

Ghana's democracy and the digital public sphere: some pertinent issues

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Abstract

Ghana's media has been one of the biggest bulwarks of its nascent democracy since the transition to democratic rule in 1992. What has become known as the Fourth Estate of the Realm is now gradually being digitally networked as a result of the emergence of new media technologies. Using existing data mostly from media think-tanks such as Penplusbytes, Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), media and other online sources, this paper appraises the role of digital media in the process of consolidating Ghana's democracy under the Fourth Republican Constitution within the lens of Habermas' concept of the public sphere. The study focuses on the 2016 and 2020 general elections of Ghana and analyses the influence of digital media in strengthening democratic values such as political participation, activism and public opinion formation. We conclude that the Habermasian model of the structural transformation of the public sphere (1962) is partly applicable to

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the Ghanaian media landscape. Although challenges such as the elite stranglehold on the traditional media landscape have been widespread since the beginning of the political transition in 1992, the emergence of the new media has brought new and complex dimensions to the debate. Specifically, while new media platforms have made immense contributions towards enhancing a general liberal environment, they suffer from several drawbacks such as unequal participation and lack of uniformity in public deliberations, with elites and other powerful social and economic actors generally holding sway. The phenomenon of fake news, online disinformation, the issue of digital divide, creeping state repression and COVID-19 restrictions during the 2020 election period have all combined to hamstring the Ghanaian new media which is currently at the center of a seemingly endless process of structural transformation.

Keywords: new media, democracy, public sphere, Ghana, digital democracy, elections.

Résumé

Les médias ghanéens ont été l'un des principaux remparts de la démocratie naissante du pays depuis la transition vers un régime démocratique en 1992. Ce que nous appelons aujourd'hui le Quatrième Pouvoir est progressivement mis en réseau numérique grâce à l'émergence des nouvelles technologies médiatiques. En utilisant des données existantes provenant principalement de groupes de réflexion sur les médias tels que Penplusbytes, Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), les médias et de ressources électroniques, cet article évalue le rôle que jouent les médias numériques dans le processus de consolidation de la démocratie ghanéenne sous la Constitution de la Quatrième République dans l'optique du concept de la sphère publique d'Habermas. L'étude se concentre sur les élections générales de 2016 et 2020 au Ghana et analyse l'influence des médias numériques sur le renforcement des valeurs démocratiques telles que la participation politique, l'activisme et la formation de l'opinion publique. Nous concluons que le modèle habermassien pour la transformation structurelle de la sphère publique (1962) est partiellement applicable au paysage médiatique ghanéen. Bien que les défis tels que la mainmise des élites sur le paysage médiatique traditionnel aient été largement répandus depuis le début de la transition politique en 1992, l'émergence des nouveaux médias a apporté des dimensions nouvelles et complexes au débat. Plus précisément, si les nouvelles plateformes médiatiques ont apporté d'immenses contributions à

l'amélioration d'un environnement libéral général, elles souffrent de plusieurs inconvénients tels qu'une participation inégale et un manque d'uniformité dans les délibérations publiques, les élites et d'autres acteurs sociaux et économiques puissants ayant généralement le dessus. Le phénomène des "fake news" (fausses nouvelles), la désinformation en ligne, la question de la fracture numérique, la répression étatique rampante et les restrictions de la COVID-19 pendant la période électorale de 2020 sont autant d'éléments qui se sont combinés pour paralyser les nouveaux médias ghanéens, ces derniers étant actuellement au cœur d'un processus de transformation structurelle apparemment sans fin.

Mots clés: nouveaux médias, démocratie, sphère publique, Ghana, démocratie numérique, élections.

Introduction

Since the political liberalization and transition of 1992, Ghana's media has been assigned the role of the Fourth Estate with the responsibility of promoting freedom of expression and public opinion formation (Shardow, & Asare, 2016). As occurs in other democracies, the press in Ghana is expected to play the role of a watchdog, demanding democratic accountability from the government (Olukoyun, 2004; Akinwale, 2010; Shardow, & Asare, 2016). To this end, the 1992 Constitution removed all conceivable restrictions on the Ghanaian media, including all aspects of censorship, particularly on the state-owned media. The repeal of the Criminal Libel Law in 2001 by the New Patriotic Party (NPP) government further helped to entrench media freedom and democratic values within the Ghanaian media and the polity (Shardow & Asare, 2016). Nevertheless, in recent times, there has been an increasing trend of state repression against journalists and free speech itself, creating a general atmosphere of fear and anxiety within the media arena. For instance, in February 2022 alone, several independent journalists, private media practitioners, civil society and political activists were arrested, charged or imprisoned for expressing dissenting views. Prominent among the victims of this state repression included Kwabena Bobbie Ansah, a host of private radio station Accra FM, Blessed Godsbrain Smart, an independent journalist for Onua TV and Oheneba Boamah Bennie of Power FM, a private radio station based in Accra (Laary, April 2022). Despite this disturbing evidence of government's intolerance in recent times, the media in Ghana by law has largely been free from any form of arbitrary control and censorship since the democratic transition almost three decades ago (Bokor, 2015).

