Information Impact

The Communicative Ecology of Social Media in the Organization of Social Movement for Collective Action in Ghana: The Case of #FixTheCountry

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Abstract

This study seeks to unravel the media-oriented practices and media technology applications of the #FixTheCountry protests which seek to demand accountability from successive governments of Ghana. While acts by various governmental agencies supposedly worked to prevent a physical convergence due to the Covid-19 pandemic, their efforts proved futile due to the communicative ecology driving the movement. Using the concept of communicative ecology and a multimodal ethnography through observation, semi-structured interviews and time series analysis of happenings after the emergence of the hashtag, #FixTheCountry, the study found out that the diverse backgrounds of the participants of the movement notwithstanding, the hybridity of the communication technologies, especially the use of social media fueled the success of their interaction, leading to enhanced information and communicative ecology, giving them a formidable front both within and outside Ghana. It recommends that political actors need to embrace protest movements for collective action based on purpose, especially because of the complex intertwining technology that characterizes their formation in the digital era.

Keywords

Introduction

In the early part of the year 2020, Ghana experienced a total lockdown due to the sudden outbreak of the Corona virus dubbed COVID-19. Consequently, the country began to suffer untold hardships since both social and economic activities had to come to a halt. The ominous challenges that characterized the country makes it, therefore, seem a syllogism for COVID-19 to be used as an excuse or want of a better expression, to blame all failures on the Corona Virus outbreak. It became therefore necessary, if not inevitable, for Ghanaians to voice out their anguish. In May 2021, the hashtag #FixTheCountry and some variations such as #WeGoDemonstrate which were created by some Ghanaians emerged on social media. The objective of these hashtags was a wakeup call to the government for social and economic reforms aiming at fixing the socio-economic hardships that seem to have bedeviled the country. The power of social media quickly made the campaign go viral, as thousands joined the social media protest, which also took aim at successive governments, and to a large extent, the sitting government, which was perceived as having done nothing to socially and economically better the lives of Ghanaians, but rather implementing policies that were presumed as worsening the plights of Ghanaians.

The social media movement, which initially had a challenge of not providing specific issues and direction of which they were calling for the fixing (Cobblah, 2021c) had some ill-advised government officials and sympathizers of the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) government crying foul because they perceived it as a victimization of their government. Perhaps, they misunderstood the whole concept of social movements and campaigns,taking it for a joke (Cobblah, 2021a), and hence providing counter hashtags such as #FixYourself. Meanwhile, subsequent discussions, queries, questioning and commenting on various traditional and new media platforms (Cobblah, 2021a)provided additional insights and clarifications for the protestors to streamline and shape their concerns (Cobblah, 2021b).The protestors now enumerated some of the challenges to include high cost of living, high taxes and utility charges, unemployment, and comparatively high petroleum cost than neighbouring countries as well as corrupt officials.

As it is to be expected, the protests were subsequently fueled by the fatal beating of a young activist, Ibrahim "Kaaka" on 29th June 2021, which then, saw members additionally demanding for justice for Ibrahim "Kaaka" and two other Ghanaians who were shot dead by police in Ejura in the Ashanti Region. Overtime, the demands by the protestors did not only increase to include insecurity, but also, the number of protestors escalated, giving impetus to them building up angers, and regardless of the Covid-19 pandemic, left cyberspace and took to the street in series of physical protests in local and other geographical locations worldwide in a reminiscence manner of gross civil disobedience. In the unfolding of events, one dominant feature, which this paper argues, as a root of the success of the protests is the diverse and pervasive application of media technologies, especially, the social media, to champion their course. The activities of the protestors from the very beginning

were aided by technology, forming a strong information ecology (Nardi & O'Day, 1999). This study, through a multi-modal ethnography, serves to unravel the media-oriented practices and media technology applications of the #FixTheCountry protestors, emphasizing the interactive strength that informed its information and communicative ecology throughout the protest period and the success thereof.

Literature Review

Studies on social media application and social movement and mobilization are copious, however, inadequate empirical works are done in the area of hashtag applications as a multimodal communicative ecology for social movements and mobilization in Ghana and hence this review of the literature will dwell on related but relevant literature to elucidate the comprehensibility of the application of hashtag in social media communicative ecology. In what follows, the literature on social media application for social movements and mobilization are reviewed and analyzed to bridge the gap for the purpose of expanding the frontiers of knowledge.

