

Do we need a digital detox?

Issued by [Dentsu](#)

14 May 2019

Digital is booming (and showing no signs of slowing down) in Africa, so is the global trend towards "detoxing" from technology and social media relevant to us in sub-Saharan Africa? Caroline Ndirangu, Business Unit Head at [iProspect Kenya](#), weighs in.



Before we dive in, let's look at some recent numbers on digital in Africa: according to the 2019 [We Are Social digital report](#), internet penetration in Africa is on the rise annually, especially via mobile. We have seen an increase of 10% in the number of Kenyans with access to digital so far in 2019 compared to 2018, with the largest numbers on social media. Other African countries show similar growth.

The good

There's no denying that digital has done amazing things for African countries. Having information available at our fingertips has led to ground-breaking developments, especially in the financial sector. For example, [M-Pesa](#), the mobile banking system started in Kenya by Vodacom unit Safaricom, allows Kenyans to do all their banking transactions on a never-seen-before scale, and is the subject of a case study at Harvard University. (It has also been extended to other countries, including Tanzania, Lesotho, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo.)

In 2016, Portland Communications' study on [How Africa Tweets](#) found that Africa outdoes the US and UK in using Twitter for political conversations. Here in Kenya, a renowned chief uses Twitter to disseminate all of his village communications. Social media is fundamentally reshaping how citizens communicate and how brands and campaigners (and village chiefs) get their messages across.

The bad

At the same time, social-media platforms have become a haven for fake news and even faker lifestyles. Every day on social feeds, there is talk from young Africans on taking a break from social media to focus on other things. According to 2017 [Geopoll research carried out in Kenya](#), fake news and "fake lives" were cited as the two main reasons people would choose to take a break from social media.

Local papers are packed with articles about our obsession with social media and why taking a break from it is healthy. In a January 2019 article on the [Daily Nation](#) news website, it was reported that psychologists and psychiatrists are starting to

look at social media as an addiction like any other, because of its effects. They caution that people should take breaks from social media when they need to distance themselves from anything that will make them feel worse about their personal situations.

Dreaming of a tech-free getaway?

So, where do you go for a complete digital detox? The top 20 Google results for “digital detox” in Africa are all from travel companies offering a tech-free vacation. They’ve clearly invested a lot in SEO, so this must be bringing in numbers for them...

As is becoming increasingly popular in Europe (Norwegian students have even devised an app called [Hold](#) that rewards people for time spent not using their phones), Kenya boasts establishments, such as [Baobox](#) in Nairobi, offering digital-free experiences. The idea is to eat and play games with friends and socialise away from screens. Within months, Baobox became the local place to be, which suggests this is trend that’s catching on quickly in our part of the world. (Although, photos are still taken by guests at these establishments and then posted as soon as the bill is paid... because what’s an experience if it’s not on Instagram?)

The verdict? Disruption without interruption

Kids in France might no longer be able to use their cellphones at school (mobile devices have been banned for secondary school pupils), but here at home, social media is still “new news” and the trend towards taking a break from tech is not as strong.

Having said that, as African consumers continue to become more digitally savvy, they will become more particular about what they choose to do on social-media platforms. The brands that will win in these ever-changing digital times are those that rethink how they distribute their content. They will ideally help people connect to each other more in real life, and will want to appear to be part of their audience’s digital life, rather than an interruption to it.

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