

# INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE: AFRICA'S DIGITAL YOUTH AND MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY COMPETENCIES AND PRACTICES

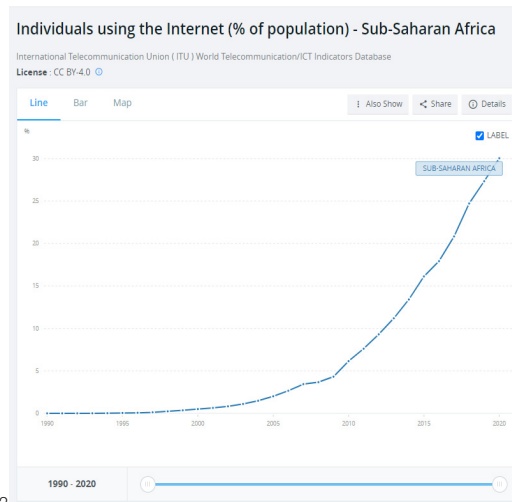
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Across Africa, young people are living digital lives that manifest in their growing uptake of digital resources and media for daily routines. Africa's media landscape is changing rapidly and has been characterized by increased media access among the youth (Silver & Johnson, 2018; Commey, 2020; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). The re-democratization and media liberalization wave of the 1990s expanded media availability significantly, bringing particularly radio and TV close to young people. But perhaps the biggest catalyst to the growth in access to, and use of media among young people across the continent has been the significant expansion in internet access and its affordance of access to new media. As shown in Table 1 and Fig. 1, internet access across the continent has expanded significantly over the past decade.

**Table 1: Household surveys with comparable data on internet access**

Country	Survey year	Share of population with internet access in their home (SSAPOV)	Share of population using the internet (ITU)
Benin	2015	2%	11%
Burkina Faso	2014	1%	9%
Burundi	2013	0%	1%
Cameroon	2014	5%	16%
Chad	2011	10%	2%
Comoros	2013	2%	7%
Congo, DR	2012	2%	2%
Ghana	2012	8%	11%
Kenya	2015	27%	17%
Madagascar	2012	1%	2%
Mauritania	2014	3%	11%
Mauritius	2017	56%	56%
Namibia	2015	15%	26%
Niger	2014	6%	1%
Rwanda	2016	17%	20%
Senegal	2011	4%	10%
Seychelles	2013	37%	50%
Sierra Leone	2011	1%	1%
South Africa	2010	7%	24%
Tanzania	2011	1%	3%
Uganda	2016	14%	22%

Source: SSAPOV database, Sub-Saharan Africa Team for Statistical Development, World Bank, Washington DC and International Telecommunication Union (ITU), World



- <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/518261552658319590/pdf/Internet-Access-in-Sub-Saharan-Africa.pdf>
- <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=ZG>

This, coupled with increased availability of mobile devices, means that more African youth can access media (Poushter, Bishop & Chwe, 2018; Ogechi, & Olaniyi, 2019; Mabweazara, 2021), leading to significant changes in the ways they consume, produce and share news and information in the fast-evolving media ecology (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). According to a 2020 Afrobarometer report, “regular reliance on digital sources for news has nearly doubled in just five years, with more than one-third of respondents across 18 countries surveyed reporting that they turn to the Internet or social media at least a few times a week for news” (Conroy-Krutz & Koné, 2020, p.1). It explains that “while radio remains the most popular mass medium on the continent due to its accessibility and reach, digital media are reshaping information landscapes, and consequently politics, in remarkable ways”.

African youth have been empowered by the evolving media and information ecology to move from mere consumers of information to creators and sharers (Bolat, 2019; Boakye, 2021). Social media platforms offer, perhaps, the most poignant evidence of this evolving young African who uses available media and information to exercise voice, power and citizenship (Honwana, 2013), and to explore economic opportunities. Digital media have opened up the spaces for young people across the continent to exercise voice by participating in discourses on varied issues of interest (Asogwa, 2015). Online, African youth actively engage in opinion-shaping conversations that have the power to change nations (Obisesan, 2022). Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok and several others have grown in popularity and impact because of the opportunities they offer for sharing information, exercising voice and connecting people (Adekunle & Kajumba, 2021; Obisesan, 2022).

Further, online, Africa’s youth have become a vociferous, trendsetting, trend following and trend participating voice (Bosch, 2017; Makananise & Madima, 2020; Obisesan, 2022). Records of Ghana’s 2021 #Fixthecountry, Nigeria’s 2020 #EndSARS, South Africa’s 2015 #FeesMustFall and #ZumaMustFall campaigns and several others across the continent demonstrate how the youth’s information access, use and sharing are changing in multi-layered ways (Bosch, 2017; Ampo, 2021; Henrietta, 2021; Sebeelo, 2021, Malik, 2022).

Beyond this, and the typical uses of new media for networking (Mäntymäki & Riemer, 2016; Oksa et al., 2021), entertainment and advocacy purposes, Africa’s youths are also leveraging digital platforms to create economic

opportunities. First, they are extending the frontiers of the characteristic trading culture of most African cities to the digital sphere. The youth have taken to social media platforms to launch a digital version of the 'buy and sell' culture in Africa's import-driven cities (Herzallah, Muñoz Leiva & Liébana-Cabanillas, 2022; Kim & Yang, 2016). This evolution seems to be being driven by increasing unemployment and underemployment, a counter to which it appears they decipher to be ecommerce, leveraging their online networks. Scholars have documented this evolution under the concept of 'side hustling' (see Muthoni, 2017).

