

Convergence, Citizens Engagement and Democratic Sustainability in Emerging Democracies: The Case of Ghana and Nigeria

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Abstract

In this era of globalisation, information accessibility is becoming more and more crucial to empower citizens in their political, economic and socio-cultural engagements. However, in emerging democracies there are certain factors, that is, economic, cultural and political, which are still hindering the vast majority of the population from being included in the media and democratic discourse. Nevertheless, a new phenomenon of communication convergence is evolving in emerging democracies like Ghana and Nigeria, which is providing platforms for wide citizen engagements in the political and social discourse in societies. Communication convergence here involves the interaction of radio, television, newspapers, mobile phones and audiences as participants at the same forum in the media sphere. This phenomenon has radically enhanced citizens' participation in the democratic processes in Ghana and Nigeria respectively. Proceeding from a phenomenological perspective, this paper shall discuss the media convergence practices in Ghana and Nigeria in relation to political engagements as well as citizens engagements using case studies of a regular radio programme (Kokrokoo, on Peace FM) in Ghana and a regular TV programme (Sunrise Daily, on Channel TV) in Nigeria. The paper will argue that citizens' engagements as a result of the convergence of the mass media are central to the survival of democracy in both countries if properly harnessed.

Keywords: Globalisation; Citizens engagement; Communication; Convergence; Newsroom practices; Emerging democracies

Introduction

This paper presents an overview of a version of media convergence practices and production in news media communication processes in Africa, specifically in Ghana and Nigeria. Although media convergence has been in the literature for more than two decades and has referred to various merging and interactive processes of organisations and productions [1], the concept is a relatively new phenomenon in Africa because of the late and slow impact of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) on the continent. In recent times, scholars have used convergence to describe the way technology is broadening the spheres of mobile telephone applicability – talk, record, radio, music, video, new media, etc. which is leading to a radical transformation of news flow in broadcasting [2]. Reflecting on Erdal's idea of *crossmedia* in the discourse of media convergence (2007:52), we use media convergence in this study as a process in which a number of media forms as well as discussants and audiences are engaged on the same platform, programme or show to communicate related content. Specifically, this media flow implies a unification and interaction (in various formats) of newspapers, radio, television, telephone, internet, new media, audiences, panellists, etc. on the same platform of media communication.

This topic is discussed within the context of the dominant normative role of the news media in a liberal-democratic society. There is need for the media to provide and disseminate relevant information to empower citizens so that they can engage and participate in the political and social discourse within the media sphere of their societies. Thus, the paper is informed by a re-conceptualisation of Habermas's [3] public sphere where the media performs the critical function of providing a forum, not necessarily for elite and reasoned debate, but for broader inclusion of citizens in the public domain of interaction in the socio-political and business space to discuss issues of general interest. Proceeding from the phenomenological and exploratory perspectives [4-6], this paper's aim is twofold: firstly, to juxtapose this evolving trend in media communication against the need for the media to play

a crucial information role in sustaining and developing democracy in such countries, and secondly, to open discussions on, and an inquiry into the practices and genre underlying such media productions.

Media studies in most parts of Africa have focused largely on the formal or traditional media, i.e. newspapers, radio and television. The interest, in this regard, has been the extent to which the media is playing its democratic role of helping to safeguard and enhance governance within the liberal-democratic model [7]. The need for national developing vis-a-vis the governance paradox in most African societies has necessitated this expectation from the press, which has been firmly entrenched in media research on the continent. Recently, Wasserman in *Popular Media, Democracy and Development in Africa*, re-affirms this position that: Media in Africa are widely regarded as having the potential to contribute to the exercise of civil rights and responsibilities, the communication of political information, the (re) construction of cultural identity and the achievement of development goals.

Although one of the critical pillars of this model is the participation of citizens in the political processes in the general sense, most of the studies have focused on the media's positive or negative role in the periodic activity of 'democratic' elections. Little attention has been paid to interactions in the political space between political authority and ordinary people for the kind of continuous engagement and participation that can enhance democratic governance and lead to

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informed voting decisions and policy initiatives. Moreover, As Willems [8] has argued, the dominant liberal-democratic model mostly in the form of the formal media are “often shaped and accessed only by an elite minority”. Willems [8] therefore makes a critical suggestion for popular (or informal) media in Africa- here referring to music, video, comical shows, etc., to engage with formal media in the media space to enhance communication between the state or authority and ordinary people within the context of “convergence culture” [9].