Furthermore, for many years since the inception of the fourth republican constitution, the traditional media have been at the center of public opinion formation, and have also served as watchdog on the activities of public office holders, especially the executive arm of government (Sikanku, 2014). Nevertheless, for almost two decades now, the emergence of the new media in Ghana, particularly social media, has widened the frontiers of free speech, fostering political debate, discussions, interaction and providing a platform for citizens to demand civil liberties and freedom. Amegatcher (2014) explains that “social media is any platform available on the internet, which provides a means for interaction and effective two-way communication on websites; social networking sites including: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Blogs, LinkedIn, Google Plus, smart phone applications, as well as news delivery sites; and other online platforms” (Amegatcher, 2014, 4). Thus, unlike traditional media, social media provides unrestricted platforms for millions of people in different geographical regions and time zones across the world to share, discuss and debate information and issues which are relevant to them and their nations. In this regard, scholars have argued that the emergence of the digital media has led to the creation of what is called the “networked public sphere” in the Ghanaian public space, where citizens converge to digitally deliberate on national issues (Temin & Smith, 2002; Shaw, 2009; Deaan, 2003; Saeed, 2009; Oluwole, 2016). This has enhanced public discourse, opening the space for more political participation, mobilization, activism and public opinion formation for the general citizenry. In this respect, the digital media has largely been responsible for wide-ranging social and political changes in Ghana for over two decades now. Therefore, Turkan (2012) is of the view that it is impossible to consolidate democracy and build strong democratic values and institutions without media freedom, pluralism and diversity of opinions and viewpoints which are now becoming the preserve of the new media and the public sphere. Thus, online resources in Ghana, especially social media, have roped in millions of people into the democratic space through their unlimited reach and diversity, opening new frontiers of free speech and media freedom by effectively by-passing the methods of censorship that have dogged the traditional media landscape during the military and civilian authoritarian regimes (Adebanwi, 2001; Turkan, 2012; Danju, Maasoglu & Maasoglu, 2013, 1; Kang, 2010, 2). Other virtual platforms such as Zoom have also emerged to further open the political space in response to the widespread restrictions emanating from the global response to the Coronavirus pandemic. This was evident in Ghana's 2020 elections.

However, despite this transformation in the media landscape in the last two decades in Ghana, there are still lingering challenges of hierarchy, top-down dissemination of information and exclusionary tendencies in the digital media ecology in Ghana. Added to this is the problem of propaganda, disinformation and post truth politics in the country's political processes. Therefore, using Habermas' theory of public sphere, this paper evaluates the role of digital media, particularly social media, in Ghana's effort towards consolidating its democracy under the 1992 Fourth Republican Constitution. It analyzes the influence of social media on democratic habits such as political participation, political activism and public opinion formation. The study focuses its analysis on the 2016 and 2020 general elections in Ghana. Specifically, we utilize existing data to critically examine the subject matter. Thus, sources of data for this study include journal articles, materials and data from websites, blogs, media-related think-tanks such as Penplusbytes and Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), and other online materials. On the basis of our analysis of these published and electronic sources, the paper assesses how social media influences Ghana's efforts at consolidating democracy and the various challenges therein.

This study begins with the literature and conceptual discussions, after which it gives a brief account of Ghana's media landscape and its interface with the political process. The work then dovetails into the analysis and discussions of digital media's influence on Ghana's democracy, with particular focus on political participation, activism and public opinion formation in both the 2016 and 2020 general elections. It ends with a conclusion that reiterates the role that the digital media has played, and calls for further comparative research on Ghana's digital public sphere.

Digital Media and Democracy

The indispensable role of the digital media in fostering democratic discussions and debate in the last three decades has been underscored by various studies including Hagar (2014), Roese (2018), Chen (2013) and Maboudi and Nadi (2016). For instance, Hagar (2014) stresses the significant role of social media in politics, especially in fostering public deliberations during elections. These participatory discussions have offered opportunity for interactions among voters and candidates in a manner that was impossible through "the traditional campaign methods (door-to-door campaigning, leafleting, print or television coverage)" (Hagar, 2014, 75). As Hagar notes, this is at almost no cost to the candidate and requires minimal expertise and skills. Consequently, unlike traditional mass media such as the print media, radio or TV, the inherent

interactivity of social media enables citizens to create and share the content of their own communication digitally, thereby helping to nurture strong democratic values and culture (Roese, 2018). Thus, instead of traditional reporting from the professional press, citizens have become journalists themselves, using social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram and Zoom as channels for breaking news and media hypes. However, authoritarian regimes can also use this power of the social media to misinform and manipulate the general population for the purposes of consolidating their power. Nevertheless, Chen (2013) argues that social media foster the formation of public opinion, civil discourse and spontaneous discussion and debate among citizens. Against this background, digital media is used to engage citizens for important democratic processes such as drafting the constitution as has been highlighted by Maboudi and Nadi (2016).

Furthermore, studies such as Gupta (2011), Khan and Krishnan, (2017) and Oginni and Moitui (2015), agree on the centrality of digital media to political participation and activism. Specifically, Gupta (2011) surmises that in a democracy, networked citizens use the new media to practice a new form of democracy by highlighting vital information that has been filtered by the traditional media. In this regard, digital media practitioners 'weaponise' their newfound platform and use it to confront those in authority, particularly politicians, to demand democratic accountability (Gupta 2011, 11). Khan and Krishnan (2017), on the other hand, highlight the strength of social media in promoting e-participation in politics thereby using technology to enhance the involvement of citizens in decision-making and public engagement. Consequently, social media unifies otherwise geographically segregated people on a common platform to share information. It also unites citizens through various societal structures such as friendship, commerce, values, ideas, knowledge, financial exchange, kinship, dislike, and conflict, among others. Common values among often heterogeneous social groups translate into political collaboration that can strengthen democracy and democratic norms. However, as a leaderless tool, the networked environment has a power vacuum and is often chaotic, thereby opening opportunities and avenues for endless and uncontrolled manipulation by despots, elites and other powerful political and social actors in democratic and non-democratic societies (Oginni & Moitui, 2015).