In the meantime, it is important to note that every social movement and mobilization of any kind, especially for collective action, is fueled by communication (Castells, 2007, 2009, 2012; Loader, 2008; Tilly & Wood, 2009; Treré, 2012). While traditional media championed this in the early stages of the evolution of media, technological advancements and the advent of the internet, most importantly, social media has charted a new path for social movements by not only reducing the cost of mobilization, but also making it easier to mobilize ordinary citizens for collective action (Lopes, 2014; Boulianne, 2015), and to be witnessed by a global audience. Social movements or protesters as this study argues, have leveraged social media as a mobilizing structure to campaign since it allows unlimited amount of information, picture and videos sharing, and encourages engagement online. Sometimes by using Twitter chat, live events can be setup. Consequently, the relationship between social media and traditional media in social movements and protests as this study maintains, is a symbiotic one, in that, although social media is now used extensively by social movements, they still rely on the traditional media, this assertion corroborates the earlier works (see Castells, 2007, 2009, 2012; Loader, 2008; Tilly & Wood, 2009;Treré, 2012).

So, Castells (2007) for instance, argues that social media has recently been observed as the force behind the new wave of recent popular protests movements, an assertion which Lim (2012) alluded to, and hence they share opinion with other scholars that it is sometimes referred to as digital activism (Tilly & Wood, 2009; Treré, 2012; Della Porta &Mosca, 2005; Joyce, 2010). Meanwhile most of the studies or literature on social movement have been criticized as being 'one-medium bias', often because they present myopic perspectives of the information and communicative ecologies present in collective actions. This study finds this statement very interesting in the sense, they oftenpresent isolated discussions on the communication strategies of movements, thus, neglecting the ecologies of intertwined communication that could rather help understand the broader picture

(McCurdy, 2011; Padovani, 2010; Treré, 2012), and hence this study focuses on the broad communication strategy adopted by the #FixTheCountry protest movement in mobilizing and communicating their agenda for collective action in Ghana.

Furthermore, while social movement has been diversely defined in scholarly discourse, this study operationalizes it as a "conscious, converted effort by ordinary people to change some aspect of their society by using extra-institutional means" as is the case or thinking of Goodwin and Jasper (2003). This may include, but not limited to signing petitions, volunteering to a civil society group and writing letters to political representatives (Lopes, 2014). The purpose of social movements which is often as a result of self-consciousness drives the unity among protesters to drive their course until its attainment (Tilly, 2004). Arguably, the new wave of discourse is motivated by the Arab Spring which had a global outlook (Lopes, 2014). The media often serves as the main conduit for social movement mobilization and message validation. The media is used to persuade and court the sympathy of individuals by employing media techniques and strategies. This implies that, social media and networks are important to the success of social mobilization because of their in-built characteristics, and they are powered by the internet. Social media, unlike traditional media as this study maintains, has transformed the mobilization process from an indirect one to a more direct one where people usually receive invites and information directly on their phones, making it efficient in disseminating information globally. Facebook and Twitter, for instance, are used to share posters, serve as reminders for events, and report on events in real time. It also creates an atmosphere for candid discussions on all matters. Hashtags such as #FixTheCountry used by social movements are also efficient ways of mobilizing passive followers because as averred by Sketelenburg and Klandermas (2007), when people identify with a group, they tend to participate in that group's action. Thus, when passive followers see photos and videos of other friends and followers as members of social movements, there is the tendency that they may join the social movement and be in the next protest.

As indicated earlier, while social movement mobilization and protests on social media are not new in Ghana, #FixTheCountry seems to be very different because it has garnered massive support from nationals of Ghana, both home and abroad, and, indeed, this corroborated the main argument of this study. In 2015, for instance, some celebrities and citizens voiced out their concerns and deep dissatisfaction about incessant electricity outages experienced in Ghana (dumsor, meaning on and off in the Akan language), using social media as mobilization and protest tool. In the end, a peaceful night vigil was organized by these celebrities who invited other well-meaning Ghanaians to join them to demand an end to the power outage via their social media handles. In fact, the hashtag #dumsormuststop was retweeted over 274 thousand times by many Ghanaians in and outside the country (Acquaye, 2015). In Ghana, governments and people in general react and respond to issues that trend on social media because of the act of citizen journalism. It has become difficult to ignore

what goes on via social media, especially when it concerns the citizens. For instance, social media content creators, who call themselves 'citizen journalists' sometimes make videos of deteriorating social amenities and environmental conditions endangering lives within their communities hoping to seek redress, and most often, these social media contents receive attention and the situation gets fixed.

