THE PUBLIC SPHERE ON A DIGITAL PLANE: THE INFLUENCE OF THE NEW DIGITAL MEDIA ON GHANA'S DEMOCRACY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract

This paper examines how social media is providing a new digital public sphere and shaping the democratic process in Ghana. It draws on Habermas's public sphere theory to explore how social media has occupied a digital public sphere that creates spaces for democratic participation and public discourse. The paper reviews relevant literature on social media use as a tool of political communication, the new digital public sphere, and the democratic process in Ghana and globally. Since Ghana's return to democratic rule in 1992, the media landscape was initially dominated by traditional state and private media outlets. However, the rise of digital and social media over the past two decades has transformed the public sphere, creating online spaces for citizens to engage in political deliberations and share diverse viewpoints. The paper examines how social media played a crucial role in Ghana's 2020 elections, facilitating citizen political participation, public opinion formation, and activism despite COVID-19 restrictions on physical gatherings. Social media enabled political parties to campaign online, citizens to voice concerns, and interest groups to mobilize protests and demand accountability. While acknowledging the digital divide and attempts by political elites to control narratives, the paper argues that social media's interactive and connective structure has enhanced the public sphere by dismantling dominant discourses and amplifying alternative perspectives. The paper concludes by recommending robust fact-checking mechanisms and collaborative efforts from government, civil society, media, and interest groups to strengthen the digital public sphere's role in consolidating Ghana's democracy. Overall, it highlights social media's transformative impact on Ghana's public sphere and democratic processes.

Keywords: Digital Media, Social Media, Public Sphere, Democracy, Discourse, Habermas

Introduction

The research study intended to examine how social media is providing a new digital public sphere and shaping the democratic process in Ghana. This looks at how the new media is impacting Ghana's public sphere and democratic values encompassing public discourse, activism, and political participation. The paper draws on Habermas's (1989) public sphere theory for its theoretical underpinnings in exploring how social media

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has occupied a digital public sphere that creates spaces for democratic participation and public discourse. In doing this, the paper reviews relevant literature on social media use as a tool of political communication, the new digital public sphere, and the democratic process in Ghana and across the world. The paper therefore examines what current literature says about social media and the digital public sphere in Ghana looking critically at the 2020 election. This helps in addressing the question: To what extent is social media shaping the public sphere and the democratic process in Ghana?

Since Ghana's return to democratic rule in 1992, the media has been vibrant in the country's move toward democratic consolidation and participatory public discourse (Fisher et al., 2023; Gyampo, 2017a). Restrictions on the media and limitations of its penetration were a major challenge in the early years of the country's democracy (Dzisah, 2018). Thus, despite the existence of the media and its operation in the country, the media was mostly state-centered and limited in terms of its reach and the participation of the general public, (Gadjanova et al., 2022; Lynch et al., 2022) with the public sphere mostly dominated by the political elites, major political parties, and the state through the traditional media spaces- including the TV, radio, and newspapers (Dzisah, 2018; Gyampo, 2017a).

Nevertheless, with the evolution of digital media, developing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, including Ghana have not been left out. With the country's embracement of the new media, particularly social media as a new space for political communication and public discourse (Dzisah, 2018), a new form of digital public space has been created paving the way for a large majority of the public who could otherwise not have the opportunity to engage in public discourse to now engage, interact, and share their opinions. State authorities, political parties, and political communicators have also taken to social media to engage with the citizenry on public discussions and issues that concern the democratic process (Fisher et al., 2023; Lynch et al., 2022). This has paved the way for a digital public sphere that sees the interaction and engagement of the public in political communication, electioneering processes, and policy discussions (Dzisah, 2018).

Research Methodology

The method applied for the paper is a comprehensive review of existing literature. In doing this, an extensive and comprehensive search was conducted on several academic search engines and databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. With this, the combination of keywords including: "social media", "digital media", "the digital public sphere", "political communication", "political participation", "political mobilization", "activism", "elections", "democracy", and "Ghana" were used. Furthermore, the references used by the papers that were identified during the literature search were critically looked at in drawing new sources and works from them. With the initial search for the literature, many papers, book chapters, books, etc., were obtained which were further reviewed concerning the research topic and concerns of this paper. Other key areas that were considered in selecting the papers were their relevance to the current study on social media and elections in Ghana as well as the date of publication and the recognition of where they were published. Throughout this process, significant reference was given regarding papers that were peer-reviewed, books, chapters, project reports, and reports from recognized institutions.

Above all, the literature that was selected was analyzed and synthesized to provide a comprehensive understanding of the works that have been done on social media's role as a new public sphere and communication tool for shaping politics and the democratic process in Ghana. This allowed for looking into the literature on how social media is shaping Ghana's politics focusing on the 2020 elections with specific

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insights in significant areas including activism, public opinion formation, public discourse, engagement, and participation. Lastly, the review of literature also helped in comprehending the theoretical framework of the public sphere and its applications in Ghana's social media politics and democracy. The literature also provided space for identifying the research gaps, with particular attention drawn to the need to conduct more research on social media misinformation and derogatory language use in Ghana and the imperativeness of bringing a more collaborative fact-checking mechanism from all key stakeholders.

