

HOW CAN CONSUMERS INTERNATIONAL CREATE POSITIVE CHANGE FOR CONSUMERS IN THE DIGITAL WORLD?

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, PARADIGM INITIATIVE 'GBENGA SESAN



Paradigm Initiative is a social enterprise that builds an ICT-enabled support system and advocates digital rights in order to improve livelihoods for under-served youth

'Gbenga Sesan is the Executive Director of Paradigm Initiative. Originally trained as an Electronic & Electrical Engineer at Obafemi Awolowo University, 'Gbenga completed Executive Education programs at Lagos Business School, New York Group for Technology Transfer, Oxford University, Harvard University, Stanford University, Santa Clara University and University of the Pacific. His consulting experience includes assignments completed for Microsoft, Harvard University and United Nations agencies, among others, in over 30 countries.

A Schwab Foundation Social Entrepreneur of the Year (2014) and former member of the United Nations Committee of eLeaders on Youth and ICT, he is a Fellow at several high-profile institutions. 'Gbenga was listed by CNN as one of the Top 10 African Tech Voices on Twitter and by Ventures Africa as one of 40 African Legends Under 40.

If anyone got a dollar each time someone said, “technology has changed everything” or “the future is digital,” they would be billionaires by now. For producers and consumers, improvements are reported – and experienced – daily. There is also an opportunity for exposure to options, thanks to connected mobile devices that are now available to 66% of the world’s population¹. Beyond their place in statistics, are consumers better today, in the digital age, given the many opportunities for improvement though? Beyond being the target of advertising, how can consumers and organisations that support their interest, get a better deal in the digital world? In 2018 alone, Statista² projects that \$269.85B will be spent wooing consumers; will they – we – get commensurate benefits?

Let me start with this: we must kill assumptions. In the years preceding the arrival of mobile phones in Nigeria, a policymaker was quoted as saying that “telephones are not for the poor” and though he has since accused the media of misquoting his original “poor people don’t own phones” statement, it is still as bad. One of the things that we must change in the digital world is this premise that has defined many consumer experiences. When we assume that the “poor” either cannot pay, or that they need a different type of experience that relives the “half a loaf is better than none” mantra, we limit the opportunity for that now-connected consumer to decide what is useful and then prioritise towards the adoption of products or services.

Less than two decades later, Nigeria now has more than 142 million mobile phones³, and even if multiple device ownership is considered, the final adoption numbers defeat the assumption that “poor people don’t own phones”. Almost 95 million of these mobile phones are connected to the internet and these consumers, in Nigeria and beyond, are increasingly connected to exposure opportunities that have led to acquired sophistication – and introduced new opportunities for engagement between consumers, producers and anyone else in the product ecosystem. For example, social media rants are the new consumer feedback, and this provides a unique opportunity for feedback monitoring even before the consumer goes through the perceived (or real) stress of contacting support.

Given these opportunities, we must go ahead to remove the silent “but” after the popular phrase, “consumer – or customer – is king.” The but may be replaced by because, giving reasons why consumer experience must become better in a digital world. For example, a consumer that trusts a service because the provider will not violate their digital rights is likely to add more value to the company’s bottom-line than another customer who only remains an advert target. The famous story of the lone passenger of

a Japanese train station is a great example of consumer consciousness by a service provider: a defunct train station was kept open so a teenage girl could commute to school daily⁴. Even though she has now graduated and the station is finally closed, the station remains an example that many consumers will use as benchmark for services they subscribe to.

The equivalent of the Japanese train station in the digital world would be a company that insists on protecting the rights of its consumers even when it does not appear to make sense at first. On the surface, the defunct train station had no business being in business but the goodwill generated from what is now seen as an act of kindness will help the parent company. When next a government requests that a service provider should either deny a contractual service – as has been the case in countries that have experienced digital rights violations such as internet shutdowns – the companies should not take the easy road. Scenarios vary from complex to very complex but service providers should not easily give up on consumers; they must look for what could be complex solutions that serve as many interests, with as little negative impact, as possible.



**BEYOND BEING
THE TARGET OF
ADVERTISING, HOW CAN
CONSUMERS AND
ORGANISATIONS THAT SUPPORT
THEIR INTEREST, GET A
BETTER DEAL IN THE
DIGITAL WORLD?**

Consumers International’s work, with members and partners around the world, can help create positive change for consumers in the digital world. One of such positive changes is around digital rights. Given the role played by telecommunications companies in countries where citizens are denied access to the internet, and building on its work to “ensure consumers are treated safely, fairly and honestly,” Consumers International could

1 ‘Digital in 2017: Global Overview’, Simon Kemp, We are Social, 24/01/17

2 Statista, Digital Advertising Spending Worldwide from 2015 to 2020, <https://wearesocial.com/special-reports/digital-in-2017-global-overview>

3 Nigeria Communications Commission, Monthly Subscriber Data, <https://ncc.gov.ng/stakeholder/statistics-reports/subscriber-data>

4 ‘A Bittersweet Ending for a Japanese Train Station and Its Lone Passenger’, Linda Poon, CityLab, March 28/03/16

work with the mobile sector to build the case for the respect of digital rights and how it is great for the bottom-line. Unfortunately, the countries experiencing the worst digital rights violations are also those on the disadvantaged end of the digital divide – a gulf that is actually deepening. The 2017 edition of the State of Broadband report features ITU estimates showing that “internet penetration in the developing world is projected to reach 41.3% by the end of 2017, while internet user penetration is projected to reach only 17.5% in Least Developed Countries in 2017.”⁵

In the 2017 edition of the Digital Rights in Africa report featuring 21 African nations, Paradigm Initiative discussed the trend of network disruptions – including outright internet shutdowns – and recommends that, given the likelihood of the repeat of 2016 and 2017 violations because of elections being held in various countries in 2018, “a viable route to at least reduce the incidents of internet shutdowns in Africa, and stemming digital rights abuses, may be through partnership with internet businesses. Telcos, ISPs, social networking platforms, content producers and all other internet businesses must take on a greater and more visible role if governments in Africa are to take digital rights seriously.”⁶

For consumers in countries that need more access, this new trend of consumer rights violations poses a threat that must be urgently addressed by stakeholders – businesses, government, private sector and international organisations.

THE COUNTRIES EXPERIENCING THE WORST DIGITAL RIGHTS VIOLATIONS ARE THOSE ON THE DISADVANTAGED END OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE – A GULF THAT IS ACTUALLY DEEPENING



5 Broadband Commission, 'The State of Broadband 2017: Broadband Catalyzing Sustainable Development', 2017

6 Paradigm Initiative, 'Digital Rights in Africa Report 2017: 'Good for Business: Why Private Sector Must Work With Citizens, Civil Society for Digital Rights', 2017.