To this end, it is worthy of note that the use of the internet has strengthened and continues to strengthen communication and caused massive transformation in the patterns of civic involvement. Unlike the traditional media which set their own agenda which sometimes blocks direct interaction between people, social media bypasses the lengthy media strategies and offers a direct stream of establishing and exchanging virtual information. Evidentially, Acquaye, (2015) observes that social media protests are clear illustrations of how social media use brings about change and how it influences people of all ages. This brings to the fore, the need for government communicators not to underestimate the power of social media protest movements to undermine social movements, instead, use it to educate the populace topromote democracy and good governance in Ghana.

Theoretical framework

This study employed the theory of communicative ecology to highlight and elucidate the comprehensibility of the complex and intertwined network of different media platforms within which collective action is embedded. Inspired by the "ecology of communication" (Altheide, 1995), the theory "explores and explains the interrelations, among social activities, information technologies, as well as communication formats" (Treré & Mattoni, 2016:294) employed within a context, and in this situation, the #FixTheCountry protest movement. Communicative ecology is examined in three perspectives, thus, technological, social and discussive. Technological considers the devices and connecting media that enable communication and interaction in social movement activities. The social perspective considers the people and their social modes, whiles the discussive considers the content of the communication employed, including the information on placards and other protest documents (Tacchi, Slater& Hearn, 2003; Treré & Mattoni, 2016). The application of the communicative ecology, has largely been within the context of digital communication for development and community media projects emphasizing on how to better the lot of people (Tacchi, Slater & Hearn, 2003), such as poverty alleviation, as such, it is well placed for use in this study. The concept allows an exploration of collective action both within the specific cultural and political context of Ghana as well as specific moments of political mobilization. This helps to explore the findings of the study beyond the moment of protest in order to better understand how collective action moves across social and political sites.

Methodology

This study deployed a multimodal qualitative research approach, contributing to the growing body of knowledge on the communicative ecology within social movement and protests. It follows an interpretive research paradigm (Bagele & Kawulich, 2012; Scotland, 2012) drawing on research

methodologies, philosophies, ideologies and epistemologies of finding meaning to how the digital era has augmented the communicative complexities and strengthened the organization and mobilization of social movements and protests. Interpretive research, as observed by Deem (2002) renders itself useful in using issues, language and research approaches that empower the participants, recognizes the silenced voices, honor their individual differences and position the researcher and participants' views in a historical, personal or political context. The study thus adopteda number of qualitative data collection approaches including covert observation of the activities of #FixTheCountry, semi-structured interviews with a convener and some activists of #FixTheCountry, as well as time series analysis of events and happenings after the emergence of the hashtag. The main aim for using all these research methods and approaches through triangulation was to understand the complex employment of both mediated and unmediated communication channels and practices for the organization and mobilization of participation in collective actions and social movements in Ghana, such as #FixTheCountry.

The design incorporated research methodologies and techniques in gathering the reliable and validated sources of data from the field study to provide experiential evidence in support of the central argument of this study. The researchers adopted purposive and convenient sampling techniques for data collection. These techniques provide the opportunity to access information from respondents who have reliable information and are available to give information pertaining to the course of study. The researchers therefore observed and followed the demonstrative activities of activists and supporters of #FixTheCountry in the media space. Additionally, a convener and two activists were interviewed on account of anonymity. Finally, a qualitative content analysis of media reports was conducted.

Findings and Discussions

So far, this study has succeeded in diagnosing the research problem and so, it is only right to do some prognosis in the light of the objectives of this study. This leads us to do some critical discussions as provided below based on the result of the findings that emerged inductively from the converged and triangulated data sources. This is to help take into account the differences and relations among applications, activities and channels, and also corroborate Meikle's (2002) assertion that limiting the focus to only one of the online or media technological manifestations of social movements jeopardizes the totality of the impact because some important aspects such as the role and evolution of different platforms within a movement and the connections among multiple technologies, actors, and their practices may be lost. To this end, it is important to note that for the sake of clarity and to elucidate the comprehensibility of the complex network application, the discussions are thematized as follows:

Mobilization

Mobilizing people for #FixTheCountry was strongly characterized by the local dimension (Della Porta, 2010), but gradually took an international dimension where Ghanaians outside the boarders of

Ghana threw their weight behind the protesters. Aside the social media support, physically protests were held in other geographical locations like the Ghana Embassies in the United States of America and Germany. Mobilization for the protests have largely been through social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Traditional media like radio and television, which have reach in rural communities have served to support the digital mobilization of protesters for the #FixTheCountry social movement, especially in areas with no internet connectivity. The street protests in Ghana had been called since May 9, 2021 but permission was not granted because the police in Ghana obtained an injunction against them, allegedly for safety reasons amidst the COVID pandemic. The crave and agitations for protests will, however, not go down. Subsequent to the lifting of the injunction, there have been protests in Accra and Takoradi in Ghana.