The Media Environment of Ghana

The media in Ghana has occupied a vital space for communication, information dissemination, and democratic promotion since its democratic transition in 1992 and even before the transition (Boateng, 2022; Tettey, 2017). Dating back to the pre-colonial period as well as its colonial period through to its independence and post-independence landscape, the media has been significant in promoting public participation and public opinion formation (Dzisah, 2018; Gyampo, 2017b; Shaw, 2009). Despite the active role that is played by the media as a fourth estate within the democratic dispensation, it has come under manipulation and control by dominant political elites, governments, and parties, which provided limited space for the public to inclusively communicate and participate in the public discourse (Dzisah, 2018).

Under the post-colonial independent authoritarian administration of Ghana, the media, and its work towards promoting inclusive public opinion were curtailed with limited spaces for media rights and freedoms (Tettey, 2017). This was meant to promote and consolidate the power, interests, and political agendas of the post-colonial military and authoritarian regimes (Boateng et al., 2024; Danquah & Mensah, 2021). Nevertheless, with the country's transition to a civilian democratic government in 1992, spaces were created for public discourse with the media gaining an avenue for engaging the public in democratic decision-making (Frempong et al., 2022; Amankwah & Mbatha, 2019). This facilitated an avenue of ensuring media pluralism and a space for holding public officials, elected governments, and political elites accountable for their actions and inactions (Anim et al., 2019). A new public sphere was created for the citizenry to engage and participate in public discourse and deliberate on diverse political concerns.

This draws attention to the structural transformation within Habermas' public sphere (Fraser, 2020; Shaw, 2009). Since the transition to a civilian and democratic governance system, the Fourth Republic of Ghana has more than ever produced media pluralism and freedoms for the media (Dzisah, 2018). The media has therefore been very vibrant at this time compared to the early periods that followed its post-colonial era and its return to a civilian democracy (Dzisah, 2024; Gyampo, 2017b). It is imperative to emphasize that the digital media wave which has expanded across geographical borders has been a major reason behind Ghana's media pluralism and openness which has revitalized the media and political communication landscape creating spaces for a new digital public sphere that has facilitated a much more inclusive and participatory communication (Abdulai & Sackeyfio, 2022; Gadjanova et al., 2022; Lynch et al., 2022). This has enhanced the freedom of speech, opinion formation, and diversified decision-making (Boateng et al., 2024). Political communication in this sense encompasses "a set of practices that center on the relationship between the public, media, and political domains" (Pfetsch, 2004). Politics is communication, and one of the primary venues for mediating politics is the media, and therefore political communication necessitates a grasp of these relationships (Blumler, 2016).

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The digital revolution in Ghana dates to the early 1990s when the country was seen as one of the states in the continent of Africa to embrace digital technology and internet use for its communication, public discourse, and information dissemination (Puplampo, 2024; Gyimah-Boadi, 2001). This led to the enhancement of solidification of the public sphere and its structural transformation as seen in the "Habermasian" framework of structural transformation within the public sphere (Dzisah, 2018). It concerns opening a broader space for its communication and media landscape. With the enhancement of digital tools of communication and technology opportunities were created for widespread deliberations for the citizenry to engage on political issues of concern. This was primarily shaped by the liberation that came within the media from the early years of 1992 and beyond under the 1992 Fourth Republican Constitution of the country (Gyimah-Boadi, 2001).

Within Ghana's digital media structure today, the most common social media platforms that have been utilized include Facebook, YouTube, Twitter (X), Instagram, and other messaging Apps, particularly WhatsApp (Boateng et al., 2024). It is important to note that even though WhatsApp is not social media but a messaging App, it is widely used in Ghana and other African countries as a social media (Fisher et al., 2023; Lynch et al., 2022; Gadajanova et al., 2022; Cheeseman et al., 2020), with many individuals and groups sharing links of WhatsApp groups on other platforms including Facebook and Twitter for others to join the link which leads them to their enclosed WhatsApp community of people. These groups are used in sharing and deliberating on emerging social and political concerns (Lynch et al., 2022). It has also been described as a space where supporters of political parties form a community to deliberate on issues of concern and strategies for effectively campaigning and winning elections in African countries, including Ghana (Asif & Sandhu, 2023; Cheeseman et al., 2020; Lynch et al., 2022).

It has been argued that elections in Ghana particularly the general elections of 2012 as well as that of 2016 and the recent 2020 elections have adopted the strategies that were used by Barack Obama during the United States 2008 elections- in utilizing the platforms of social media for electoral mobilization and campaigning (Frempong et al., 2022; Dzisah, 2018). This has in turn shaped the structures of political communication and electoral campaigning creating the space for employing the interactive and connective structures and patterns of social media for communication and information dissemination.