While the new media has emerged as a game-changer in the promotion of democratic ideals and principles in the last two decades, the issue of regulation has become controversial among scholars and various stakeholders. Eriksson, et al. (2009) and Tully (2014), for example, identify the various

regulatory mechanisms used to stifle the digital public sphere. Interestingly, Eriksson et al. (2009) argue that both authoritarian and democratic regimes use surveillance, eavesdropping, filtering and blocking of internet sites to control the flow of online communications, thereby undermining freedom of expression and the press. According to them, internet control may also take the form of information manipulation or propaganda especially by authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, governments also control internet access to the citizens through regulation, monitoring and planning of access, “through state-run programs of developing broadband networks, and through licensing domestic internet service providers (Eriksson et al. 2009, 207–208). While agreeing that the new media helps in upholding liberal democratic values, Tully (2014, 153) suggests that they could also serve as platforms that can be used to spread hate, fake news, inflammatory messages and deliberate propaganda to undermine the democratic process. Therefore, the law, market, norms and infrastructure are the major forces that can potentially serve as regulatory mechanisms on the digital media.

Furthermore, Akhavan, (2013) and Whelan, Moon and Grant, (2013) expose the relevance of digital media in political contestations. Specifically, Akhavan, (2013) highlights the use of digital media especially social media by Iranian citizens to demand political accountability and more transparent and fair election especially in the aftermath of the flawed 2009 elections. On the other hand, Waldherr (2018) discusses the hybridity of today’s mass media. According to him, the public sphere is undergoing radical structural transformation with both the traditional and digital media sharing the available spaces in public discourses. This hybridity, according to him, enhances communications and the flow of information to nourish the democratic environment (Waldherr 2018, 292). However, the new media’s ability to evade restriction through both gatekeeping and censorship procedures make it far more effective than the traditional media in promoting greater participation in public discourse. Further, the hybridization of the media space has drastically reduced the power and influence of the political elites who hitherto controlled the flow of information. Non-elite actors have broken the monopoly of the elites over the control of information and communications in democratic societies (Waldherr, 2018, 292–293).

Prier (2017, 50) highlights the use of social media as a tool for media warfare in the age of ICT and analyses major themes such as social networking, propaganda, news and information sharing, to explain how both state and non-state actors use social media for disinformation and propaganda. According to him, the spread of the so-called “fake news” and hostile propaganda through

social media has negative repercussions on building democracy and democratic values.

For instance, malicious actors can use trends on Twitter to spread a message using multiple forms of media on multiple platforms, with the ultimate goal of attracting the attention and garnering coverage in the mainstream media (Prier 2017, 52–53).

Chiweshe (2017) and Wasserman (2007) offer additional contrasting views on the use of new media as a platform for democratic participation. Chiweshe questions the efficacy and viability of social media to galvanize, organize and bring together the youth in some parts of Africa to actively participate in the democratic process. Specifically, he argues that the urban youth in Harare, Zimbabwe have not utilized their presence on the networking sites Facebook to participate in the democratic discourse of their country. Instead, they spend many hours on the site discussing and debating anything from fashion, gossip, sports, religion and music. In his view, therefore, the youth can be apathetic to the democratic process taking place in their countries despite their overwhelming presence in the digital public sphere (Chiweshe 2017, 130). However, Sikanku (2014), Jackson and Stanfield (2004), Parkinson (2006), Whitten–Woodring (2009) and Jose (1975) disagree with Chiweshe's (2017) and Wasserman's (2007) conclusions and emphasize the crucial role of the media and press freedom in building strong democratic societies. Specifically, Sikanku (2014) points out that media pluralism in Ghana helps in deepening democracy through the unfettered access to information, discussion, debate, and advocacy since the democratic transition of 1992. Jackson and Stanfield (2004) concur with this view and further postulate that, access to communication and free and independent press are democracy's most important strength anywhere in the world. Moreover, Parkinson (2006, 176) suggests that the role of the media in a democracy includes exposing people to different shades of opinions, as well as building their capacity as citizens to exercise judgment, and helping to hold accountable powerful elements within the democratic society. While Whitten–Woodring (2009) underscores the watchdog role of the media, particularly when it is from illegal regulations or censorship, Jose (1975) emphasizes the importance of press freedom in Africa especially in the post-independent period.

Olukoyun (2004) and Akinwale (2010) affirm the critical role the Nigerian media is playing in holding democratically elected leaders accountable to the people. They assert that the crusading names of the Nigerian media such as the Vanguard, the Punch, the Guardian and the Champion not only depict the

culture of outspokenness but of militant press ideology necessary to keep the political class accountable to the people. Furthermore, Akinwale (2010, 47) suggests that, the recognition of the media as the “fourth estate” empowers the media to hold the three arms of government accountable to the people.

Finally, scholars such as Richardson (2006) and Wambui (2007) highlight the participatory nature of the internet-driven media. Richardson (2006, 148) asserts that the ease of access to new media by citizens, “its inherent reflexivity, its highly participatory nature, and the difficulty of its regulation have endeared it to pro-democracy advocates” across the world. Wambui (2007, 86–102) on his part suggests that press freedom in democracies is increasingly influenced by the emerging revolution in ICT.

While all these studies highlight the current trend as well as the significant contribution of both the traditional and new media in the spread and strengthening of democratic values and norms, our work seeks to make an additional contribution to the literature by highlighting some of the challenges the new media face as a new tool in the ongoing structural transformation of the public sphere in Ghana. Of particular significance are issues relating to exclusion, hierarchy and the top-down approach to the spread of news and public opinion within the digital space. Other challenges include the problem of disinformation, propaganda and post truth politics.