The media as public sphere for engagement or disengagement?

Jurgen Habermas argued in his classic work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, that in our contemporary society, the mass media has become the public sphere by acting as a forum for the public to engage in rational debates. His idea of public sphere i.e. a forum where individuals leave their private interests and come together to engage in rational debate that will lead to the betterment of society [3] has been criticised by some scholars. For instance, Frazer [10] argued that Habermas’ concept of public sphere excludes certain people (i.e. women) from the debate, and that it is difficult to separate private interest from public interest in the public sphere. Nevertheless, the objective of a discursive interaction between members of the public in the public sphere which is to promote accountability and transparency makes Habermas’ public sphere central to this study.

In emerging democracies like Ghana and Nigeria that are faced with numerous political, economic and cultural challenges which impact on the democratic process, the media has a challenge of sustaining and consolidating the democratic process. One way of addressing these problems is through providing a platform for political debates. This platform will encourage citizens’ participation in democracy toward reviewing government policies, actions and activities which according to Coleman et al. [11] is central to democracy as it brings the public closer to government and vice versa and hence changing the communication pattern from one linear flow of information to multi-directional or two way flow.

The impact of such public engagement in the media sphere can be felt in stable democracies like United States of America, United Kingdom etc. As Bennett and Serrin [12] put it, the role of the media in sustaining democracies cannot be overemphasised, because without the active role played by the media in developing and building democratic principles and institutions, America’s democracy would not be taken seriously today. Gyimah-Boadi [13] also asserted that the platform for debate built by the media has contributed to the sustenance of Ghana’s democracy. Therefore, there is need to examine the extent to which the media has provided a platform for citizen’s engagement in these countries.

Transition politics and participatory journalism

Both located in West Africa, Ghana and Nigeria share similar political, economic and cultural histories and are regarded as emerging democracies that recently started their democratic processes in 1992 and 1999 respectively after series of failed attempts [14,15]. The mass media is the cornerstone of this change because of the significant role they played in the democratization processes. Most literatures suggest that without the mass media, the democratization processes in pre- and post-independence era in (both countries) would have been futile. According to Nyamnjoh [7], early nationalists such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria used the media to advocate the decolonization of their respective countries. The current drive for democratization was likewise initiated and facilitated by the

media [16]. The media has the potential to sustain and consolidate the democracy and are considered to be “strongest features of democracy” in any country, due to the platform for debates that encourages citizens’ participation in the democratic process [17].

Before the transition to democracy, the mass media were commonly regarded as the mouthpiece of government, because they were largely centralized, owned and funded by the government [18,19]. The few available private press were gagged or forced into developmental or sport reportage as restrictive media laws hindered the private press from creating the space for rational debate and citizens’ participation. Ghana’s Minister of Information in the early 1990s opined that society did not need a critical media but one that will partner with government [20]. Consequently, the media was limited to reporting government activities and were unable to facilitate transparency and accountability in governance by acting as a market place for ideas and a platform for citizens’ participation. This strained the relationship between the government and media, media and the public and between the government and public [21].

However, the transition process in Ghana and Nigeria has brought about new orientation and new rules of engagement and interaction between the government, media and citizens [22]. This new engagement facilitated by the transition processes witnessed the liberalisation of the media sphere following the implementation of communication policies like (National Media Policy 2000, National Telecommunication Policy 2005, Ghana ICT for Accelerated Development Policy 2003 and Liberalised 1992 Constitution in Ghana) and (National Telecommunication Policy 2000, FOI Act 2011 and 1999 Constitution in Nigeria). Therefore, a new kind of participatory journalism which promotes active citizen participation in the public domain has characterised the media sphere in both countries. According to, the political discourse since transition has significantly changed as participatory journalism has expounded political debates and engaged oppressed people in the advancement of democracy in new democracies like Ghana and Nigeria (1998:204). The engagement of these different actors in the media sphere will lead to a rational debate that will largely influence the quality of information available to the public, consequently enhancing the quality of democracy and the democratic processes [11,22].

