

In disguise, foreigners infiltrated our land, seemingly harmless at first. We traded with them, and the exchange seemed fair and profitable to our forefathers. However, soon enough, the strongest of our men were taken, and the finest of our minerals followed. Can colonialism revisit our land? Perhaps it already has, wearing a different mask—digital colonialism, unnoticed by our ignorance. Today, countless Ghanaians rely on digital platforms for transactions, e-health services, entertainment, and more. Each activity leaves behind digital footprints, or data. Yet, amidst this digital proliferation, one critical question remains unasked: Who truly owns and controls our data?

In 2012, the Ghanaian government passed the Data Protection Act, outlining the rights and responsibilities concerning data protection. However, its enforcement has been ineffective, and public awareness remains alarmingly low. Despite Ghana's increasing digital dependence, much of our data is stored and managed abroad. In 2013, Edward Snowden exposed the extent to which the US government had been monitoring phone conversations of 35 world leaders, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel. If such actions could occur to a global power, how much more vulnerable is Ghana, where most of our data is not even managed domestically?

As internet usage has risen, so too has the need for data centers to manage the increasing traffic. The United States has led this trend, investing heavily in its “Data Center Alley” in Northern Virginia. This has underscored the importance of localized data infrastructure in maintaining data sovereignty—the principle that data should be subject to the laws and governance of the country where it is collected and stored. In Ghana, however, the rapid pace of digitalization has outpaced the development of necessary data infrastructure. As a result, we are left with no choice but to rely on foreign-hosted servers. This reliance not only increases costs but also undermines the concept of data sovereignty, pushing us closer to a situation of data colonialism.

Data colonialism refers to powerful entities exploiting and controlling user-generated data, commodifying personal information for profit while limiting local autonomy. In this age, aspects of our private lives are harvested, leading to the commodification of data. Indeed, data has become the new oil—but unlike oil, it is being extracted and stored elsewhere.

While Ghana has made commendable strides in digital transformation, these efforts have not been mirrored in the development and enforcement of data protection frameworks. The Data Protection Act, though well-intentioned, faces significant challenges in enforcement. The mechanisms for upholding the law are weak, and public awareness about data rights is minimal. As a result, Ghanaians remain vulnerable to unauthorized access to their personal data, compromising privacy and confidentiality.

Furthermore, Ghana's dependence on foreign-hosted digital servers raises serious questions about data sovereignty. When our data is stored abroad, it is subject to foreign authorities, thereby jeopardizing Ghana's control over sensitive information. This is a ticking time bomb for national security and underscores why data protection laws are poorly enforced. The ripple effect of this reliance is felt across individuals, companies, and even government agencies, all of which remain susceptible to exploitation.

In 2018, during the Ebola outbreak, Vodafone collaborated with the government to track the movement of 8.7 million customers to aid in containing the epidemic. While this was intended to assist in medical interventions, it also raised significant concerns about data privacy

and sovereignty. Could Vodafone know the location of its customers without their consent? Moreover, the data was processed through foreign-hosted servers, further compounding the issue of control over Ghanaian data. This example vividly illustrates the broader issue of data colonialism and the dangers of foreign control over our digital resources.

To address these challenges, Ghana must strengthen its data governance framework. We need to invest in local data centers to ensure that data generated within the country is stored and managed domestically, reducing reliance on foreign intervention. This would not only enhance data sovereignty but also improve access and lower costs for businesses and individuals.

Additionally, the Data Protection Commission must be equipped with the resources and authority necessary to enforce data protection laws effectively. Public awareness campaigns are crucial to educate Ghanaians about their data rights and empower them to protect their personal information.

Ghana's digital future may be slowly traded away, bit by bit, without our knowledge. But history offers valuable lessons. We must learn from past mistakes and prevent another form of colonialism from taking root. I envision a future where Ghana leads in technological advancement while ensuring that we control and manage our own data. By taking the right steps now, we can achieve data sovereignty. Just as Ghana was the first African country to gain independence, we can also be the first to achieve digital independence.

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