Conceptual Considerations: Habermas’ Public Sphere and its Structural Transformation

While ‘the public sphere’ as a model has maintained a consistent position as one of the dominant concepts in the debate on media and politics or more specifically between media and democratic system of governance, its genealogy has largely been ignored. Consequently, scholars have traced the concept of public sphere to Jurgen Habermas’ descriptions of coffeehouses and salons as arenas for public deliberations in eighteenth and nineteenth century Western Europe. These coffeehouses and salons provided the institutional structures necessary to break down the stranglehold of both the state and the church on issues of public concern (Fraser, 2018; Stewart & Hartmann, 2020). Even though in theory all citizens could participate in these kinds of public debates regardless of barriers such as class, gender and status, in practice, the deliberations in the coffee houses and salons were bourgeois in nature. Nevertheless, by the twentieth century, coffeehouses and salons had given way to media markets, mass culture, public opinion and modern technology such as radio and television as avenues for rational and critical debate on issues of public concern. Thus, Habermas’ eighteenth and nineteenth century public sphere evolved into the ‘structural transformation of the public

sphere'. Despite the transition to what is now referred to as the traditional media, the logic of liberalism and commercialization in the twentieth century undermined the inclusivity of public deliberations within the public sphere (Stewart & Hartmann, 2020). Subsequently, in recent times, particularly in the last thirty years, the emergence of digitization backed by the internet has led to yet another layer of the structural transformation of the public sphere where the new media has emerged as a discursive arena and platform for public interactions and public opinion formation (Seeliger & Sevignani, 2022). While the structural transformation from the traditional media to the new media represents a quantum leap for democratic interactions, there are inherent drawbacks such as what Staab & Thiel (2022, 132) termed "unequal access to discursive power (agenda-setting)" and avenues for manipulation by various political and social actors.

This study seeks to evaluate the contribution of new media to Ghana's democracy using the lens of Habermas' theory of public sphere and its structural transformation. This has become necessary given the limited to non-existent literature in this area. Thus, in this study, important democratic norms such as political activism, political participation and public opinion formation are examined with regard to the 2016 and 2020 general elections.

Ghana's Media Landscape

In one way or the other, the media and its ecology have been an inherent part of Ghanaian society, even if one cannot always equate it to the Western European style of public sphere. From the pre-colonial era of oral traditions, to the colonial, through to the post-independence civilian and military authoritarian regimes, there have always been traces, at times infinitesimal, of media and public opinion formation within Ghanaian society and polity (Shaw, 2009; Olukotun, 2002). Under the post-independence authoritarian regimes, the media and public opinion were subdued, censored or even manipulated for purposes of achieving some undemocratic political objectives. However, it is from the post-1992 democratic period that public debate was revitalized, that public opinion was shaped, media pluralism guaranteed, and elected politicians held accountable to the citizens, and top-down and bottom-up political conversations and interactions were facilitated. All these reflected the Habermasian structural transformation of the public sphere (Fraser, 1990; Shaw, 2009; Olukotun, 2002). Strikingly, Ghana's Fourth Republic has witnessed more unfettered media freedom than in any other era since independence in 1957. However, it was the emergence of the new media in the last three decades that has revolutionized media practice and further expanded the frontiers of free speech and media freedom. In 1989-1990, Ghana emerged as one of the

first countries on the African continent to join the advanced nations in getting connected to the internet, further cementing the Habermasian model of the structural transformation of the public sphere within the country's media and political environment (Sey, 2011). Thus, internet connectivity in the country led to the incremental introduction of various digital media outlets for deliberations and discussions within the public space by citizens. This was coupled with the liberalization of the media guaranteed by the Fourth Republican Constitution of 1992. Currently, the most influential of all the digital media genres in advancing Ghana's democratic consolidation are by far Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube and other remote conferencing applications such as Zoom. Political participation, particularly the mobilization of the electorate and electoral campaigns during Ghana's elections of 2012, 2016 and 2020 mimicked the use of social media strategy employed by Barack Obama in the 2008 US elections which has transformed the rules of political communication by its focus on interactive ways of communication (Dillon, 2012; Penplusbytes.org, 2017). Braimah (2018) suggests that the media landscape in Ghana, particularly the online space, has undergone rapid transformation over the past two decades since the emergence of digital technology, giving practical expression to the 1992 Constitution's guarantees of freedom of expression, speech and the media. For instance, in the year 2000, there were just about 30,000 internet users in Ghana. By 2017, the number had jumped to about 10.1 million (Braimah, 2018), deepening political participation and enhancing political activism and public opinion formation. More significantly, as of January 2022, Ghana boasts of about 15.7 million internet users representing a penetration rate of 50 per cent. This means that half of the entire Ghanaian population had internet access as of 2022, with WhatsApp alone commanding about 9.9 million of all internet users while Facebook follows with 8.6 million users (Boateng, April, 2022). This is not just a signal of the rise of Ghanaian democratic culture but also testament to the strength of the nation's digital public sphere.

Digital Media and Ghana's Democracy: Perspectives from the 2016 and 2020 Elections

One question of critical relevance in this study is whether the new media facilitates political participation, activism and public opinion formation in Ghana's public and political arena. While the new media faces some challenges in this regard, the overwhelming evidence gathered in this study suggests that the new media evolution in Ghana has played an important role in nurturing and strengthening political activism, participation and public opinion formation before and during both the 2020 and 2016 elections. The ensuing section first takes a look at the 2020 general elections, the most recent of Ghana's elections,

and then hones in on the 2016 general elections.

The 2020 General Elections

Political Participation

Drawing on Jurgen Habermas' seminal study, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, first published in 1962 and translated in English in (1989), recent scholarship has highlighted the indispensable role of the digital media and new communication technologies in roping in many citizens into the political processes (Bruns & Highfield, 2015; García Luengo, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2006). The public sphere as a concept considers social life wherein citizens freely discuss matters of public and political importance for the common good of the society and the state. Habermas' use of coffee houses, cultural societies and salons in the seventeenth and eighteenth century as arenas for political participation has very little, if any connection, with Ghana's traditional, social, cultural, political, historical and philosophical setting from the pre-colonial up to the inception of the Fourth Republic (Calhoun, 1993). However, the structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere from the salons and the coffeehouses to the mass media in Western Europe in the early twentieth century reverberates with Ghana's current democratic dispensation. This is because, Ghana's mass media since the political transition of 1992 has emerged as an arena for public deliberations where citizens have been constitutionally empowered to participate in the political processes of their nation. For instance, despite the constraints of the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) in the run-up to the 2020 elections, the inclusive and participatory nature of the digital media was evident.