The relative freedom accorded the media could be attributed to the benefits of participatory journalism in Ghana and Nigeria; nevertheless, this participatory journalism would not have been possible without the convergence of telecommunication. As Kafewo argued, the convergence of telecommunication i.e. mobile telephony, radio, television and internet {email} facilitated by liberalization is germane to this new phenomenon of participatory journalism (2006:7). Therefore, the following section will discuss how this convergence of telecommunication has impacted on news flow and increased citizens’ participation in the media sphere.

Technology, convergence and news flow

Africa is presently experiencing its fair share of the digital revolution necessitating radical adaptation and transformation of not only the media industry but also audience composition and how they access information. The internet, telecommunication, radio and television have made very significant penetration on the continent with diverse possibilities for broadcasting. Almost every African country has at least a mobile network providing a range of services including voice calls, messaging, and internet connectivity, among others to users [23]. Added to this, is the utility of current mobile handsets

on the market: photography, video, music, recorder, publishing, etc. For instance, in 2007 alone, there were about 65 million new users of mobile phones, with average accessibility at 30% (ibid) spreading significantly to villages. In Ghana and Nigeria, mobile phone usage has become 'ordinary' even in the remotest part of each country making up about 85% penetration.

The radio is also no more a preserve of the affluent as it used to be some time ago. FM radio stations now dot almost all parts of the continent. In Ghana and Nigeria, there are currently 220 and 104 radio stations respectively scattered throughout the countries. Most of the stations in the countryside are syndicated to big ones in the cities. Thus at certain times, these affiliated stations carry the same news and some popular programmes relayed from those in the metropolis. In addition to significant numbers of public broadcasting stations across the countries, there are also many commercial and a few community stations as well.

Television may not have a similar penetration rate like those of telephone and radio in the rural areas but is strongly represented in the cities and semi-urban areas. There are significant public (or semi-public) service stations as well as free to air commercial TV stations, together with pay-for digital satellite opportunities. With television in Africa evolving towards full digital migration by 2020 (2013 for Ghana and 2012 for Nigeria), the media industry portends massive opportunities and possibilities. However, this demands innovative programming and practices to reflect the equally changing dynamics and composition of audiences as well as the need to broaden inclusion in political participation.

Consequently, the (traditional) media organisations in Africa are evolving the type of innovative convergence practices described earlier perhaps as a competitive strategy in the liberal capitalist market and for a lifeline within the upsurge of new media. This type of convergence represents a unique conception and practice which appears to have attracted little research attention.

The few studies on media convergence in Africa have focused largely on the penetration, uses, and opportunities of ICT and digitalisation, as well as the opportunities they offer media, journalism and communication [24]. Of particular interest is Willems's [8] recent work on "cultural convergence" within the rubric of popular culture. The study focuses specifically on Zimbabwe and highlights how different forms of media and structures such as formal, informal, new, global and local, public and privately owned, etc. could provide divergent but purposely unified ways in which the interaction between state and citizens in Africa could be mediated. We argue that such studies have left a critical research gap by discussing little of the specific newsrooms practices concerning the unique exploitation of the technological revolution and other opportunities in communicating related content. This is in view of the novelty of such practices, and this paper has set out to provide an overview of the practices as a step toward further studies into the phenomenon.

In line with this objective, overarching questions underlying these media convergence practices include what inform(s) the practices and processes? To what extent does the platform provide a forum for wide inclusiveness? Does the practice have the potential of enhancing or negating the democratic aspirations of the emerging democracies? What implication does this practice have for research in the field?

Methodology of Study

We used two specific approaches in this study. Firstly, we

monitored the media coverage in Ghana and Nigeria from November 2011 to January 2012. This is to enable us note the general nature of news flow and the impact of convergence on citizens' participation and media activities. Our media monitoring revealed that the practice follows almost the same pattern among the various media institutions. Therefore, we used one radio show in Ghana and a television programme in Nigeria believed (anecdotally) in both countries respectively to be prominent based on reach, popularity and number of affiliates as a meaningful representation of the practice. In Ghana, we used a current affairs morning show called "Kokrokoo" on *Peace FM*, a very popular commercial radio station in Accra. This station has about 20 affiliate stations all over Ghana with its influence going even beyond the shores of Ghana as it has affiliates in Europe and America. The morning show is relayed concurrently on almost all these affiliates. Additionally, the station is currently believed to have the biggest radio listenership in Ghana. Its programmes occur mostly in Akan, the most spoken local language in the country (Akan). The show ("Kokrokoo") is, however, often heavily laced with code switching into English. Similarly, in Nigeria, we used a current affairs morning programme called "Sunrise daily" on Channels Television. This station is one of the privately owned independent television stations with wide coverage across the country due to its transmission on UHF bandwidth, cable television networks like DSTV and Star TV and live online streaming which can be accessed on ipad, blackberry, iphone, amongst others.

