


Analysing a Transnational Advocacy Network of Internet Data Affordability in Malawi

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ABSTRACT

This paper analysed how advocacy groups and consumers influenced government, telecommunications regulators, and mobile network operators to reduce the cost of internet data. The study used a case of Malawi as an example of a low-income country with high cost of internet. Transnational advocacy network theory was used to analyse secondary data from online databases, websites of regulatory organisations, online news, and social media posts. The findings showed that transnational advocacy network drew members from international, regional and local organisations. Consumers also participated in the transnational advocacy network. Information sharing was crucial in highlighting the high cost of internet data in the country. Local network actors used information, symbolic, leverage, and accountability politics to persuade government agencies, the telecommunications regulators, and mobile network operators to reduce the cost of internet data. The study provides insights into the understanding of issues related to internet data affordability in the context of a developing country.

KEYWORDS

Consumers, Data Affordability, Data Bundle, Internet Data, Malawi, Transnational Advocacy Network

1. INTRODUCTION

About 66% of the world's population have access to the internet (ITU, 2022). In developing countries, some consumers access internet using mobile devices (e.g. smartphones, tablets) because mobile devices are easy to use and may not require electricity in their households. The majority of consumers use internet data packages for mobile devices to communicate, search or share information and access online services (Inegbedion, 2020; Moyo & Munoriyarwa, 2021; Stork, Esselaar & Chair, 2017). Malawi is an example of a developing country in Africa where internet access is problematic and universal access to the internet is yet to be achieved. The country has an internet teledensity of 9.9% leaving a large part of the population not connected to the internet and unable to access online services (ITU, 2022). One of the inhibiting factors of internet access is affordability (del Portillo, Eiskowitz, Crawley & Cameron, 2021). In this context, affordability is the ability of individuals or households to pay for internet services in relation to their disposable income (Goggin, 2014). Recent media reports indicate that Malawi is among countries in Africa with high cost of internet data (UK Cable, 2022).

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International organisations, non-government organisations, government departments, private sector organisations and internet users in Malawi engage in dialogue and exchange regarding affordability of internet data. While the debates on internet affordability have become popular among internet users, there are few but growing academic studies mention in passing the phenomenon (e.g. Banda, 2022; Bichler, 2010; Chaputula, 2012; Makoza, 2017). To the knowledge of the author, studies on how dialogue and exchanges among organisations and consumers influence government strategies on reduction of the cost of internet data in Malawi are missing in literature. Against this discussion, this study aims to address part of this knowledge gap. The study was guided by the research question:

- *How does dialogue and exchanges among organisations and consumers influence government strategies on cost of internet data to achieve affordability?*

To answer this question, the study used Transnational advocacy networks theory (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). The theory was useful in understanding the composition of networks, approaches used to exchange of information and different types of political strategies that stakeholders used to influence government strategies and regulations on internet affordability (Goggin, 2014; Makoza & Chigona, 2016; Mansell, 2010). This was important so that lessons could be learnt, and unresolved issues brought to the attention of stakeholders e.g. policymakers, telecommunications regulators, academics, services providers and consumers.

The rest of the paper is presented as follows. Section 2 summarises the background of the study. Section 3 discusses the theory guiding the study. Section 4 presents research methodology used in the study. Section 5 summarises research findings. Section 6 discusses the research findings followed by conclusions drawn from the study.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Internet has become the primary means of interaction and sharing information among people in many societies across the globe. The internet offers benefits that can be viewed from demand and supply perspectives (Gillwald & Mothobi, 2019; Myovella, Karacuka, & Haucap, 2020). On the supply side, the internet is used in supporting business processes and activities of organisations to achieve better performance, productivity, efficiency in meeting the needs of customers. Public organisations are also using the internet to support efficient and effective public services delivery (Adam, 2020; Dias, 2020). On the demand side, individuals are also using internet in their day to day activities for convenience, low-cost in accessing products or services and improving their well-being. At national level, internet is perceived to be a driver of productivity, innovation in the economic sectors, facilitating international trade through digital networks, supporting economic growth and reduce poverty (Abeliansky, Hilbert, 2017; Myovella, Karacuka, & Haucap, 2020).

Researchers have argued that the prevalence and integration of internet in many areas of activities of individuals and communities signifies human rights. In other words, internet access has become a new human right (De Hert & Kloza, 2012). The United Nations Human Rights Council declared the internet as a human right in 2012 (Barrios, 2019). Internet as a human right promotes (a) individuals to access the internet (b) access to information (c) freedom of expression and opinion (d) individuals to be protected when accessing the internet (Barrios, 2019). African countries supported the declaration of internet as a human right through ratification of Resolution 362 of the Africa Commission of Human and Peoples Rights (e.g. right to freedom of information and expression on the internet in Africa) (Marchant & Stremlau, 2020). While African governments have set priority on providing internet access to promote human rights of their citizens, there are many challenges inhibiting internet adoption and access (Bergere, 2020; Gillwald & Mothobi, 2019). The cost of internet is one of the

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