Despite their initial concerns, the imposition of the Restrictions Act, 2020 by the Ghanaian government and the various Executive Instruments curtailing civil liberties ironically opened the floodgate for the deployment of several digital media platforms by the political parties to facilitate the participation of their supporters and the general citizens in the political process (Penplusbytes, 2021). Thus, while mass gatherings, including political rallies, were outlawed in the 2020 elections, the deployment of several new media tools in the election campaigns opened a new arena for citizen's participation in both the pre-election and post-election processes. Scholars such as VonDoepp and Young (2013), Callamard (2010), Martin (1992), Phiri (1999) and Zaffiro (2000) emphasize the significance of this kind of interface between social media and the process of democratic consolidation, arguing that, social media is the "incubators of a robust public sphere", and vehicles for dialogue and articulation of marginalized

political voices, especially that of the youth (VonDoepp & Young, 2013, p.36). In this regard, the deployment of the digital media, particularly the social media by the all the political actors including the youth of all the participating political parties in the 2020 elections highlighted the indispensability of the media to that election, especially when civil liberties, including freedom of association and assembly were restricted by law. This aptly concurs with Habermas' conception of the media as a dialogical arena for public deliberation and political participation (Nunoo, 2020). However, despite this important milestone in Ghana's new media landscape and the public sphere in general, the problem of digital divide continues to exclude large portion of the Ghanaian population from the democratic process. Ohemeng and Ofosu-Adarkwa (2014, 298) describe digital divide "as the gap between the Internet literacy, and perhaps aptitude for it, of the citizens, households, businesses, and geographic areas at certain socioeconomic levels and those of the same people and entities at others". Thus, over the years, a lack of access to reliable devices as well as high-speed internet among women, rural populations, and the poor has hindered effective political participation among these categories of Ghanaian citizens (Close the Gap Foundation, 2022). In addition, the Ghanaian ruling elites have sought to regulate the free flow of information online through various means. For instance, in February 2020, the Akufo-Addo-led government, in response to a storm of criticisms online, threatened to clamp down on new media, with communication minister Ursula Owusu-Ekuful warning social media operators to self-regulate, and "if we don't self-regulate the state will be compelled to set in place the mechanisms to regulate our usage of the internet" (Adepoju, April, 2021). Furthermore, in 2019, government warned that the Attorney General and the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection are collaborating with other relevant agencies and departments to introduce fresh legislations that will criminalize the sharing of what the state considers as inappropriate content on social media. This was in spite of the fact that Ghana already had cybersecurity laws in place (Adepoju, April, 2021). Due to this hostile and threatening posture against independent media and free speech (and many other reasons), Ghana dropped 30 places on the 2022 World Press Freedom Index. Compiled by Reporters without Borders, the 2022 index saw Ghana ranking 60th after placing 30th in 2021. This performance is Ghana's "lowest-ever ranking in 17 years after it ranked 66th and 67th in 2005 and 2002 respectively" (Lartey, May, 2022).

Despite some of these drawbacks, in the 2020 elections, both the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the main opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) made effective use of digital media to reach out to their supporters and the larger Ghanaian voting public. Through these efforts, citizens

were able to participate in the elections and the democratic process (Orji, 2014). For instance, as part of its wider communications strategy for the 2020 elections, the NPP maintained and even expanded its existing social media campaign structure with at least one social media communications officer at every level of the party hierarchy from the national to the constituency levels.

Their mission was to use the power of social media to rope in as many voters as possible into the political process to enhance their chances of winning the elections (Gadjanova, Lynch, Reifler & Saibu, 2019). Thus, this strategy was able to engender citizens' participation in the democratic process across all layers of the Ghanaian society. On the other side of the political divide, the NDC was also able to integrate "a coordinated social media communication teams into the structure of the party and...recruited a large number of social media communicators" to prosecute the 2020 election campaign (Gadjanova, Lynch, Reifler & Saibu, 2019, 11). This gives credence to the view that mass and web-based media are central players in Ghana's evolving digitized public sphere, serving as the incubator of political participation in the process of democratic consolidation (Ayish, 2008; Chen, 2013).

Public Opinion Formation

While Habermas used coffee houses, cultural societies and political salons to serve as rational but critical discursive arenas in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, in Ghana's Fourth Republic, the structural transformation of the public sphere was witnessed in the proliferation and increasing assertiveness of the traditional media in the early years of the political transition. In this respect, public communication and discussion was fully dominated by newspapers, radio and television which were either state-owned or privately owned entities. Nevertheless, in the last two decades, digital media has emerged as a powerful media genre to complement traditional media in what can be described as a continuous process of structural transformation of Ghana's public sphere. While Ghana might not have had the tradition or the experience of direct forms of democratic debate and deliberations through the coffeehouse, salons and civic societies as was the case in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the role of digital media in facilitating current debates and discussions in Ghana's public arena represents an important milestone in the gradual but continuing transformation of the public sphere in the country (Bruns, & Highfield, 2015). Consequently, there is ample evidence to suggest that the digital media in Ghana's democracy under the Fourth Republic plays the roles that conform to the basic requirements of the Habermasian model of the structural transformation of the public sphere (Bowd, 2016; Buchstein 1997).

