a need to consider an alternative communication model which enables wider access to affordable and high speed connectivity for African children. For many African families, the cost of a data subscription for basic internet access is beyond their reach, and the cost of owning a smartphone is equivalent to more than 10% of a high-income earner’s monthly salary (Okeleke & Suardi, 2019; Radcliffe, 2018). This is reinforced in the UNICEF (2018, p. 41) research study on Ghanaian children’s online participation, with an 11-year-old girl from East Ghana stating that her primary issue in engaging with ICT was “when you have no money to go to the café (cybercafé)”. According to Mutsvairo and Ragnedda (2019, p. 14), the digital divide . . . remains a major problem in Africa. Mobile phones are too expensive for many and accessing mobile internet is even worse. Therefore, unless affordable smartphones are made available to people with low socioeconomic status, the digital divide will persist

(Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019, p. 14)

Furthermore, research suggests that from an economic and cultural perspective, African children do not require individualised smartphones or computers to connect or interact online. Rather, what they require is access to affordable and reliable bandwidth, power supply, and to be equipped with technical skills. For example, the research carried out by Joyce-Gibbons et al. (2018, p. 18) found that four out of ten adults in Tanzania shared a mobile phone. This observation is consistent with the analysis of Anyanwu (2019), who used the Pareto principle to examine ICT penetration in African countries. The Pareto principle is often regarded as the 80/20 rule or that of the 20% making 80% of the decisions. An understanding of the family structure in African communities would indicate that often a single mobile phone would serve as a gateway for family members to the rest of the world. As Yang and Laroche (2011, p. 980) observe, communal societies emphasise collaboration, openness, and sharing. In this respect, such prohibitive costs and economic limitations can be, to a certain degree, leveraged through collective ownership, which, while enabling cultural cohesion, can also leverage the cost of participation.

**The Voices of African Children**

Despite the challenges discussed above, there is a growing number of successful young Africans whose entrepreneurial spirit and creativity have transcended sociocultural and socioeconomic barriers. The 2018 *Forbes* list (Nsehe, 2018), for example, lists a number of promising young African entrepreneurs who have used those challenges to enable creativity. Many of them have used their childhood experiences to find creative solutions to increase other African children’s participation in
the online world. These entrepreneurs have established co-creative spaces, affordable power sources, educational platforms, sustainable farming support applications, and a host of other innovative products. For example, in Nigeria, Temitope Ogunsemo’s MySkool Portal (https://myskoolportal.com.ng), a web-based application for a school information management system, has been adopted by many high schools in Nigeria to help track students’ progress. In South Africa, Nhabiseng Mosia’s Easy Solar (www.easysolar.sl) aims to provide access to reliable cost-effective energy to rural communities through renewable sources. Mosia’s Easy Solar is an important example of how Africans can address the issue of unreliable power supply and battery life, which was a key barrier in The State of the World’s Children 2017 Companion Report (Third et al., 2017, p. 40).

As part of the 2019 Children’s Day celebration, Nzekwe Henry (2019) also compiled a list of African children who made global impact through their brilliant and innovative efforts. Among them is Kelvin Doe from Sierra Leone who, at the age of 13, became a self-taught engineer who had built his own radio station, transmitters, generators, and batteries from scrap metals. He was later invited to MIT and subsequently signed a solar project pact with Canadian high-speed service provider Sierra WiFi. Betelhem Dessie from Ethiopia started working, at the age of nine, in her father’s electronic shop in order to get some pocket money. She began to develop an interest in computing and coding and within one year was able to code in HTML. She combined this work with her studies and was able to teach her classmates basic computer skills. At the age of 12 she was employed as a developer by the Ethiopian Information Network Security Agency (INSA), and at the age of 20 she was founder and CEO of Anyone Can Code (ACC), with four patented projects as well as others in collaboration. Finally, in 2017, a group of five Kenyan school girls aged 15 to 17 developed an app called i-Cut, which was aimed at tackling the issue of female genital mutilation. The app was designed to alert authorities and provide support for victims. These students won the African entry in the finals of the Technovation Challenge, which took place in California of that year.

These examples demonstrate that African children can engage in ICT in innovative, and in turn successful, ways. There can be more of these success stories if the sociocultural, socioeconomic, and technical limitations considered in this chapter are addressed. Education is an important tool to foster and encourage such empowerment. African parents send their children to school to empower them and to accomplish what they, as parents, were unable to accomplish. Digital literacy and participation could be extended to play a similar role. This is reinforced by the voices of the African children themselves. A 14-year-old child from the Central African Republic summarised: “digital technology allows me to search and learn anything I am interested in and use it for my academic work” (Third et al., 2017, p. 68). A 14-year-old boy from Ghana also claimed that he uses “Google to answer questions and do my homework” (UNICEF, 2018, p. 53).

So too does ICT assist in fulfilling their basic social needs, including being identified as part of the online community. As a 14-year-old Ghanaian girl stated: “I feel happy when I chat with my friends … when I read jokes, I am happy” (UNICEF, 2018, p. 51). For these African children, technology and ICT were not viewed as inhibitors to expanding their education, but rather as a facilitator. For example, a 12-year-old girl from the Central African Republic remarked that “technology never got in the way of learning or caused problems at school: with technology we get information for our lessons” (Third et al., 2017, p. 53). A 14-year-old girl from Ghana continues this idea, stating that “I learnt how to type fast … and use shortcuts of words … I learnt a lot about current affairs, and this helped in my academic work” (UNICEF, 2018, p. 51).

**Conclusion and Suggestions**

From the various examples and data used in this chapter it is fair to conclude that ICT is a global disruptive technology which challenges political, sociocultural, and economic boundaries. Its
impacts permeate every society and therefore it is not a question of if, but when, governments and communities can take strategic initiatives to ensure that their children are adequately prepared to embrace it. It is also evident that while African children do not have the same level of access and opportunities as their Western counterparts, they are very creative and innovative with the few resources at their disposal.

While this chapter has acknowledged the challenges and difficulties facing African children and institutions, it is also important to understand that playing the dependency card will no longer enable African leaders to assert their authority and political independence before their global counterparts. Therefore, it is time that African leaders started investing in a strategic developmental agenda without expecting handouts from foreign countries. Investment in ICT should be regarded as an integral part of children’s education, and national and continental development. In this regard, African governments should consider opening up more spectrum allocation and to have competitive tender processes to ensure that more stakeholders can compete to provide affordable services to the people.

While the emphasis of this chapter is on children, it is suggested that the education of parents on the uses and implications of ICT would enable them to understand and empower their children to take more control in the online environment. It is also recommended that community-based co-creative spaces be established to enable children to balance their creativity with cultural integration. Such creative space could serve as locations for professional development, as well as adult training grounds. It is also suggested that such training should consider using children as facilitators and trainers. This approach would enable families to share their cultural and digital experiences together, and indirectly recognise the need to transfer digital powers to their children.

Governments should also consider mandating telecommunication service providers to fund co-creative spaces in their communities of operation, either as joint initiatives or as part of their corporate social responsibility. Educational institutions should consider professional development opportunities for their teachers to enable them to improve their technical skills so as to support children in this digital environment. They should also review their curriculum to include coding and programming as an integral part of children’s education. It is expected that these small steps will enable the continent to prepare for the digital revolution which has already started.

References


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