The transformations that have been seen in Ghana's media landscape are much evident in its digital media which have over the last two decades and still counting been significant in shaping the public discourse (Kumi, 2022; Amankwah & Mbatha, 2019). This has provided many avenues for the expression of public opinion and interests in matters of concerns and policy as well as created room for a widespread public expression of freedom and a free speech space to some significant level compared to the early years of its democratic transition. In January 2024, there were 24.6 million internet users in Ghana, accounting for 69.8% of the country's 34 million total population (Dataportal.com, 2024). 7.4 million People used social media at the same time, accounting for 21.5 percent of the nation's total population (Dataportal.com, 2024). Compared to 2023, when 14.8 million individuals in the nation had internet access and 6 million of them were active social media users, these numbers are significantly higher (Dataportal.com, 2024). As a result, there is a significant increase in the 2024 statistics, indicating a rise in social media users and internet penetration (Boateng et al., 2024; Dzisah, 2023). This speaks to the capacity and strength of the country's digital public sphere and its significance for wider public discourse which comes as essential for widespread democratic opening and deepening.

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Theoretical Underpinning: The Public Sphere Theory

The public sphere theory has its roots in Jurgen Habermas's explication regarding the coffee houses as well as salons as spaces that fueled the deliberations of the public dating back to the 18th and 19th centuries in Western Europe (Habermas, 1989). This created a form of institutional structure that led to a wearing out of the chokehold of the church as well as the state regarding matters of public interest (Stewart & Hartmann, 2020). It should be emphasized that notwithstanding the point that in theory, all people could engage and contribute to the public discourse and discussions within the public irrespective of gender, social status, class, etc., the discussions in salons and coffee houses were restricted and dominated by the few bourgeois class (Fraser, 2020; Stewart & Hartmann, 2020; Squires, 2002).

However, starting from the 20th century the salons and coffee houses have to an extent opened up for mass culture, modern technology, and the larger media market (Stewart & Hartmann, 2020; Squires, 2002). Modern media technologies- including Television and Radio thus took center stage regarding discussions on rational issues that concerned the public interest and beyond. The 18th and 19th century's public sphere of Habermas transformed into the "structural transformation within the public sphere (Stewart & Hartmann, 2020). It should be noted that notwithstanding the transformation towards a conventional media structure, the rationale of democratic opening concerning the media and its liberalization in the 20th century impaired the inclusive communication and participatory deliberations of the larger public (Seeliger & Sevignani, 2022; Fraser, 2020; Squires, 2002). By and by, the evolution and diffusion of digital media including social media with its penetration through the internet has provided a form of transformation within the public sphere. That is, digital media with its networked and discursive platforms has created avenues for widening the public sphere arena (Squires, 2002) which has led to diverse expressions of public discourse and opinion sharing from the citizenry (Fraser, 2020; Stewart & Hartmann, 2020; Gadjanova et al., 2019). This has facilitated larger public interactions within a networked public arena that has enhanced the public sphere more than ever. In the case of Ghana therefore the emergence and spread of social media has facilitated a broader public sphere (Lynch et al., 2022; Dzisah, 2018), which has enhanced a networked public of the citizenry in deliberating and engaging in the public discourse.

However, it is important to emphasize that despite the structural transformations regarding a shift towards a more digital media space which has created a widespread platform for public deliberations within a digital public sphere, there continue to exist limitations- including serving as avenues for political manipulations and restrictions from political and state functionaries (Gadjanova et al., 2019; Squires, 2002). There are also a lot of setbacks in terms of unequal access which is engineered within a digital divide for some people and groups, especially the rural and poor communities (Fisher et al., 2023; Gadjanova et al., 2022) regarding benefiting from and engaging in an inclusive and discursive public sphere.

The Media and Democratization in Ghana

With Ghana's transition to democratic governance in 1992, the media was charged with acting as a fourth arm of government promoting and projecting the voices, interests, and concerns of the people (Dzisah, 2018; Gyampo, 2017b). The media was charged with ensuring public opinion formation and enhancing freedom of expression. However, media freedom and penetration dating back to the early years of the country's transition to democracy and beyond were much dominated by the state, with few political elites and major political parties dominating the media and political communication landscape (Fisher et al., 2023;

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Lynch et al., 2022) through the various traditional media platforms- encompassing the TV, Radio, and Newspapers. The 1992 constitution of Ghana provided for the elimination of all censorship with the state and the private media (Dzisah, 2018). The government of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) in the year 2001 made substantial efforts that led to a repeal of the Criminal Libel Law in the media (Gyampo, 2017a; Shardow & Asare, 2016). This suggested a strengthening of the democratic process and the enhancement of media freedoms.

