Navigating the Digital Landscape: Charting the Course of Digital Citizenship in Ghana

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Introduction

Data available indicates that Ghana's population as of January 2023 stood at approximately 34 million, with about 68% of the population being active users of the internet. The country also boasts of approximately 8.8 million social media users – majority of whom are young people. This number is expected to rise significantly in the coming years. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter (now X), which are leading the digital charge in the country are used on a daily basis for a number of activities including civic engagement, networking, information and news sharing, entertainment and leisure purposes, professional and work-related networking, opinion sharing and discussions, and many others.

From a civic tech perspective, this blog post focuses on how Ghanaians are harnessing the power of the digital space to be active citizens. It seeks to highlight how citizens are exercising their agency to actively participate in the open society fashioned by digital technologies and media for civic ends. It therefore sheds light on digital citizenship and how it is shaping civic action in Ghana.

Meaning of Digital Citizenship

Notwithstanding its different meanings and applications, digital citizenship can be simply understood as the use of digital technologies such as mobile communication devices, the internet, and social media to actively engage in civic activities. Anyone who engages regularly and effectively in social, economic, and political interactions online can therefore be described as a digital citizen. To become a digital citizen, one needs to get involved actively in the use of digital tools and engage online to fulfill civic duties and social responsibilities. Digital citizenship is thus agency-based and has civic or political participation, social inclusion, and even economic prospects as some of its ends – not as ends-in-themselves though. It is often exercised to voice opinions, influence decision-making, make claims to rights, and hold governments accountable.

The Course of Digital Citizenship in Ghana

Digital citizenship can be exercised in diverse ways and may have different contextual nuances. In Ghana, the actions of citizens in charting the course of digital citizenship have become pronounced. The most visibly common ways Ghana's digital citizens are actively participating in civic life and constructively contributing to social well-being include the following:

1. **Citizen journalism**

In Ghana, it is common to find ordinary citizens – not career journalists – using smartphones to report on issues and share stories about various developments around them with the use of digital and social media platforms. Until his demise, Macho Kaaka, for instance, was deliberate in the use of his Facebook page to report the deplorable state of affairs of his community, Ejura – focusing on a range of issues such as bad road network and poor sanitation facilities among other abandoned development projects. It also took citizens making use of X to report the Marwako food poisoning case as well as the coagulated evaporated milk products of Nestle which drew the attention of the wider public and the Food and Drugs Authority to act. Such active efforts of ordinary Ghanaians to capture incidents and disseminate information, especially on social media about education, sanitation, health, road safety, and security among other issues affecting their communities have complemented traditional journalism in bringing wider public attention to issues in real-time and from the hinterlands. This helps to elevate local issues and promote social inclusion in news coverage and reportage.

2. **Digital protest and activism**

Many Ghanaians also resort to online spaces to raise their voices and draw the attention of political leaders and public office holders in general to issues bordering around human rights, corruption, constitutional review, transparency, accountability, cost and standard of living issues among others. #FixTheCountry, for instance, which has positioned itself to reshape youth activism and protest culture in Ghana relies heavily on social media platforms, most especially X to mobilize citizens to call out government officials and state institutions to fix problems such as the deteriorating Accra-Tema Motorway, to address youth unemployment, and a plethora of issues. Social media protests have also been waged in recent times against perceived acts of injustice such as the taxing of sanitary pads and alleged persecution of activists. This active expression of digital citizenship in the country is immensely helping citizens to aggregate their voices with the enhanced speed and scale of social media to engage in hashtag campaigns. Such campaigns are mostly geared towards exerting pressure on Ghanaian duty-bearers and officialdom to expedite action on the plights and concerns of citizens.

3. Political engagement and policy discussion

Social media is often awash with lots of comments especially from individuals who pitch camp with the major political parties in the country. These individuals comment on anything and everything with their political lenses on. Such posts engender engagements and reactions that shape political commentary in the country including debates on the "bread and butter" issues citizens expect politicians to address. Apart from the usual politicking, Ghana's digital citizens also use social media platforms to debate, scrutinize, and draw critical attention to public policy issues, especially in the broad areas of governance and economic management. Notable civil society actors like Bright Simons and Professor Stephen Kwaku Asare exercise this strand of digital citizenship devoid of partisanship to keep citizens engaged, informed, and involved in public interest and accountability matters. Among the issues which have been vociferously debated on Facebook and X by Ghanaians include the suspension of road toll payments, the passage of the controversial E-levy, the Auditor General's reports, and the rulings of the Supreme Court on political cases. These engagements of interactive communication promote civic participation, project the opinions of citizens, and can enable political leaders to garner public opinion in governance and policy decision-making.

4. Digital philanthropy

Another visible mode by which Ghanaians express their digital citizenship is through the organization of and participation in crowdfunding campaigns online for good social and civic causes. The stories of individuals and communities with diverse needs as shared by some citizens and organizations on their social media platforms help rally support for such causes. Citizens such as Nana Tea, and Wendy Boatemaa among others use their social media pages particularly on Facebook to mobilize financial support for good social causes such as medical support, educational sponsorship, rehabilitation of addicts, and psychiatric patients among other needs. Another classic instance is Yen Somu Bi – a giving-for-change initiative of Penplusbytes and Star Ghana Foundation which provides a digital platform for non-governmental organizations and citizens alike to raise funds for their respective social projects. Altogether, these digital acts and initiatives of philanthropy are making Ghanaians responsive in bringing aid, relief, and assistance to people and communities who find themselves in situations of need.

Conclusion

Digital citizenship is indeed contributing to Ghana's democracy. It is helping to expand civic spaces beyond the usual face-to-face events; enhancing access to information; promoting civic engagement and protecting democratic values. The examples cited above point to one thing: Ghanaians are becoming active digital citizens, not spectators; a development that apparently resonates with President Nana Akufo-Addo's call for active citizenship in his first inaugural address.

Notwithstanding the contributions Ghana's digital citizens are actively making towards the social change of their communities and the nation, it is important to take cognizance of the costs digital citizenship can entail including risks such as fraud, bullying, misinformation, and disinformation which digital technologies and media pose to civic life online in Ghana. In this regard, it is necessary to address such emerging threats and vulnerability issues and help make the digital space resilient for safe and active civic participation.

To ultimately enhance digital citizenship in the country, however, the Five A's of digital access namely issues of availability, affordability, awareness, abilities, and agency with respect to digital technologies and media have to be addressed at both state and individual citizen levels.