Secondly interviews were conducted with relevant media actors, this is to enable us get an insight on the impact of convergence on news flow and citizens participation from their own perspectives and experiences. Some of the overarching issues pertaining to this type of media flow which feature in the conversations included:

- The general purpose or objective of the programme
- Gate keeping practices in both newspapers and stories reviewed
- Selection of topics for discussion on a day
- Selection or admission of phone callers and text messages on the show
- The overall success and implication of this particular media flow.

Our research approach was informed by the nature of the contemporary media environment and the nature of the convergence practices to be described. The media environment was monitored over the study period and subsequent investigations were based on our observations.

Findings and Discussion

In both countries, the newspaper is consumed by only a section of the educated audience. This is not just a matter of the currently unchallenged notion that the newspaper is an elite discourse but because almost all the papers are in English, so only those with formal education can read. Thus, a great majority of the population are excluded from the print press. In addition, the high cost of newspapers has discouraged most people from buying newspapers. For Instance, the cost of newspapers range between G¢1 to 2 and N150 to 250 in Ghana and Nigeria respectively depending on the print quality, which is out of the reach of peasant population in both countries. In West Africa, newspapers are largely used to set the agenda for the political and social interaction in the public spheres. The papers are reviewed and discussed on the electronic media each day and at various times, but mostly in the mornings, hence the programmes on which the reviews take place are generically called "morning shows". The morning shows have different

names depending on each radio network. The predominant occurrence of the shows in local languages gives the programmes a wide appeal not just among those with low levels of formal education, but also with the educated as well.

The structure, organisation and production of the shows on radio and television we observed, follow a similar pattern. There are varying durations for the shows depending on the radio station in question and the programme structure of each station on a day. On average however, the shows run anytime from 6 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. The host of the programme and his producers take charge and plan the programme or show, although it can be inferred that they work within the general ideological principles underlying the establishment of the station. The shows normally bring together newspaper content, radio or television programming, telecommunication (phone-in segments), internet (text messages by phone or internet via Facebook or twitter), a panel of discussants, political and civil society personalities (by phone), and audiences in the interaction. Additionally, the majority of newspaper and radio/TV institutions run a parallel online version of their news.

The common media practice in Ghana is that all newspapers delivered to the station are assembled. The host selectively reads out some of the stories making the headlines on the day in English. The headlines and their details are then translated into the local language by a translator or translators. By then the host and his team had arranged for a panel of discussants, who come to the studio for a media debate. The panel is largely partisan reflecting the major political parties i.e. National Democratic Congress (NDC) and New Patriotic Party (NPP). Sometimes, a member of a minority political party and/or an expert or professional not directly identified with a political party also appears on the programme. The host introduces them as such, for instance, Mrs. x of the M party and Mr. Y of the N party, etc.

The topics for discussion on a day are decided by the host but based on stories in the newspapers, particularly topical stories captured by many newspapers, and the host moderates the interaction that ensues among panel members as they speak to issues one after the other. The issues debated are often political and social having a bearing on governance and social problems in the country. The debate is interlaced with phone conversations with government officials and other personalities (carried live) to clarify issues under discussion. The station also has correspondents all over the country who call into the programme to report news-worthy events live. At some point in the programme, the host opens the phone lines, and invites listeners to join the show. Listeners call into the programme, give their name and location and then express their views. The host also reads messages received on phone as well as on computer through internet (e-mail, Facebook, etc.).

The discussions (whether on radio or TV) have some unique features. They are characterised sometimes by heated exchanges between panellists, direct insinuations, mendacious manipulations, etc. by and among discussants. The platform also gives the opportunity for discussants to add to, take away from, and exaggerate matters pertaining to issues under discussion. There is also the tendency for humouring; the translators especially embellish the rendition from English to the indigenous language with entertaining techniques such as proverbs, witty coinages, anecdotes, allusions etc.