Despite all these and the efforts towards enhancing media plurality, freedom of expression, and the democratic process, various instances have been reported regarding the curtailment of media freedom, freedom of expression, and public opinion (Gadjanova et al., 2019; Dzisah, 2018). For instance, various attacks have come on journalists and other media personalities as well as political and social activists over the years with threats of arrests and the like in recent times (Larry, 2022). A clear example of this is the repression of the state on media personalities including (Mr. Boamah Bennie) of the Accra-based Power FM, (Mr. Godsbrain Smart), popularly known as (Captain Smart) currently working as a Journalist for Onua TV an Accra-based private TV station (Larry, 2022). All these occurred only around the month of February 2022 (Larry, 2022). It should be noted however that notwithstanding all these repressions and lack of tolerance from the state regarding a restriction on the media's role and function in promoting freedom of speech and the democratic process, Ghana's media to a large extent enjoyed a quite good level of freedom from state control and censorship dating to its transition to democratic governance (Dzisah, 2018; Gyampo, 2017b; Bokor, 2015).

It is important to reemphasize that since Ghana's return to democratic governance, the traditional media has remained the main space for curating and stewarding the activities and actions of the government and other state officials (Dzisah, 2018; Gyampo, 2017a). It has also served as the main stage for public opinion formation (Boateng, 2022; Lynch et al., 2022). However, it has been evident that in the last two decades and still counting, the evolution and expansion of digital and social media have gradually broadened the spectacle of public opinion formation, public discourse, and media reach across the country (Gadjanova et al., 2019; Dzisah, 2018). This has led to expansion and broadening in terms of creating a wider space for citizen engagement in political discussions, political opinion sharing, and enhancing the public discourse. It has provided a public sphere where citizens can voice out and share with the political elite and the online citizenry on public discourses enriching opinion sharing across the digital spaces. Popular social media sites that are used for political communication and public opinion sharing in Ghana include Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram (Gadjanova et al., 2019; Dzisah, 2018; Gyampo, 2017b).

Social media has therefore served as a "new networked public sphere" that has created avenues for the public to meet in the digital space and deliberate and discuss pertinent socio-political issues that affect them (Lynch et al., 2022; Dzisah, 2018; Oluwole, 2016). In the case of Ghana, which is the focus of the paper, social media has created a networked public sphere for citizens to converge digitally in sharing their opinions (Fisher et al., 2023; Gadjanova et al., 2019; Dzisah, 2018) and contributing to the political discourse over time and space. This has expanded the public discourse paving the way for widespread public opinion sharing, inclusive political communication, political participation, activism, and mobilization.

It is evident that to achieve the formidable plurality regarding media openness, dynamism in communication, participation in the public sphere, and public opinion formation, social media has become a key part of the contemporary media landscape. Social media with its digital public sphere has provided a solid

space for strengthening and consolidating the democratic process (Fisher et al., 2023; Boateng, 2022). Social media in Ghana has brought millions of the Ghanaian populace into the public sphere- enhancing participation and engagement in the public discourse (Gadjanova et al., 2022; Lynch et al., 2022; Kang, 2010, p. 2) on a digital plane so to speak. Social media with its affordances and widespread usage for political communication in Ghana has provided diversity in media- creating avenues for citizen engagement in the public sphere that enhance the democratic dispensation. This was seen in Ghana's 2020 elections where social media served as a space for the citizenry to engage the political elite and the state in diverse conversations on the public discourse (Gadjanova et al., 2022; Lynch et al., 2022).

The Role of the New Digital Media and Political Communication

Political communication as noted earlier encompasses "a set of practices that center on the relationship between the public, media, and political domains" (Pfetsch, 2004). The role of the new digital and social media in political communication, politics, and democratic deliberations and dialogue cannot be underestimated in contemporary media, communication, and politics. The significant role played by social media over the last two decades has been emphasized by scholars regarding the very ways they have acted as new communication channels for public deliberation and discussions more than before (Gadjanova et al., 2022; Dzisah, 2018; Roese, 2018; Gyampo, 2017b). The digital space provided by social media has thus created an online political community of engagement, where political parties, their supporters, and candidates can interact, considered, and deliberate on important socio-political issues (Gadjanova et al., 2022; Dzisah, 2018).

This space has been relevant as a community engagement arena where the public can move beyond the traditional media structure to now communicate and dialogue on digital platforms. According to Hagar (2014, p. 75), the spaces of digital media have served an important role for political parties and their candidates as they have utilized the platforms at low cost compared to the traditional media in enhancing political communication and campaigning. Similarly, Dzisah (2018) has pointed out that political parties in Ghana, particularly the incumbent NPP and the opposition NDC have over the last two decades utilized the spaces of social media to reach a larger audience and disseminate their political campaign messages and engage with people across the digital spaces, which was evident in the 2016 general elections. Also, Boateng et al., (2024) have noted that the platforms of social media have over the years served as community spaces for the Ghanaian public and political parties as they have used the spaces in campaigning and dialoguing on political messages and elections, which was seen during the general elections which was held in the year 2020.