Hence, despite various obstacles, including the threat posed by state's regulatory mechanisms and the recent risks emanating from the phenomenon of fake news and post truth politics in the digital public sphere, Ghana's new media ecology is perceived by many as "universal, anti-hierarchical," interactive and provides "uncoerced communication, freedom of expression, an unrestricted agenda, participation outside of traditional political institutions and generates public opinion through processes of discussion" (Buchstein, 1997, 250; Waisbord, 2018). Therefore, in the run-up to the 2020 elections in Ghana, the significance of digital media in public opinion formation was palpable. Ironically, the Coronavirus pandemic served as a catalyst for what can be seen as a digital media transformation prior to Ghana's 2020 elections. For instance, for the first time ever in the run up to elections, remote and virtual conferencing applications such as Zoom became a common feature in the formation of public opinion in the country's democratic space. This markedly distinguished the 2020 elections of Ghana from that of the 2016 and it is evident that with subsequent elections, the Ghanaian digital public sphere will continue this process of transformation (Alhassan, 2021). Public opinion formation in Ghana during this period largely relied on these digital media innovations, networking people from different parts of the country in debates and sharing of ideas. Nearly all traditional media, civil society organizations, political parties and their candidates conducted their interviews, political discussions, debates etc. through virtual conferencing as a result of the Coronavirus restrictions (IDEG, 2020). In this regard, Habermas' idea of public sphere is not only the mere existence of mass communication tools in the hands of the Ghanaian citizens but also a reflection of power relations necessary "for free, rational, and critical exchanges of information" among diverse individuals and groups with the view to achieving a good level of public consensus on the democratic process (Ayish, 2008, 14).

In spite of this significant contribution of the new media and computer-mediated technology in the promotion of democracy through public opinion formation and opening up new spaces for a large number of Ghanaians to enjoy their freedom, there are still lingering problems of exclusion and exclusionary voices. This is particularly evident among citizens who have been confined to the fringes of institutionalized power and influence (Wasserman, 2007, 112). For instance, according to a nationwide survey conducted by Ghana's National Communications Authority (NCA) in collaboration with the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) in 2019 and released in 2020, only 39.7 per cent of Ghanaians were aware of the internet. From this figure, 51.6 per cent in the urban areas had knowledge of the internet while 27.4 per cent of individuals in the rural communities had knowledge about the internet. In terms of gender, males

constituted 45.2 per cent while females represented 34.6 per cent of all those who had knowledge about the internet (NCA & GSS, March, 2020, 23). Consequently, despite some successes, further transformation (in public communication, engagement, and collaborations in the democratic process) has to take place in Ghana's public sphere for it to be fully explained by the orthodox Habermasian model. Variables such as gender and rural-urban dichotomies are evident in knowledge, access and use of the internet media in Ghana.

Digital Activism

The use of internet and social media as tools for networking, mobilization and formation of protest movements to demand democratic accountability and freedom has been widely discussed and debated (Kang, 2010, p.2). In Ghana, this represents a transition from the citizen's wholesale reliance on the traditional media made up of print and electronic media. Specifically, the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic prior to the 2020 elections, led to the intensification of the use of digital media to advance democratic ideals through political activism (Penplusbytes, 2021). This is contrary to the earlier concern that the outbreak of the pandemic was going to undermine media freedom and democracy. Thus, the digital public sphere has energized and encouraged Ghana's urban middle-class youth to play a central role in the democratic process through political activism and formation of protest movements to express their views and demand accountability from the political elites (Zia, 2012, 16). For instance, on election day, Ghanaian political activists deployed different forms of digital media technologies for "awareness building, voter education, results-tracking and combating electoral malfeasance in the 2020 elections (Smyth, 2013, 1-2). Moreover, in the 2020 elections, despite the Coronavirus restrictions, political activism through protests became widespread. Protests demanding free, fair, peaceful and transparent elections were pervasive, especially during the collation of the election results at the various constituency collation centers. Some of these demonstrations led to the death of at least five protesters, mostly members of the opposition NDC (Citinewsroom, 2020). Social media, particularly WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube played a central role in mobilizing the various opposition activists protesting against the Electoral Commission's declaration of incumbent Nana Akufo-Addo as the President elect for the 2020 elections. Thus, videos of the demonstrations embarked upon by NDC activists were uploaded on the aforesaid social media platforms and websites of other traditional media attracted widespread attention, discussion and debate from the general Ghanaian citizenry (Citinewsroom, 2020). The viral nature of digital

media ensured that this information also spread to other mainstream international media such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Aljazeera, Reuters News Agency and many others.

The 2016 General Elections

Political Participation

One of the defining features of the transition from the family to the public sphere in European states in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as highlighted by Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public*, was the participatory nature of politics through various channels of communications. While the initial conception of Habermas' work focused on the traditional media, studies such as Dzisah (2018), Gilmore (2012), Huff (2001) and Dahlgren (2012) provide important insight into how the new media revolutionized the flow of information and communication and added impetus to the concept of public sphere in democratic societies. In Ghana, Web 2.0, for example, has empowered citizens with adequate journalistic tools to individually participate in building stronger democratic society (Gilmore, 2012, 7; Huff, 2001, 440; Dahlgren, 2012). Ghana's 2016 elections therefore witnessed an impressive use of social media compared to the previous six elections. Apart from the political campaign itself, various issues about the 2016 elections were contested on the various social media platforms, opening the needed space for citizens to participate in the democratic process. Prominent political issues which preceded the 2016 election campaign and were highlighted strongly by the social media include the 2016 State of the Nation Address, the internal squabbles within the main opposition NPP, the corruption scandal that rocked the judiciary, the widespread political violence witnessed in the limited voter registration, the dramatic and highly controversial presidential pardon granted the Montie trio (three journalists from Accra-based Montie FM) by President John Dramani Mahama, the challenging economic environment, among many others (Penn State University, 2016; Penplusbytes.org, 2017). While some of these public and political discussions in the digital media were horizontal and involved participants of equal social status, other deliberations in the public arena were both hierarchical and vertical, with information originating from the elites and agenda-setters such as politicians, academics, journalists themselves, social media influencers, and members of civil society, among other powerful social and economic actors. For instance, before election day, civil society groups like the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO), deployed various social media assets as communication tools to wage a public education campaign on many election-related issues, especially the 2016 limited voters' registration exercise conducted by Ghana's electoral commission. This was geared not only