The interaction with the host and producer of the show was insightful. The main purpose of this particular form of media communication, according to the host and producer, was to broaden access and participation in the political space much beyond the narrow

audiences of the formal media. In terms of gate keeping practices, the newspapers (usually across the ownership and partisan divide) reviewed were those the station considered as 'credible' and running news that is worthy of attention. It was such topical stories that were usually selected and read out to listeners in both English and Akan. On considerations and rationale for composing discussion panels, they said the station was very particular about partisan representation for two main reasons. Firstly, they thought people enjoyed political news more than anything else, and indeed political issues featured more prominently than anything else in the debates, so it was a matter of giving to society what it wanted. Secondly, they were also conscious of the professional and ethical demand of balance in journalism. They also said they invited people with 'information', people who were humorous and/or aggressive in their presentation. All these, they explained, made the programme interesting thereby attracting audiences. They explained that the majority of callers into the programmes and others who send text messages were ordinary people who hitherto did not have access to such a media platform. Many such audiences are also ordinary party activists who call to support or oppose issues depending on how those issues affect various social groups and their functions in the political and social system. According to the media professionals, although the forum opened an avenue for occasional exaggerations, distortions, 'propaganda', mendacity, etc. it nonetheless reached a wide audience with information from which the audience can decide on political and social decisions. To this end, they believed the programme was promoting democracy since it served as an interface between the state and various civil society groups as well as ordinary people.

Similarly media practices were observed in Nigeria. The programme "Sunrise daily" is popular with the public as it is a forum for debate of issues of national interest. The programme which is hosted by three presenters allows for different panel members i.e. government officials, civil society, opposition party members and NGOs to discuss the topic of the day. These three hosts take turns in asking panel members questions, and in the course of the programme, the hosts read out text messages, emails or tweets from the public asking the panel members questions and contributing to the discussion. The structure of this programme is unique in that the different panellists on the show on each day are invited to discuss different issues, unlike in other stations where panellists discuss the same issues. On average three national issues are discussed with different panel members and the issues for discussion are usually informed from major newspaper headlines and other events occurring in the country. The programme acts as a platform for insightful discussions and interaction between the three hosts, panellists and contributing public. Such interaction creates an opportunity for government policies to be scrutinised and for the public opinion to be heard. The main purpose of this particular form of media communication is to broaden access and participation in the political space much beyond the narrow audiences of the formal media.

The rationale for the discussion panels was mainly to create a forum to promote accountability and transparency in the society and this explains the wide range of issues debated in the programme ranging from security, economy, politics and policies, etc.. As an underdeveloped country with high level of corruption but with huge natural resources, this platform for debate uses the available technology to enable the Nigerian public participate in public debates and promotes good governance. And according to the media professionals, although these new technologies that allow public participation are expensive, there is high level of citizen participation in programmes like Sunrise Daily because such media convergence is essential in the emancipation of the public and in promoting good governance.

Conclusions

What do we discern in this type of communication flow regarding journalism, communication and democracy today and in the future, and what are the implications for research? Concerning the issue of journalism, communication and democracy there are many angles to the phenomenon. Obviously, accessibility to issues making the headlines in the political sphere is enhanced. Newspaper stories are brought to the doorstep of the majority of ordinary people who could not have had direct access to such elite discourse, although this access is limited to those newspapers reviewed and the stories read and discussed. Additionally, the platform gives vent to different and alternative perspectives coming from the different discussants, callers and those who send messages. This is particularly significant because these contributors or participants represent various constituencies within the social structure. In this way, an inclusive and participatory ambience that brings those in authority and ordinary people into direct interaction is created to overturn the hitherto mostly one-dimensional flow from top to down.

In Ghana, this citizens' engagement facilitated by the convergence of technology has given room for partisan politics which is often grossly abused. It has also created a platform for incitement to violent and hate-speech. In the scheme of democracy, this practice has positive or negative implications depending on how the practice is managed. In Nigeria, it has further enhanced the democratic process as more people are keen to participate in the media debates in order to advance accountability and transparency in society. If these trends continue and are managed in ways that further enhance participation, good governance and democracy will be consolidated.

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