The spaces provided by social media have acted as a digital community that has moved beyond the structures of traditional media to embrace communication and participatory dialogue which is carried out by the digital public community of social media users. The interactive media structures of social media with its affordances have opened up spaces for digital communities that are used to create, share, discuss, and deliberate on important political issues across digital platforms (Dzisah, 2023). This has gone beyond the roles and structures of the traditional media including the TV, Radio, and Print Media. This has facilitated democratic engagement and participation of the public.

Social media platforms have created avenues for a form of citizen journalism where the public now acts as public journalists by utilizing digital platforms including Twitter (X), YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and the like in disseminating information on important social and political concerns (Dzisah, 2018). Social

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media therefore offers the opportunity to facilitate a new digital community that enhances public opinion formation and diverse political discourse among the citizenry (Maboudi & Nadi, 2016; Chen, 2013). However, it is important to note that non-democratic regimes, including authoritarian governments, can also capitalize on the spaces of social media to shift political attention and issues by disseminating misinformation and fake news with the view of consolidating their political power and interests (Lynch et al., 2022).

The social network spaces that have been provided in Ghana over the past few years have opened the platform media avenue that paves the way through the digital public sphere community for citizens to voice out and dismantle dominant political narratives and challenge the discourses that are put forward by the dominant political elites (Gadjanova et al., 2022). Through social network spaces, therefore, a form of e-engagement and participation is provided for the citizenry in effectively sharing in and facilitating diverse political discourses that help in public decision-making. The role of digital and social media in Ghana just like the global wave of digital platforms and widespread political communication and participation has provided the space for activism and the public's participation (Dzisah, 2018; Ogini & Moitui, 2015). This confirms an argument by Khan and Krishnan (2017) that social media in contemporary communication and politics occupies a central role in citizen engagement, participation, and activism. This follows the point that within a democratic political landscape, the existence of digital platforms provides a network of citizens who are actively involved and engaged in disseminating and discussing significant news and information that are shared by traditional media channels (Gyampo, 2017b).

It is therefore seen that the emergence and spread of social media have created an online community that cuts across physical and geographical landscapes where people can engage and disseminate political information, news, and ideas. This brings people together in a democratic space that sees the sharing of ideas and avenues for expressing and discussing diverse discourses that dismantle the mainstream views and decisions on politics (Boateng et al., 2024; Boateng, 2022; Anim et al., 2019). Through this digital community of the online public, an avenue is created for public collaboration where citizens deliberate in strengthening and enhancing democratic norms on citizen participation and dialogue. It is however important to emphasize that social media's networked structures, and affordances, as well as its uncontrolled platforms to an extent also create avenues for facilitating a disarray landscape where fake news, misinformation, and manipulations become present (Gadjanova et al., 2022; Lynch et al., 2022). Political elites and other political functionaries and communicators also capitalize on the widespread arena of the platforms in manipulating and disseminating distorted news and ideas to cement their power and consolidate their political agendas and interests (Anaman et al., 2023; Gadjanova et al., 2022). The next section looks at social media and democratic transformation in Ghana's 2020 election.

Social Media and Democratic Transformation in Ghana's 2020 Election

This part of the paper examines how social media has shaped democratic processes and the public sphere in Ghana, particularly looking into the 2020 election. This examines significant areas including citizen political participation and engagement, political activism, as well as public opinion formation. Studies have pointed out that the digital media wave, particularly social media, has contributed significantly toward shaping citizen engagement and expression of views and concerns on political discourses and overall democratic procedures (Nutsugah et al., 2024; Anaman et al., 2023; Danquah and Mensah, 2021). This was evident in the 2020 Ghanaian elections as social media served as online communities for the participation and engagement of the citizenry (Boateng et al., 2024; Frempong et al., 2022).

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The idea of the public sphere encompasses a social structure where the citizenry is encouraged within a free space to deliberate on public and political discourses that concern the public for the common good (Suleiman, 2017). Looking closely at the "Habermasian" idea of the public sphere with its focus on the early cultural societies as well as the coffee houses and the salons within the 17th and 18th centuries, a space even though limited was seen to be created for public participation, and deliberations on issues of the public interest (Dzisah, 2023; Suleiman, 2017). The earlier notions of the public sphere within the "Habermasian" view had little about what ensued in the cultural, social, political, traditional as well as the philosophical and historical structures that encompassed the periods that preceded colonialism through the colonial, and early post-colonial periods (Najatu et al., 2024; Agomor, 2023).

Nonetheless, it is necessary to emphasize that the transformation that has emerged with the structural landscape of the public sphere from the coffee houses and salons to a more vibrant and open media structure within Western Europe dating back to the 20th century resonates with the present democratic structures and openings in Ghana (Puplampu, 2024; Prempeh, 2023). This reflects Ghana's transformation to civilian democratic rule in the early 1990s and continuation towards a democratic consolidation where citizens have had the opportunity and continue to have the space for engaging democratically in sharing their opinion on public discourses and partaking in decision-making. A clear instance here is the Ghanian elections in 2020, where notwithstanding the restrictions that were placed on physical meetings and gatherings due to the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, during Ghana's run-up towards its elections, the networked and connective nature of social media and its affordances allowed the citizenry to digitally engage in an online community of public in sharing their ideas and above all participation through voicing out their concerns about the elections (Boateng et al., 2024; Danquah & Mensah, 2021).