to promote transparent, free and fair elections but also to enhance popular participation in the democratic process, thereby helping to consolidate democracy and democratic values in the country. Moreover, this hierarchical, top-down model of communication was also evident in the 2016 elections when both the NPP's presidential candidate, Nana Akufo Addo and the NDC's John Dramani Mahama made effective use of apps on Facebook to interact with their supporters and the floating voters, turning them into mere spectators, audience or consumers of political advertising and marketing instead of active and equal participants of the various deliberations and political discussions. For instance, the NPP presidential candidate used 'I am for Nana' app to propagate his messages to his supporters and the electorate in general. This app enabled voters and other interested parties or stakeholders in the election to sign up to a mailing list to receive firsthand information on the flag-bearer's activities on the campaign trail (Penplusbytes, 2017, 10). Furthermore, there was a strong contest for political space on Twitter by the two presidential candidates and their media acolytes. Both candidates had their personal profiles to digitally network with their supporters and the general Ghanaian voting public. While President Mahama used @JDMahama handle and others such as @Flagstaff Ghana and @TransformingGhana to update his supporters and the public on his campaign, opposition leader Nana Addo also adopted NAKufoAddo on Twitter (Penplusbytes, 2017, 10-11). Thus, social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were used effectively by the two major political parties and their presidential candidates to reach out and persuade their supporters to take part in the 2016 elections. Nana Addo used social media to effectively propagate his change campaign, leading to his eventual victory in the December 2016 elections (Technovagh, 2017). On the other hand, President Mahama's social media handlers and planners focused their strategy on President Mahama's efforts at building strong infrastructure across all sectors of the Ghanaian economy and social life. This strongly resonated with the Ghanaian public in the run-up to the elections. His army of social media strategists inundated the digital public sphere with tons of hashtags portraying President Mahama as a reformer and achiever who could be trusted with the destiny of Ghanaians. Some of these include #JmToaso, #Ghanaatwork, #TransformingGh (Technovagh, 2017).

Digital Protests

There is no debating that the transformation of the public sphere in this era of globalization and new media technology has changed the form and methods of political activism, particularly protests and protest movements. For instance,

armed with some of these viral new media platforms, pro–democracy protesters before, during and after the 2016 general elections in Ghana have digitized the public sphere and transformed their activities in various ways, including setting the tone and agenda of their protests, spreading slogans and organizational practices through those viral networks, and offering counter and alternative narratives of their movements and in some situations even blunting the official state accounts of the various issues in contention (Postill, 2014). Specifically, OccupyFlagstaff House has been one of the major protest movements prior to the 2016 general elections of Ghana. It deployed and effectively used the various digital media platforms to demand democratic accountability from the Mahama–led NDC government in the run–up to the 2016 presidential and parliamentary elections. Mimicking the strategies and tactics used by various protest movements across the globe including the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street in the United States of America, as well as the Spanish Indignados protest movement, the organizers employed social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter to communicate and interact with people and mobilize people for protest activities as well as challenge the narratives of the government on major national issues. Thus, with its potency, simultaneity, reach and interactivity, social media was a game–changer in political activism in Ghana during the 2016 elections (Pratt, 2015; Postill, 2014).

Public Opinion Formation

There is consensus in the existing scholarship that public opinion is crucial to the development and sustenance of constitutional democracy (Saeed, 2009; Calhoun, 1993). The digital media era has witnessed the transformation of public discussion, debate and public opinion formation across many parts of the world. Yet again in Ghana, the Habermasian theory of the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere is vital in analyzing the emergence of social media as spaces that foster discussions of political issues and formation of public opinion (Habermas, 1991). In the 2016 general elections of Ghana, digital media such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and YouTube played important roles in the formation of public opinion, public discussions and public debate mirroring the Habermasian democratic public sphere. Thus, the Ghanaian digital public sphere opened a new political discussion platform to hitherto marginalized social groups such as the youth to influence the formation of public opinion in the 2016 elections. Online messages from individual users of social media particularly Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter could become viral in the virtual space and eventually find themselves in the traditional media. In some cases, the issues raised on digital media platforms transcend the local traditional media and spread into the international media such as the British

Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Reuters, Associated Press, Aljazeera, CNN International, among others. Thus, under the Fourth Republic, particularly during the 2016 elections, Ghanaians, especially the youth have formed various social media platforms to create and spread information to members of the platform. Information from one platform eventually spread to many others, leading to the formation of public opinion on important national issues. Thus, professional journalists and the mainstream media in Ghana did not have the monopoly of setting the agenda for public discussions and public opinion formation as individuals through the networked public sphere could form an opinion and push it through social media to attract both national and international attention (Chiweshe, 2017, 134 ; Atengble, 2014). However, just as happened in the 2020 elections, many of these public discussions during the 2016 elections were vertical and hierarchical, with influential public or political actors setting the agenda for discussion. For instance, in the run-up to the 2016 elections, #DumsorMustStop, a pro-democracy protest movement took advantage of social media and the digital public sphere to build a strong public opinion on their struggle against the NDC-led John Mahama government. In the build-up to the elections, proponents of the protest movement particularly Ghanaian celebrities led by Yvone Nelson, Lydia Forson and renowned hiplife artiste Sarkodie together with Actor and Glo Ghana Ambassador Van Vicker made effective use of social media to propagate their narratives in the marketplace of public opinion. Dumsor, an Akan word meaning "Off and On" and referring to the severe power outages that plagued Ghana from 2012-2016, inundated the digital space. Thus, the celebrities used this new-found power afforded by social media and the digital public sphere to help in the formation of public opinion and in the process succeeded in mobilizing ordinary Ghanaians to undertake peaceful protests in the capital Accra, calling for an end to the crippling power outages that had destabilized the Ghanaian economy and negatively affected all sectors of public life in the country (Acquaye, 2015). This added pressure on the John Mahama-led NDC government, leading to its eventual defeat by the Nana Akufo-Addo-led NPP in the December 7, 2016 elections.

