

BOOK REVIEW

Tanja Bosch and Tony Roberts, eds. *Digital Citizenship in Africa: Technologies of Agency and Repression*. London: Zed Books, 2023. 227 pp. Illustrations. Index. \$43.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-350-32445-9.

The past two decades have witnessed a surge in African digital citizenry, with the rise of mobile and digital technologies profoundly reshaping the continent's political landscape. This pervasive use of digital media coincided with the failure of many postcolonial states to protect civil liberties, pushing people towards online spaces to contest their marginalization. However, these supposedly expressive digital spaces also enable new control mechanisms and constraints, leaving a widening gap between digital media as a battleground for active resistance and actualized citizenship. In *Digital Citizenship in Africa*, Bosch, Roberts, and the other contributors critically examine this double-edged nature of digital media, exploring how Africans navigate the complex interplay of agency and repression. The book opens with Francis Nyamnjoh's insightful foreword about the inclusionary promises of citizenship, which exist in tension with prevailing exclusionary practices. Citizenship, he argues, must be conceived from the perspective of incompleteness not as a universal ideal but as a flexible, permanent work in progress open to reinvigoration in the struggle to reclaim the political field. His intriguing analysis animates the eight chapters of the entire collection.

The book assembles scholars from multiple disciplines, with chapters demonstrating how the digital turn fosters resistant, disruptive, and, crucially, alternative expressions of African citizenship. The perennial question about the Africanness of digital citizenship in Africa, and what is digital about digital citizenship in Africa, gains perspective from the carefully curated case studies spanning various African regions, including West Africa, Southern Africa, and East Africa. This multi-regional approach showcases unique patterns of digital engagement shaped by diverse local political cultures, infrastructure challenges, and historical legacies. It delineates emerging sociopolitical circumstances and economic contexts of various societies, making the book an important addition to the literature in the studies of digital activism in Africa, given that the African continent was largely written out of accounts on technology and digital citizenship scholarship, as it were. What remains debatable and contentious in the different social domains in these chapters is how these hypermediated spaces democratize civic spaces while accommodating preexisting norms that limit the agency and capacity of the user. Moreover, the editors make it clear at the outset that the book's aim was not necessarily to resolve the problem of digital

citizenship but to determine the conditions under which digital media could positively impact the political and social life of Africans.

The first chapter lays out the conceptual and theoretical foundations of digital citizenship as the active use of digital media to participate in society. It builds linkages with citizenship practice in Africa by drawing from the work of African scholars Mamdani (1996) and Ekeh (1975), offering robust insights into how Africa's colonial and historical struggles are a product of its dynamic citizenship practices while developing new sociopolitical imaginaries that shape various digital expressions. The second chapter, a contribution by Ojebode, Oladapo, and Ojebuyi, draws together insights from the hashtags #PantamiMustgo and #END-SARS to discuss the contradictory outcomes of digital action that can emerge from performances of digital citizenship. In their analysis, the #ENDSARS opened up space for digital citizenship by building solidarity across ethnic cleavages, while the #PantamiMustgo closed the civic space by enabling ethnocentric, divisive claims. It reveals the paradoxical effect of ethnic and religious identities that simultaneously frustrate and encourage citizenship.

It was inspiring to read Brhane and Eneyew's longitudinal study of Ethiopia's digital citizenship practices, which shows how digital technologies intensified the seed of activism stretching back over thirty years. Yet, individuals who expressed digital dissent became victims of antiterror laws and state surveillance. In Chapter Four, Antonio and Roberts explore measures taken to intercept the free flow of information through internet shutdowns in diverse contexts (Nigeria, Uganda, and Ethiopia) to silence dissent, protests, and self-assertions contravening the nation-state's approved idea of citizenship. The authors recognize that when states feel threatened by citizen action they react by shutting down the internet. The chapter offers a robust account of the repercussions of these curtailments of freedom of expression. The fifth chapter shifts focus to feminist digital citizenship in Nigeria through the lenses of cyberactivism and the five A's of technology access. In Chapter Seven, Elias and Roberts describe how digital citizens hold power holders accountable during elections but that dissenters' speeches do not often translate to the intended outcomes. The final contribution by Nyabola discusses how the dominance of the English language defines the limits and opportunities for African digital citizenship, contributing to the exclusion and circumscription of digital citizens. It highlights the importance of promoting linguistic diversity in digital environments.

This book contributes significantly to the literature on digital citizenship on the continent. It is written in a highly accessible vocabulary for readers with or without background knowledge of the continent's, politics, culture, or digital media systems. It also offers important insights for practitioners working at the intersection of technology and governance in African contexts and for researchers interested in digital Africa. Also, its open-access format makes it readily accessible to all readers. An apparent limitation of this volume is the overemphasis on social media. While this symbolizes social media's significance and near ubiquitousness in Africa, questions have been raised about the possibilities of developing and using Indigenous artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to engineer the continent's political and digital spaces. For instance, a 2023 volume edited by Damian Okaibedi Eke, Kutoma Wakunuma, and Simsola Akintoye,

highlights these issues while discussing the epistemic injustice of global AI ethics, opportunities and challenges. They suggest using African philosophies of Ubuntu for the analysis and application of AI policy and responsible AI use. More research into such endeavours can be included in future volumes. The book could also have benefited from more attention to rural and marginalized communities' experiences to understand how those on the margins navigate the complexities of Africa's digital terrain. The authors have produced a volume that makes significant theoretical and empirical contributions to African digital citizenship literature.

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