Despite the restrictions placed on physical meetings and gatherings during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, political parties were able to utilize the spaces of social media to mobilize and engage their supporters and the electorate body for political support (Asif et al., 2022; Boateng et al., 2024). Online campaigning mechanisms of posters, manifesto, and policy message sharing on various platforms, including Facebook and Twitter came to replace the physical rallies that had been halted. This draws attention to the influence and impacts of social media's interactive spaces and the democratic consolidation processes with social media coming in as a path towards an online public sphere (VonDoepp & Young, 2013, p. 36). This digital space of the public sphere contributes towards the creation of an online community of people who utilize the platforms to share their voices on political concerns (Dzisah, 2018; Callamard, 2010) in articulating alternative and new discourses that stand to oppose the dominant narratives of the political elites. It is seen that social media's utilization in political communication, particularly in the areas of political information dissemination, mobilization of the electorates, participation, and opinion sharing, especially among the youthful population points to the inseparable use of social media in politics in contemporary times. This reflects how despite the restrictions of movements and any physical gatherings during the intense periods of the Coronavirus, social media served as a public community for the citizenry and political actors to interact in the process of the 2020 election.

Political Participation on Social Media during the 2020 Election

The "Habermasian" conceptualization regarding the media in terms of its dialogical sphere that facilitates public participation and deliberation is seen in Ghana's democratic opening and citizen engagement in the public sphere (Dzisah, 2018). Notwithstanding this significant progress regarding the digital media's

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transformation and political participation in Ghana, the challenge of the digital divide consistently acts to leave a significant part of the people of Ghana out from actively engaging and participating in the democratic space (Gadjanova et al., 2019). The digital divide encompasses the gap that emanates between the internet and digital literacy concerning households, communities, and individuals in terms of social and economic levels with other people and groups (Asif, 2022; Ohemeng & Ofosu-Adarkwa, 2014, p. 298).

That is, the limited access to high-speed internet connections and digital media devices and technologies particularly for rural communities and the poorest populations of the country have to an extent affected inclusive political participation for these parts and groups of the citizenry (Gadjanova et al., 2019). Also, the incumbent political elites have in many ways acted to influence the free dissemination of information through the digital spaces in the country (Boateng et al., 2024). An example of this happened in February 2020 when the incumbent president Nana Addo-Danquah's administration responding to the vast of criticisms on digital platforms made a statement that came as a threat towards clamping down the digital media spaces (Adepoju, April 2021). This came with a statement from the then "Information Minister that the operators of the digital media should make it a point to regulate and check its use by people and if this is not done the government will set to regulate people's internet and social media use in the country" (Adepoju, April 2021).

In addition, during the year 2019, the government made a statement that the Gender, Children, and Social Protection Ministry as well as the Attorney General were coordinating together with some other state departments towards bringing in new regulations meant for criminalizing digital media content that are considered by the state not to be appropriate in the social media spaces (Adepoju, April 2021). This came although the country already has strict regulations in place in terms of cybersecurity (Adepoju, April 2021). As a result of this threatening atmosphere and hostile statement which in a way destructs the democratic process regarding people's freedom of speech and the independent media landscape, together with other important attacks on media freedoms as noted in the introductory sections, the country came down with thirty places down in the "World Press Freedom Index" in the year 2020 (Lartey, May 2022). The index in 2022 as was put together by the "Reporters Without Borders" saw the country, Ghana dropping from its 30th position in the year 2021 to 60th position in 2022 (Lartey, May 2022). This position is the worst position for the country in the last seventeen years following its 67th position in the year 2002 as well as its 66th position in the year 2005 (Lartey, May 2022).

Notwithstanding these backdrops, the platforms of social media were utilized by the main political parties, the NPP and NDC in reaching out to a widespread audience in their campaigning and information dissemination (Anaman et al., 2023; Frempong et al., 2022). The electorates also had the chance through the spaces of social media to voice out their concerns on the country's democratic and electoral procedures and in so doing contributed to public opinion formation (Boateng et al., 2024). The opposition, NDC intensified its social media presence by integrating a structure that was coordinated by their digital media communication teams to bring together a great number of their party communicators in enhancing their party communication, campaigning, and information dissemination (Gadjanova et al., 2019, p. 11). This shows how social media was heavily utilized and used in the 2020 elections as an avenue for strengthening electoral campaigning, public opinion formation, and the engagement of the political elites and the citizenry. It further shows how the digital public sphere has become salient in contemporary media and politics and its relevance for democratic opening. The next section examines public opinion formation and role of social media in the elections.