Fake News

The Habermasian model of the structural transformation of the public sphere helps us to understand the transition of the society from the bourgeois coffeehouses and salons to the mediatized realms where the state, media corporations and other non-state actors hold sway in public deliberations (Bruns & Highfield, 2015). If the consequent emergence and influence of newspapers, radio and television in the early twentieth century had some challenges in the

public sphere, then the era of internet in the past three decades cannot be immune from even bigger drawbacks which can diminish the value of public discussions and even democracy itself (Orji, 2014). Thus, while every citizen, regardless of social background, has unfettered access to the internet-mediated interactions and conversations, the irony is that, it opens the floodgate for all kinds of reliable and unreliable tales, theories and stories from various sources (Dyson, 1998). In Ghana, many have raised issues about the reliability of the information that is collated, collected and shared through the social media. Information provided by anonymous citizen journalists is often tainted with partisan biases rendering it inaccurate and unreliable. Again, social media has also become an avenue for deliberate spreading of rumours, disinformation, political propaganda, inflammatory and hate messages that often poison the democratic atmosphere and lead to unnecessary tension. With the virtual absence of gatekeeping and censorship, systematic verification process which is vital within the democratic system to filter the information collected from social media before any meaningful action or decision can be taken, is lacking. Thus, in both the 2020 and 2016 elections, fake news was one of the biggest challenges that faced the nation's democratic processes. For instance, in the run-up to the 2020 elections, polls conducted by Ghana Fact, a civil society organization in Ghana, revealed that an overwhelming majority of respondents had an encounter with fake news and about 90 per cent of the respondents called for some form of action to curb the phenomenon as the country prepared for the 2020 elections (Odour, 2020). However, the impact of fake news and disinformation which became common features of the 2020 election campaign in the digital media was to some extent doused by various new media applications. Thus, the concept of fact-checking became widespread, especially with regards to disinformation on social media. For instance, Ghana's National Media Commission (NMC) in partnership with Soft Masters, a private company, out-dooed what they described as a mobile application (app) to combat fake news and disinformation (Bonney, 2020). The phenomenon of fake news was also evident in the 2016 elections. However, in the 2016 elections, the Ghanaian digital media landscape did not have the financial, logistical and human resource capacity to curb the menace of fake news online compared to 2020. Thus, despite the emergence of fact-checkers by various traditional media outlets and other media-related organizations, there was no well-defined and reliable strategy for dealing with fake news both by the media, regulatory bodies, and government as well (Ahiagbenu, Ofori-Peasah & Sam, 2018). Hence, before, during and after the elections and on a daily basis, false stories, disinformation, rumours and misinformation found their way onto almost all the major digital media platforms, particularly, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube and Instagram. These false stories and

information were circulated deliberately online to mainly achieve certain partisan political effects with very little or no regard for facts.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, the new media in Ghana has been playing outstanding roles in the consolidation of the Ghanaian democracy. Political participation, activism and public opinion formation are some of the key areas in which the new media are making remarkable contributions to the expansion of liberal democratic values in the country. While the Ghanaian society has no discernible tradition of bourgeois public sphere akin to what happened in Europe in the eighteenth century as highlighted by Habermas, the political transition in 1992 “mid-wifed” a media ecology that was liberal as was the case of Western Europe in the early twentieth century. Consequently, public deliberations heralding the 1992 political transition mirrored the Habermasian concept of the structural transformation of the public sphere. Thus, private and independent media which were muzzled before the restoration of democracy in 1992 joined the state-owned media in setting the agenda and the formation of public opinion. The challenge since 1992 has been that most of the private media organizations were owned and controlled by politicians, powerful social and economic actors and other members of the elite. This therefore blunts any idea of equality among the participants in public deliberations in Ghana's emerging public sphere. Furthermore, while the traditional media held sway in the media ecology immediately after the transition to democracy, in recent years, particularly the last ten years, digital media has relegated the traditional media to a peripheral role and represents the digital public sphere in Ghana's democratic process. Nevertheless, the lack of proper and well-functioning gatekeeping mechanisms of the new media has opened the floodgates for the abuse of the digital public sphere through the phenomenon of fake news and post-truth politics. Thus, rumours, propaganda and news items with dubious journalistic standards have found their way into the political space, endangering the democratic process. Moreover, elites and other powerful social and political actors have found ways to make their content “go viral” through the formation of fake accounts and various other manipulations, particularly in the social media.

Finally, in the Ghanaian (and possibly, the African) context, the concept of the public sphere and its structural transformation, as postulated by Habermas, plays out differently from that of Western Europe. Nevertheless, just as case studies elsewhere have shown, the notion of public sphere in Ghana as a uniform and expanded form of public deliberation as posited by Habermas is not only an

idealistic and never-ending endeavor, but also a fantasy (Webster 2013). Thus further research on the digital media both in Ghana and in a comparative perspective is needed to shed additional light on the positives as well as the drawbacks of Ghana's digital public sphere and its interface with the fourth republican democratic dispensation.

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