Digital Citizenship and Digital Solidarity in Africa

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Introduction

The growth in the popularity of the internet around the world, as evidenced by growing user numbers, particularly in Africa, has enabled citizens to harness its power as a tool of agency, creating new global and transnational spaces for civic participation, advocacy, and social change. Digital technologies have become crucial tools for African citizens to highlight concerns, claim rights, and demand social justice. At the centre of this digital transformation are two key and interconnected concepts: (i) digital citizenship to claim rights; and (ii) digital solidarity to act collectively to secure social change. These twin concepts highlight that citizens exercise their rights and collectively support each other in the digital realm. This post reflects on how these two concepts manifest in the African context and how they are shaping the continent's socio-political landscape. Building on our previous conceptualization of digital citizenship and Felix Stadler's description of digital solidarity, we argue for digital solidarity as

an additional component of digital citizenship, moving from individual agency to the collective power of loosely organized digital networks that often manifest across physical borders. We refer to work published in our recent book, *Digital Citizenship in Africa* (Zed Books, 2023), to draw out some of the findings from the case studies published therein.

Introducing Digital Citizenship

As we argue in our 2023 work, the concept of digital citizenship refers to people's use of digital technologies to participate in civic and political life, generating positive opportunities for citizen activism, which are also simultaneously being constrained by various forms of digital authoritarianism and repression. For example, the use of internet shutdowns by African governments (Ethiopia, Sudan, Cameroon, among others) in response to protests and civil unrest.

Despite uneven access to technology, African citizens use digital technologies to influence policy, claim rights, hold governments accountable, and expand democratic space online. Previous research has shown that conceptions of citizenship in Africa are fluid and flexible in the African context, including counter-hegemonic claims for space by minorities, as well as ethno-religious in nature. Moreover, citizenship is experienced unevenly, is often contested and used to exclude 'outsiders,' and is constructed in relation to ethnic and gendered hierarchies.

Not all citizens have the necessary digital access or digital literacy to practice digital citizenship, and not all online activities are acts of citizenship. For example, utilising the internet for e-commerce purposes does not fall under the category of digital citizenship activities. To clarify, we define digital citizenship as the use of digital tools and online spaces to participate in civic and political life. We further argue for a normative definition of digital citizenship as an active process of claiming fundamental human rights and pursuing social justice, which includes an explicit commitment to social justice and human rights.

Furthermore, we argue that African digital citizenship is distinctive in several respects. Unlike global North conceptions of citizenship that centre affiliations to the nation and state-citizens relations, our African digital citizenship case

studies reflect ethno-religious affiliation and post-colonial political settlements. We conclude that African digital citizenship has distinct and specific cultural, ethnic, religious, or gender characteristics that are national or sub-national in character. Following this finding, we argue that the study of digital citizenship needs to be situated in local contexts, conducted by researchers with deep contextual knowledge, and should draw on African theoretical framings.

Defining Digital Solidarity

Digital solidarity refers to the idea that individuals, communities and organisations are able to come together in digital spaces to support each other during times of crisis. Since activists first appropriated digital tools for building political solidarity there have been many studies analysing the use of new technologies in collective action, including the use of bulletin boards, SMS, blogs, and social media. Felix Stalder highlights four new forms of digital solidarity that are emerging in online spaces: *commons, assemblies, swarms, and weak networks*. These four forms of digital solidarity are used below to typologize some of the episodes of digital citizenship analysed in our book. We find Stalder's third and fourth forms of digital solidarity most relevant to the case studies of digital citizenship that we have documented, but all four are briefly outlined below.

Commons *refers to shared online resources or spaces where individuals are free to collaborate and manage digital resources*, e.g., open-source software or Creative Commons-licensed content. One compelling example is a project like Ushahidi in Kenya, used for crowd mapping crisis situations and collecting key information during elections and disasters.

Assemblies *in digital spaces refers to participatory online meetings with the goal of advocacy*. The SOS Coalition in South Africa, an online campaign to save public broadcasting, is an example of an assembly. The Coalition's online activities provided a platform for a range of actors to make rights claims and present policy proposals for the future of South Africa's public broadcasting, including a range of legal, financial, and technical concerns. Twitter (now X), was used to share information, mobilize opinion, organize offline protests, and influence policy outcomes.