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Public Opinion Formation and Social Media Use in the Elections

Going back to the public sphere theory, it is seen that whereas public salons, cultural societies as well as coffee houses were employed in the "Habermasian" public sphere for fostering critical and rational discussions dating to the 18th and 19th centuries, the structural transformation of the public sphere (Prempeh, 2023; Fraser, 2020) with regards to Ghanaian democracy has been characterized with the enhancement of the assertiveness regarding the traditional media during its early years of the country's democratic transition (Gyampo, 2017a). During this period, information dissemination as well as the broader public and political communication came to be controlled and dominated mostly by the traditional media landscape encompassing the TV, Radio, and Newspapers that were to an extent controlled and owned by the state with some few private media (Gadjanova et al., 2019; Dzisah, 2018). Public opinion formation in the public sphere was controlled and spearheaded by the state and its media, the political elites, and a few private media.

However, with the wave of digital and internet media spreading across the world, Ghana has not been left out of it with the private media, state media, and the citizens utilizing the platform's spaces in contributing and shaping public opinion formation (Boateng et al., 2024). This has necessitated what has become known as the transformation of Ghana's democracy and the public sphere in the light of a digital public (Dzisah, 2018). The digital media has therefore played a significant role in complementing the traditional media's role in enhancing the public sphere and public communication. Furthermore, it could be emphasized that even though Ghana did not experience the direct democracy structure of deliberations within the salons, cultural societies, and coffee houses as was experienced in the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe, the salient function of the digital media in shaping public deliberations and political participation in Ghana is largely leading to a significant transformation within the public sphere (Dzisah, 2023; Bruns & Highfield, 2015). A structural transformation in democracy and the public sphere arena continues to be seen in the country's democratic dispensation and communication, with its online communities (Danquah & Mensah, 2021) of people that continue to shape public opinion formation and democratic discourse.

It could be noted that notwithstanding all the criticisms and setbacks on the media and communication in Ghana, digital spaces have created a profound avenue for an interactive and connective structure for widespread communication and political involvement of the citizenry together with the political actors. In the run-up to Ghana's 2020 elections, digital communication including remote conferences such as Zoom was employed in engaging with political supporters and the electorates in sharing ideas on political procedures and public opinion (Nutsugah et al., 2024). Public opinion formation in the periods of the elections and beyond was enhanced through the digital media spaces (Frempong et al., 2022; Alhassan, 2021).

This was possible with the interactive and connective avenues of digital media that created spaces for the sharing of ideas and the deliberation on issues by the citizenry alongside the political elites. In addition, most of the traditional media houses took advantage of the digital transformation and joined in the digital communication with most of their discussions and interviews conducted on digital platforms and conferencing applications of Zoom and the like, with political elites and the citizenry (Boateng et al., 2024; Institute for Democratic Governance, 2021). This draws attention to the fact that the "Habermasian" conceptualization of the public sphere and its transformation within democratic media does not just model mass communication and its existence but comes to reflect and reiterate critical and rational exchanges of information, opinions, and ideas, as well as power relations (Dzisah, 2023). This is significant for promoting diversified opinion-sharing and deliberation in the public sphere.

Social Media and Political Activism

Social media has contributed significantly as a space of mobilization and activism by social and youth groups in shaping democratic development (Gadjanova et al., 2022; Kang, 2010, p.2). Interest groups and associations in Ghana have over the years organized significantly on online platforms including Facebook and Twitter to protest unfair political practices and procedures (Gadjanova et al., 2019). As noted by Zia (2012, p. 16) the spaces of digital media have generated an interactive avenue for people, particularly the youth to organize and mobilize people in political activism and protest on important political and social concerns which come to shape the democratic opening.

During the 2020 elections in Ghana, political activists utilized social media platforms to engage the citizenry and educate them on the voting procedures, awareness creation, as well the tracking of election results (Anaman et al., 2024; Penplusbytes, 2021) as a way of ensuring a fair and transparent electoral procedure. The platforms of social media including YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook were utilized during the elections in protesting and demanding free and fair elections (Boateng et al., 2024; Penplusbytes, 2021). The platforms were also used by particularly the opposition in protesting against the Electoral Commission's declarations of the incumbent as the victor in the elections, requesting a recount of the ballots (Boateng et al., 2024). In addition, video documents of demonstrations and protests that were organized by the opposition were all posted on social media and online websites to create awareness among the public and seek political support from the public (CitinewsRoom, 2020). The interactive and connective structure of digital media also allowed for disseminating the opposition's concerns and protests across digital media beyond the national sphere, with international media houses including the "Reuters News Agency" and "BBC" reporting on it (Boateng et al., 2024).