Then, there is the growing trend towards mediapreneurship as young people take to content sharing platforms to create their own digital empires. Platforms such as YouTube which allows users to cultivate a following by sharing interesting content have opened up business opportunities as individuals can monetise their pages for advertising placement. This has significantly revised entry barriers to media ownership and made media particularly interesting to Africa's youth who, as it turns out, have a lot to share. Their digital media ventures cover content spanning varied subjects including entertainment, lifestyle and relationships, news, and social commentary. Examples of these digital mediapreneurs who have attained significant success include Nigeria's Mark Angel, Oga Sabinus and MrMacaroni; Ghana's Wode Maya and Kojo Sheldon and Uganda's Anne Kansiime.

While the foregoing are points to be celebrated about the affordances of digital media, particularly for African youths, several concerns have also emerged concerning the negative implications of the internet-rich information ecosystem. These include, for instance, misinformation, cyber bullying, cyber fraud, privacy breaches, mental ill-health arising out of consumption of unwholesome content, extremism among several others.

The juxtapositions of the good and bad sides of what digital media portend for young people raises questions about their capacity to thrive and take advantage of them while not putting themselves at undue risk or disadvantage. Thus, a growing scholarly interest explores how young people across the world are using and taking advantage of the evolving global media ecology and with what competencies. Questions have emerged as to their media and information literacy, the competencies needed to understand how media and media systems work, know how to access information and other

content, make critical assessments of such content and use them to create and share in an ethical manner (Metzger, Flanagin, Markov, Grossman & Bulger, 2015).

Over the past decade in particular, numerous texts have emerged on the subject, as scholars strive to make sense and share learnings from how young people's lives are evolving in digital spaces and their skills for manoeuvring the intricacies and vulnerabilities there. For instance, a quick key word search on Google Scholar for media and information literacy throws up over ten thousand scholarly articles published within the last decade. Besides these, UNESCO has also been instrumental in facilitating knowledge production on media and information literacy. Its contributions include a MIL handbook for journalists and journalism educators, Guidelines for broadcasters on promoting user-generated content and media and information literacy, Media and information literacy curriculum for teachers and Media and information literacy policy and strategy guidelines.

In spite of these efforts a cursory scoping search on different databases reveals that the subject has, for the most part, been studied in non-African contexts. What we know about MIL as regards its conceptualisation, manifestations, dynamics, effects and fault lines remains largely Euro, Western and Asia centric. One only has to look at the cases published in Wiley Blackwell International Encyclopaedia of Media Literacy, to see how missing a spot Africa is in the growing scholarship on media and information literacy. Scholarship examining issues of access, inequality, skills and competency gaps, growing misinformation and its implications for the continent's relatively low literacy populations remains rather sketchy. The received wisdom on media and information literacy, therefore, has little to tell scholars, policy makers and practitioners about its African truths and realities. Our knowledge is even more so limited when one considers the MIL knowledge, attitudes, practices, outcomes and effects among Africa's youth.

To draw attention to these knowledge gaps and engender more scholarly interest and productivity, the Department of Communication Studies of the University of Ghana organized the maiden edition of its Trends in Media and Communication Conference (TMCC) in October 2021. The Conference which had with funding support from DW Akademie and Penplusbytes, discussed issues pertaining to Africa's digital youth. Participants deliberated

on media and information literacy competencies and practices. The conference featured sessions on ethics, privacy and security, competencies and knowledge gaps, youth and media activism, youth digital media and democracy, access use and trends and education, youth and digital media.

Arising out of this conference is this special issue titled *Africa's digital youth and media and information literacy competencies and practices*. This special issue was designed to bring together some of the papers presented in the conference which shared latest insights on the digital lives of African youth as regards their activities online and the skills with which they navigate and mitigates threats and challenges inherent. Youths and the digital are evolving rapidly, and this special issue helps to shed light on a range of subjects and methodological approaches.

A total of four articles are included in this special issue. It opens with Epepe's contribution from Nigeria titled "analysis of ethical concerns in social media use among youth in Nigeria". The author examines tweets on the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria in 2020 for evidence of how young people navigate ethical challenges in sharing information to their online networks. The findings point to a mix of ethical and unethical behaviour, calling attention to the need for media literacy promotion and education.

Chenganna's contribution from Mauritius examines young people's media consumption patterns during the heat of the Covid-19 pandemic. Exploring what happens beyond rational use on information from online sources, the paper poses the question: 'can an 'affective turn' provide insight into youth incidental news media consumption during the Covid-19 pandemic?'. It then delves into and considers consumption of incidental news as social experience that is liminal.

Next, there is Dzandza Ocloo, Ayisi and Oye who explore MIL opportunities in Senior High Schools in Ghana using a demand and supply sides perspective. The authors argue that as digital technologies find their way into young people's lives, teachers and students are forced to innovate MIL infusion into teaching and learning in the absence of deliberate curriculum provisions. Their exploration of the opportunities that lie outside school curriculum finds that teachers' inventiveness and extra-curricular activities are key pathways to MIL training in the school system.

The special issue concludes with Dadzie and Adjotor's analysis of the links between young people's social media competence and literacy and their ethical uses of social media. The author reports that media literacy skills among the youth in Ghana is generally high but that such skills do not correspond to ethical social media use behaviour.

### **About the Guest Editors**

Janet Kwami's academic interests include digital and social media, international communication, media studies, women and gender studies, ICT4D, communication for social change, media in Africa and research methods. Her research focuses on the intersections of gender, information and communication technologies and socio-economic development as well as social inequity, and the appropriation, use and impact of digital technologies in the global South.

Abena Animwaa Yeboah-Banin is a senior lecturer at the Department of Communication Studies, University of Ghana. Her academic interests lie in brands, consumers and audiences and the connections between them. She also has interests in media and gender and youth digital literacy.

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