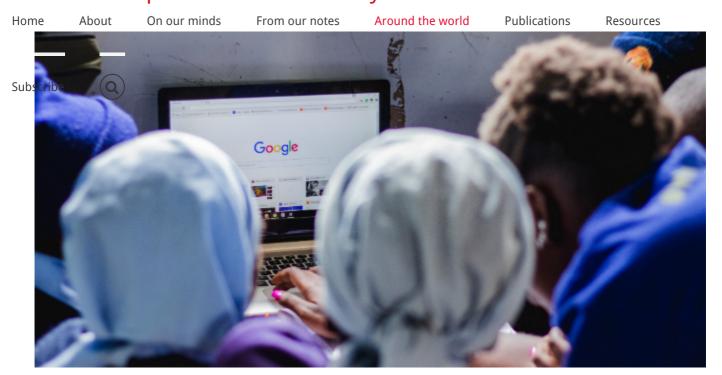# Online child protection in rural Kenya

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Caleb Ndaka is a project lead in Kenya, working for Kids Comp Camp. As Kenya focuses on initiatives to bring billions more online, Caleb asks: how can we prepare for child protection online and also make use of the learning opportunities it will bring? Kids Comp-Camp is an organisation which seeks to reach out to children aged 8–15 in marginalised communities, to equip them with computing skills. Since it was set up in 2014, it has engaged more than 6,300 children, and for 90%, this was their first time using a computer. [Header image: Copyright Kids Comp Camp, used with permission]

During the Internet Governance Forum 2016 in Guadalajara, Mexico, I keenly followed a discussion on child online protection. As I took part in the different seminars and workshops, I kept asking myself, is this a real problem in my community? Or it is just another 'first world' problem?

Children online in Kenya

In terms of mobile and internet penetration in Africa, Kenya is leading. According to the Communications Authority of Kenya, mobile penetration now stands at 88%, while internet penetration is at 74% – 9 out of 10 Kenyans have a mobile device and 7 out of 10 can access the internet. However, these statistics don't necessarily reflect the 'rural–urban' digital divide, as they are based on subscriptions and not unique users. The digital divide could be even greater, based on what the regulator terms 'multiple sim card' users, the increasing number of individuals with multiple devices , and internet access driven by smartphone penetration, which is unequally distributed. Kenya's leading telecommunications company, Safaricom, has 65% of the market share, but only 15% of its subscribers have smartphones – the majority still have limited or no access to the internet. While ownership of multiple sim cards, multiple devices and smartphones all favour the urban population due to availability and ability to purchase, more than 70% of Kenya's population live in rural areas.

The digital divide is even bigger regarding children accessing the internet, as it is device-based, and children in Kenya don't own devices. A parent or teacher owning a device doesn't necessarily

mean that the children can or do access the internet, and most schools have neither devices nor internet connection.

According to Kids Comp Camp data collected between 2014 and 2016, less than 2% of the 6,300 children had accessed the internet, although this it set to change in urban settings and among teenagers. According to a survey by Youth Alive Kenya, commissioned by UNICEF in 2013 about the use of digital media among adolescents in Kenya, 74% aged 12–17 access mobile phones and 42% access the internet at least twice a week.

The Kenyan government is in the process of distributing 1.2 million devices to *all* public primary schools in Kenya (22,000) to support its Digital Literacy Program (dubbed 'digischools'). Network connection will also be provided, with Safaricom promising to provide free internet to support the project. The target was that by December 2016, 1.2 million devices should have been distributed through the Sh17 billion project (this deadline was extended to March 2017).

Protecting children in Kenya online

The delay in implementing the Data Protection Bill 2013 is of concern, and could be one of the loopholes that might expose children to data protection breaches. It is still stuck between Parliament and the Attorney General's office. Once law, it will protect the right of every person not to have 'information relating to their family or private affairs unnecessarily required or revealed', and 'the privacy of their communications infringed.' Yet it doesn't explicitly address the protection of data stored in the 'cloud', with many cloud repository servers based outside Kenya. The Kenya Information and Communications Act currently gives mandate to the Communications Authority to ensure all consumers, including children, are protected.

In 2015, through a campaign called 'Be the Cop', the Communications Authority sought to provide consumers, especially children and young people, with information and skills to practice safe internet use, to minimise their exposure to risks, preventing them being victims of online crime and fraud. Google Kenya also launched a children online safety initiative to promote the responsible and positive use of the internet among young learners. While these are good steps in the right direction, much more needs to be done, especially among the 'critical mass' of children living in rural and marginalised communities in Africa, who are the majority, yet the least protected.

Another concern is the level of digital media literacy among Kenyan parents and teachers. The majority are simply not interested in what devices can do beyond making calls and texting. Nine out of every 10 adults have a mobile money service known as 'M-PESA', yet in one of the schools with 12 teachers, only three had the service. The nine teachers depend on the local shop attendant to send and receive money on their phones. This means the parent/teacher support system is weak, leaving to chance children's unguided and unprotected exploration on devices on their own, which could lead to them being exposed to harmful content.

In 2015, the Kenyan government switched off analogue TV to digital transmission. This has led to more variety provided by new stations and local languages now being televised, subsequently significantly increasing 'screen time', especially for children with working-class parents. To ensure content control, the government is now working on regulation to ensure mandatory inclusion of 40% (9.6 hours) of local content. 'The new laws are meant to protect children from programming content that has undesirable elements like nudity, strong language and violence, especially during the watershed period which runs from 5am to 10pm', said the Communications Authority.

Opportunities and threats

Many still hold the view that the internet is a 'thing' of the West, that it's only for adults, that it's a waste of time, or generally, 'nothing good can come out of devices'. For them, learning comes only via books and teachers. The struggle has now shifted from protecting children online to protecting

them from the internet. This is a disservice to children's online presence and participation, especially for their learning opportunities.

Local communities, institutions (schools, churches, etc) and local opinion leaders/community mobilisers need to be engaged to create awareness about children's online safety. They cannot offer meaningful services if they don't have good policy backing and empowered local capacities. Children's online protection is a reality in Kenya, as a result of the many initiatives trying to bring billions more online. The big question is, how do we get ready for this, how do we provide our children with the safety and opportunities to take advantage of it?

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