Similarly, in the 2016 elections that preceded the 2020 elections, digital media channels served as avenues for horizontal deliberation and participation of the citizens in salient political issues that needed immediate attention (Dzisah, 2018). Some of the issues that were deliberated on online platforms included the contentious pardon of the three journalists of Montie FM, an Accra-based radio station, by the then president, Mr. Dramani Mahama, as well as the scandals of corruption that had been leveled against the Judiciary during the time (Penplusbytes, 2017). Other issues included the political violence that was seen as a result of the limitation in the voter registration exercise and the internal challenges of politics that were faced by the main opposition, NPP at the time (Dzisah, 2018; Penplusbytes, 2016). Online discussions were also seen on the economic crisis of the country at the time along with the "State of the Nation's Address" in 2016 (Gyampo, 2017; Penplusbytes, 2016).

It is also important to point out that although most of the deliberations on social media were horizontal in nature allowing for inclusive discussions and participation of the public, some deliberations were characterized by a vertical origin that came from the societal top hierarchy including political elites, some media practitioners, academics, and other powerful social and economic actors (Boateng et al., 2024). The "Coalition of Domestic Election Observers" (CODEO) for instance during the 2016 elections utilized various digital platforms to educate the population on issues that concerned the elections (Boateng et al., 2024; Penplusbytes, 2017). The issues included the limited voter registration of the 2016 elections and the need to actively take part in the elections in exercising their franchise and political right of voting. This was meant to enhance democratic participation and strengthen democratic dispensation.

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In terms of political activism, social media has been utilized massively by interest groups and movements in the country (Gyampo, 2017b). This has been used by pro-democracy activists in Ghana in disseminating their agendas, and slogans, and organizing support from the digital community in sharing counter-narratives within the online public sphere (Dzisah, 2018). An example of this is "#Occupy Flagstaff House" which was organized by protest groups in the year 2016 to demand accountability from the Mahama-led government at the time (Gadjanova et al., 2019). The group utilized social media including Facebook and Twitter in mobilizing public support to call attention towards their demand for accountability from the incumbent government. These protest campaigns actually took motivation from other protests that had happened on the African continent and globally- including the "Spanish Indignados Protests", "Occupy Wall Street" that occurred in the US, and the "Arab Spring" in North Africa (Dzisah, 2018). Through social media such as Facebook and Twitter, the protest movements were able to mobilize the public in dismantling the dominant narratives of government and its take on important political concerns (Danquah and Mensah, 2021). Digital media has therefore served as a salient platform for political activism and democratic protests in Ghana. The next section concludes the paper.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper has examined the new digital media and how it has shaped the public sphere in Ghana, taking a critical look at the 2020 elections. It has been seen that Ghana has not been left out of the digital media wave, particularly with social media becoming a salient public space for the citizens to engage in political issues and contribute to the public and political discourse in the last two decades and still counting. Significant areas where social media have shaped democratic deepening and the inclusive public sphere in Ghana have included public opinion formation, political participation, and engagement, as well as activism. Even though Ghana's socio-cultural and political sphere in its early political years was not characterized by the bourgeois structure within the "Habermasian" public sphere in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, the country's political and democratic transitions in 1992 opened avenues for an open media environment that resembles the liberal public sphere structure of Western Europe in the 20th century.

The discussion within the public following the transition to a republican democracy in 1992 shows significant elements of structural transformations in the public sphere. That is, the media opening has created widespread spaces for both the public as well as the private media to contribute to public opinion formation and enhance diversity in decision-making. The challenges following the transition were seen with a large control of the media by the state and some powerful private social and economic elites in the country, which to an extent affected inclusive deliberation and participation in the media and the public sphere.

Nevertheless, with the digital media wave and its utilization in Ghana in the last two decades, widespread avenues have been opened for the media and the citizens to horizontally contribute and engage in the political discourse. It has also allowed for interests and opinion groups to demonstrate and challenge the dominant discourses and narratives of the government. This has led to the emergence and transformation of a digital public sphere where citizens engage in an online community in voicing their concerns, ideas, and alternative discourses in the public arena allowing for diverse viewpoints and participation from the public which was not present in the past when digital communication was not common. In the 2020 elections of Ghana which met restrictions placed on physical movement and gatherings, social media served as the indispensable arena where the political parties and citizens interacted on the political and electoral procedures as well as deliberated on salient public concerns on matters. This served as a digital public sphere for ensuring

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diversity, and participatory deliberations on the political and electoral procedures before, during, and after the elections.

Despite the strong role of digital platforms in enhancing diversity in public deliberations and opening spaces for an online public sphere and counter publics, the platforms due to their limited regulations and algorithmic nature have also acted as avenues for disseminating misinformation and fake news which goes a long way to destruct the democratic processes. In addition, political elites and other influential social and economic actors have capitalized on the platforms to spread their agendas in dominating the digital spaces, as well as disseminate misinformation. Moving forward, a more robust system of managing and monitoring the digital space through profound fact-checking mechanisms and gatekeeping machinery will be required to positively shape the digital public sphere as a deliberative democratic instrument. This will require a collaborative effort from the government, civil society, the media, and interest groups in coordinating towards strengthening the public sphere in consolidating and sustaining the democratic structures.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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