Dossier of #FixTheCountry Social MovementPhysical Protests

4thAugust 2021 – Accra, Ghana

The first successful physical protest in Accra was held on 4th August 2021. The conveners perceived it as just the beginning (Myjoyonline, 2021a) since there were plans to replicate it in the various regional capitals of Ghana (Parker-Wilson, 2021). Aside #FixTheCountry,protesters used another hashtag #WeGoDemonstrate to garner support and organize protesters.

12th June 2021 – Spain

The protests were led by Mark Oliver Vormawor in Spain. Most of the protesters held placards which suggested that they wanted the government of Ghana to fix the depreciating value of the cedi as well as increasing petroleum prices. Ghanaians who protested in Spain not only raised concerns about happenings in Ghana, but the fact that the Ghanaian Embassy in Spain was charging exorbitant fees (BBC, 2021).

24thAugust 2021 – Germany

The President of the Republic of Ghana was invited to Germany, to deliver a speech in Düsseldorfas part of the 75th-anniversary celebrations of North Rhine-Westphalia. Ghanaians resident in Germany accosted the president, chanting #FixTheCountry (DW News, 2021).

21st September, 2021 – Sekondi-Takoradi, Ghana

Some Residents of Sekondi-Takoradi joined #FixTheCountry protestors in the oil city of Takoradi to demonstrate against the deplorable nature of the roads in a region that produces oil and substantial quantities of the total cocoa output in Ghana. Other critical concerns driving the street protests were the destruction of water bodies due to illegal mining activities and the high unemployment rate in the region (Ghanaweb, 2021a).

24th September, 2021 – United States of America

During a visit by the President of Ghana to the United States to attend the 76th UN General Assembly, two groups of Ghanaians clashed, hurling invectives at each other. While one group, perceived as pro-

NPP was there to welcome the president, the other group, perceived as pro-#FixTheCountryhad organized themselves in another protest against the happenings in Ghana (Ghanaweb, 2021b).

The outlay of activities and concerns above by the #FixTheCountry protestors have been found to be contextual-based issues that feed into the global picture effectively. Aside the general need for fixing of issues in Ghana and elsewhere, it has been found that protesters in the various regions where demonstrations have been staged have called for issues that pertained to their regions, but adds up in the global puzzle of #FixTheCountry.

Communication Applications among Protesters

Based on the diverse technology used by protesters, the communicative ecology formed is multi-dimensional, interrelated and covering people from all walks of life and economic backgrounds thus enhancing the communicative strength of the movement. The communicative ecology built is strong, spanning both on and offline technologies. Social media and mobile technologies played a pivotal role, but traditional media was also not left out for those who were technologically limited. In an interview with one of the conveners, he averred that:

> This protest as you see it started on social media. We first created the hashtag on Twitter and we realized that within a short time, it was trending as number one with many followings, tweets, retweets and mentions. We then moved some activities to Facebook and continued mobilizing people there too. The radio stations and TV stations have also helped us a lot. We then started organizing and pushing for physical demonstrations.

> Organizing people for this protest movement wasn't difficult at all. This is because people are feeling the economic hardships and so it is not as if we are trying to persuade or coerce them to be part of us. People have come out of their free will. The hardship is real, people don't have jobs and the economic situation is also not conducive for businesses. There are too many high taxes but people need to survive.

The vision of the conveners had gone down so well with the protesters that, on the day of the demonstration, aside the social media mobilization, mobile and traditional media communication, some protestors brought their personal placards which bore messages of their perceived challenges and issues that needed redress by government, aside the corporate placards provided by the organizers. This is evident in the interview extracts below:

> This demonstration that you see, a lot of people brought their own placards with the messages already on them. The reality is that, people feel the hardship and based on their situations, they created the placards.

> Even Ghanaians outside Ghana feel the hardship because their family members in Ghana complain to them. When they bring money it is not enough for any project and so they have

decided to join us in protests. You see what is happening in the Ghana Embassies abroad. We will not give up until we see drastic changes in the economic situation in Ghana.

