

Enhance African mobile skills or miss the global digital citizenship wave

 By Leigh Andrews

12 Nov 2014

There's a swelling global wave of participatory citizenship. While it's definitely the way forward and enhanced by mobile, there are unique challenges to be faced in Africa...

On Friday, 6 November, I attended the closing day of the [@GSMA Mobile360 series Africa](#) held at the Clocktower. It kicked off with a show reel stating the following:

“ RT [@GSMA @MobileWorldLive](#): Half of the world's population will be on [#mobile](#) internet by 2020 [#mobile360 #Africa](#) <http://t.co/JyglPMAoe7> - Souktel Mobile (@souktel) [November 7, 2014](#) ”

Added to this, mobile connects five new people every second, with mobile currently accounting for 40% of YouTube's time spent watching. Brendan Smith, VP of Professional Services at Vital Wave, used this as an entry point to welcome attendees and spoke of the intricate definition of global citizenship, posing the question of what it actually means to the opening panel. The panel comprised Steve Vosloo of Pearson SA, Praekelt Group's Simon de Haan and Levi Goertz of VOTO Mobile.

Vosloo said he started thinking of digital citizenry at a higher level by accessing [Wikipedia](#), which sums up a [digital citizen](#) as a person using IT to participate with their community and government. This is increasingly enabled by mobile technology, with the benefit of engagement and empowerment, which in turn hints at rights and responsibilities. It implies increased access to information and services, and the ability to act upon the information, as it is meaningless without a voice, making it "simply not good enough," to provide access if people aren't empowered to use it. This means citizens also have the responsibility to use this information and make their voices heard wisely... But it goes even further, as Vosloo says that allowing people to phone in and report potholes and report broken street lights is meaningless if government does nothing with this information to act on it and close the feedback loop.

Bring participatory citizenship to those who will benefit most from it

De Haan spoke next on the participatory citizenship aspect of digital citizenry, pointing out that those who need it most are often the furthest removed from it. De Haan said it's important to use the lowest common-denominator channels like USSD and SMS to share this information, to make it more inclusive and allow more citizens to take action. He shared an example of [Praekelt MomConnect](#), where women can register to receive information on pregnancy and child development through USSD, and also rate the service from clinics and provide feedback via SMS through the programme.

“ [#PraekeltGroup](#): “ [#MomConnect](#) program has reached 1 million registered mothers ” - Success story in [#mHealth](#). [#Mobile360](#) Africa- Max Bayen (@MaxBayen) [November 7, 2014](#) ”

This works as a loudspeaker to create a powerful voice that effectively closes the loop as citizens provide information that is actually listened to and acted on, as the information shared has the ability to improve life for everyone, everywhere.

De Haan also mentioned [Internet.org](#), which is working to provide internet access to all. It focuses on topical global grass root issues, such as Ebola awareness and the safety of girls, but these are seen as just a foundation pieces to be built on. He added that the universal declaration of human rights says we all have the right to receive any information without barriers, which is essential to true citizens improving their lives and those of others around them. When more is delivered on this, predicts De Haan, it will actively move entire societies forward.

Goertz built on this idea by saying it is actually about using citizens' voice to influence the quality of services they receive. He also identified an interesting Africa-specific problem in Ghana - the population has high mobile access but low literacy levels - something for market researchers to think about.

Three ways to make education more mobile

Next, Smith asked the panel what is actually possible in terms of enhancing education through mobile. Vosloo mentioned three key areas of mobile enhancement of education. First and foremost is the management of educational resources, where data is collected on existing infrastructure and attendance and fed back into the system. This speeds up the capture and cuts down on analysis time, resulting in better and faster decision making. But Vosloo says it's not just up to administrators to do so as students, teachers and parents can give their input on what works and what doesn't.

Second, according to Vosloo, is increased transparency or visibility in data collection on students and teachers throughout a career. Moving away from paper-based methods and having this information accessible throughout a career of lifelong learning would be a powerful tool on par with the idea of open medical records. This empowers people as well as government to make better decisions on educational resource allocation based on actual, documented learning habits.

Vosloo's third point was that through ICT advancements, education is more in tune with the actual realities on the ground with online learning opportunities. But he says that access to online communities for peer-to-peer learning needs to work in tune with face-to-face methods, so this shouldn't be replaced as lots is actually lost in translation.

Mobile shouldn't supersede traditional face-to-face just yet...

De Haan added that mobile education methods may also mean people learn better, such as kids outside a school-setting engaging with maths through mobile doing better as they feel more comfortable engaging on handsets than with traditional pen and paper.

Goertz then raised the question of whether people actually have the skills to use the mobile tools at their disposal to participate, and built on De Haan's point that we still need face-to-face interaction to explain the full possibilities at hand. Vosloo then spoke of the need for an Africa-friendly Massive Open Online Courses or MOOCs. He says at the moment, people who already have advanced degrees are often the ones to sign up for online courses so we need to adapt it to be friendly to first-time users, and Africa is ideal for this as it is often difficult to self-study with traditional paper-based courses.



L to R Brendan Smith of Vital Wave, Steve Vosloo of Pearson SA, Praekelt Group's Simon de Haan and Levi Goertz of VOTO Mobile.

Next, De Haan pointed out that there is a big gap in understanding mobile. He says not to assume someone with a smartphone understands the device, as many with a handful of apps have no understanding of how it appeared on their handset in the first place. We therefore need to help all people, even those we think have a good understanding of mobile, internet and connectivity, to transition to understand the full possibilities. It's an interesting challenge for the future.

African governments' responsibility when it comes to enhancing digital citizens' lives

Moving on to the topic of inclusion, it's usually understood that the tech-savvy youth are early adopters who go after digital, but we need to do more to promote the benefits of mobile across all sectors of society as handset prices drop and connectivity goes on the rise. De Haan says among South Africa's top mobile communication tools are USSD and SMS, and that marketers and communicators need to make sure they use a handset that is representative of their target audience. He adds that getting detailed feedback from specific users is harder to ignore as it becomes personal and gives government actual names and real people, not just numbers.

De Haan also says government needs to commit more to open data and to think about how this information is useful to its citizens. More specifically, he says government needs to change its method of communication, as it's no good releasing a PDF or Excel file that's not accessible on an entry-level handset. Goertz stepped in to say that it's not all a top-level fault though, as some African governments do actually want to provide this level of information, but need help sharing it in an accessible way.

Pull and push of information to enhance citizen participation and the gatekeeper problem

The floor was then opened to questions from the audience on how to handle shared phones or single devices that serve a family or even community, in some cases. Goertz says this can be push-based and scheduled, so that the specific people using the handset know when to check for relevant information. It can also be pull-based if the person chooses when they access the handset and what they do with the information.

De Haan added that if a single handset serves as a communication device for numerous people, getting them to dial a USSD code means they're specifically pulling the information they want, so it's less of a problem as the information doesn't fall into the wrong hands. What is a problem is if the phone owner acts as a gatekeeper for all the information received on the handset for a number of people.



For example, if you're sending out specific content on girl empowerment to motivate them to stay in school but the handset gatekeeper is actively working against this, such as a parent who would rather have her daughter start working than finish her schooling, there's a chance they will delete the message and not pass on the information. Clearly, more research is needed into influencing the gatekeepers too,

to work around this problem.

In closing, De Haan said that certain basic life skills definitely should be available on mobiles, which brings in the responsibility of mobile network operators. In the next few years, Vosloo says government and the department of education need to open up the educational data they already collect to those who can use it at an aggregate level, for feedback to enhance services.

Ultimately, if five years from now we're no longer talking about digital citizenship we will have been successful and no longer confusing the means with the ends.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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