Swarms *are forms of decentralized and collective action where individuals connected through social media or digital networks come together quickly as a response to a specific event or issue*. Online movements like #FeesMustFall in South Africa, or #EndSARS in Nigeria can be viewed as swarms: social media platforms were used successfully to mobilize support and raise global awareness, often leading to offline action and change. Viral campaigns like the 2015 #FeesMustFall campaign, which began in South Africa, are characterized by the speed at which large groups of people are mobilized, online and offline, to achieve political goals. The student fees protests gained significant international attention and support as a result of trending hashtags such as #FeesMustFall and #NationalShutdown. Placing the issues of local students onto the international agenda via social media resulted in a range of digital solidarity efforts, most notably online petitions and campaigns that were launched on platforms like Change.org to collect signatures to express support for the #FeesMustFall movement. The online activism led to global media coverage, and students around the world came out in support of the movement and campaigned against austerity measures and economic inequality. In the UK, for example, students protested rising tuition fees and cuts in higher education funding. South African students in the UK expressed their solidarity with those at home by marching to the SA High Commission along with students from Oxford, the University of Brighton and the University of Manchester.

Weak Networks are *loose connections of geographical diverse actors with common interests of concerns.* Also known as loose or distributed networks, weak networks are digital networks connecting diverse people with common interests or concerns. These networks are flexible, they lack centralized authority, and while they are inclusive and open, people may join or leave the network as their interests evolve. WhatsApp is increasingly popular in Africa as a space for everyday personal messaging and friends' groups but is also commonly used among affinity groups to build solidarity and organize activities. The expression "same WhatsApp group" is frequently used in Africa as an indication of shared political affiliation or sentiment. WhatsApp has also been spotlighted for its role in spreading hate speech and misinformation, particularly during elections or health pandemics such as COVID-19. However, the affordances of the messaging app also lend themselves to possibilities for

digital solidarity. WhatsApp can be a powerful tool for fostering digital solidarity by enabling individuals, communities, and organizations to connect, collaborate, and support each other in various ways. WhatsApp groups can be used for crisis response and support, virtual community building, and sharing messages to raise awareness about important issues quickly. The messaging platform can also be used for crowdsourcing data and to connect migrants and diaspora communities with their home countries.

Digital Solidarity and its Links to Digital Citizenship

Digital citizenship and digital solidarity are interconnected concepts. As conceptualised above, digital solidarity takes the principles of digital citizenship beyond the individual, enacting cooperation and collaboration among digital citizens in pursuit of shared objectives and interests. The ability to engage in digital solidarity is shaped by structures of opportunity and constraint. Digital divides exist between continents, countries on the continent, and demographic groups in each African country. Digital (dis)advantage is often delimited along intersectional lines with an enduring inequity, for instance, between high-income, high-literacy, urban men and low-income rural women where connectivity is intermittent or absent. The 2023 Revised UN Draft Declaration on International Solidarity outlines the principles of international solidarity as an essential element of human rights and emphasizes the importance of cooperation and collective action to address digital inequalities and global challenges such as poverty, climate change, and inequality. Emphasizing the importance of global cooperation and collective action in addressing digital inequalities and upholding human rights for all individuals and nations, the Revised Draft Declaration aligns with the principles of digital solidarity and digital citizenship.

The adverse effects of digital inclusion should also be acknowledged: states and corporations have developed a range of repressive practices to limit free online expression, and digital citizenship practices are often limited by the states and corporations in the context of surveillance capitalism. Governments and corporations are engaged in extensive surveillance of their citizens and others, raising the important point that digital citizenship consists of citizen agency alongside the actions of the state and corporations. Within this context of repression, digital citizenship and digital solidarity become increasingly

important as a means for citizens to ‘fight back’ against the state and corporations. The countervailing force of digital citizenship and digital solidarity is increasingly important as the digital commons are eroded. As the once free and open internet is increasingly enclosed, privatised, and repurposed as a platform for surveillance capitalism and state control manifests as digital authoritarianism, it is important to identify and nurture countervailing forms of digital citizenship and solidarity.

Conclusion

Digital citizenship and digital solidarity are increasingly important elements of social change in Africa, enabling citizens to raise neglected issues, exercise and claim rights, advocate for change, and form bonds of solidarity with one another in pursuit of their demands. The continent has witnessed an upsurge in online activism, collective mobilization, and the use of digital tools to address pressing issues. As Africans continue to embrace digital tools as a means to enact active citizenship, these forms of digital solidarity will play a pivotal role in shaping a future defined by unity, collective empowerment, and social progress.

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