The protests, though perceived to be for a worthy course of ensuring a better Ghana for posterity to see sometimes ended up being fatal. It is no wonder some placards had the inscriptions of "*I may not return home alive from this 'demo'. And if I don't, Mama, remember I died fighting for the betterment of the next generation.*" Some other protest messages on the placards which demonstrators demanded government to fix included – a fair share of the oil money; scrap hybrid system and adopt PSA; killer rents; poor health delivery; stop illegal electricity and water connections; remove 20% sanitary pad tax; stop the cathedral and use the proceeds to build hospitals, schools, roads and comfortable houses for the police; fix our education system now; reduce fuel and gas prices; change the 1992 constitution; stop the no bed syndrome in our hospitals; turn all prisons into hotels and put prisoners on state farms; stop suppressing press freedom; fix bad roads; stop the religious partiality; The dollar has arrested Bawumia; no to revisionism, Nkrumah remains the founder; stop the nasty borrowing; the national security has now become a national threat to the citizens; keep Ghana clean, stop dumping refuse just anywhere; respect yourself – Officer Adjei Koti, stop taking bribes; justice for Kaaka; Ken Ofori Atta should resign as the Finance Minister: no family and friends; the police are hungry but cannot complain; dishonesty and lack of patriotism gave us year of no return; If Ghana was your personal property, would you run it like this?; among others.

Not only are these messages informative, but they are reflective of the kind of change that the protestors demanded and wanted to see.

Political Coloration of Protests

From the emergence of the protest movement #FixTheCountry, activists accentuated that it was not politically motivated and that well-meaning Ghanaians and ordinary citizens who felt pressed by the economic policies and initiatives of successive governments were behind the protests. The former president of Ghana, H.E. John D. Mahama for instance came out clear that he had never supported the activities of the #FixTheCountry campaigners (Sore, 2021), however, on July 6, 2021 at an anti-government demonstration in Accra organized by the main opposition party in Ghana, the National Democratic Congress, banners with the hashtag were spotted. Subsequent to that, the former flagbearer of the Convention Peoples Party (CPP), Dr. Abu Sakara Foster, also joined forces with the #FixTheCountry campaigners to collect signatures of Ghanaians to compel the President of Ghana to accent to a review of the 1992 Constitution which has been in use for nearly thirty years (Myjoyonline, 2021a). Mr. Foster claimed that the 1992 Constitution in its current state "only benefits the political elite," calling for one that "represent[s] the hope and aspirations of Ghanaians."

Quite contrary to what was expected, a daughter of former Prime Minster of Ghana, Dr. Kofi A. Busia, Nana Frema Busia, threw her weight behind the #FixTheCountry protestors (Busia, 2021),

increasing the unpopularity of the New Patriotic Party government, which is the incumbent government. This is because, her father was a proponent of the Danquah-Busia-Dombo tradition that gave birth to the NPP.

The different political interests and participation in the social movement, #FixTheCountry, including activists of the ruling government (Ghanaweb, 2021a) espousesthe fact that largely, the communicative ecology of the social movement #FixTheCountry was to improve the social and economic lives of Ghanaians, but not politically motivated. This corroborates Tacchi, Slater and Hearn (2003) assertion that the application of the communicative ecology in digital communication is essentially to elicit development to better the lives of people. This is also very evident in the kind of information displayed on the protest placards.

Conclusion

This study has revealed a number of significant findings which hitherto, not known in the social movement and mobilization communicative ecology and, for that matter draws the following conclusions. That social and protest movements have existed for a long time and the media has served as a strategic collaborator for organizing such movements, though sometimes implicitly. In the technological and digital era, social media forms such as Facebook and Twitter have enhanced the organization of social protests, and the power inherent cannot be underestimated, in spite of the fact that it may seem virtual in the initial stages. Accordingly, this study, advances that the media ecology or environment in the digital era is fertile and fosters the mobilization of people for any agenda. Indeed social media has proven as very resourceful in the #FixtTheCountry social movement protests, which this study argues that may have taken place with the unfettered media climate in Ghana, however, the infusion of social media has added to the success of the protests. Finally, it concludes that "Technological change is not additive, but ecological(Postman, 1998:x)because this study believes that much as the protests would have gone on with the traditional media as we had previously, social media did not come in as an additional layer of medium, but "altered the relations within a system of other media, reconfiguring the ecology in unexpected ways" (Treré & Mattoni, 2016, p. 292).

The study thus recommends that, much as social media has come to stay and it is easy to use, its power to make information and issues go viral should not be underestimated. Few years ago, traditional media was the main stake for collective action and it would have taken months to be heard or seen elsewhere. Drawing on the findings of the study, we observe how a spark in Ghana could influence Ghanaians around the world to consistently and collectively fight for a common desire. Collective action is often for a good social course and political actors need to accept this reality and the fact that, thanks to the strong communicative ecology powered by social media, citizens can always get their voices heard for a desired action.

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