

Opportunities and Challenges of Digital Media: A Comprehensive Literature Review of Ghana

by

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Abstract

Digital media, also called by many as “New Media,” is the use of computers and mobile devices (blogs, e-book, and video games) which are aided by internet to create and disseminate content as well as other physical embodiment such as flash memory sticks, hard drive among others. Some scholars prefer to define digital media in contrast to “analog”, “mass media” in relation to “new media” and so on. The history of digital media documents the move of computers from glorified calculators to devices that are transforming human communications, entertainment, and creative production, linking digital media to earlier interactive machines and media. Digitization and media convergence in Ghana are considered by many media experts as the gateway to the socio-economic development of Ghana. Since its introduction in the early 1990s, digital media and information and communication technology have shaped and continue to shape the media landscape of the good people of Ghana. In spite of the numerous opportunities presented by the digital media technologies developing country like Ghana, the challenges are still eminent which prevent the country from tapping the full potentials of digital media. This article starts with a review of literature on the concept of digital or new media in global, Africa and Ghana context, the Internet and new media production. The article closes on the opportunities, challenges and the way forward for the development of digital media technology use in Ghana. Sources of material for this article included published and unpublished academic articles, media reports, and personal and institutional blogs, as well as Web sites.

Keywords: Digital Media, Internet, New Media, media convergence, “analog”

Introduction:

Digital media, popularly called new media is the ‘lovebird’ of our contemporary world. Messages meant for a large audience can be delivered in a variety of channels. Some of the popular media used in the world today are either print or electronic forms. The print includes, (books, newspapers, magazines), electronic versions include, (radio, television, computers, billboards, banners, posters, direct mails) and social media.

Digital media is mostly used to represent the use of computers to combine with the various forms of media. In most cases, the term is sometimes used interchangeably with

multimedia but is more specifically refers to as electronic media that use digital codes rather than analog signals (Omenugha, 2018).

Over the past two decades, Ghana has demonstrated a high degree of political desire to improve on the lives of its citizens and to connect its citizens to the rest of the world through the development of information and communication technology. Another objective of successive governments since the year 2000 is to make Ghana the digital technology hub in the whole of West Africa (The Republic of Ghana, 2003). In order to realise these noble objectives, the government of Ghana promulgated the ICT for Accelerated Development Policy in 2003. The policy is targeted at making Ghanaians information-rich and knowledge base citizens within the two decades (Republic of Ghana, 2003).

The levels of new media use among Ghanaians have improved considerably. This development is due to the improvements in internet connectivity. As early as 1989-1990, Ghana became one of the first countries in Africa to be connected to the World Wide Web. Since then, the internet infrastructure has improved creditably. The country currently has six registered mobile operators and four (4) broadband wireless access licensees and fifty-two (52) authorized Internet Service Providers providing data services in the market (NCA, Dec. 2018). According to the Ghana National Communication Authority (NCA) 2019 report, the total Mobile penetration increased by 140% in the fourth quarter of 2019. Also, the number of mobile lines subscribers in the country has increased dramatically between 2010 and 2019, from 17.4 million to 40.9 million (International Telecommunications Union, ITU, 2019). Mobile data subscription for the last quarter of 2019 was 18.8 million with a penetration rate of 89%. Mobile phones are the main medium through which communication takes place.

This article is a review of the literature on digital media or new media technologies in Ghana. Emphasis is placed on the opportunities and challenges of digital media or the new media landscape in Ghana.

Methodological and Theoretical Considerations:

This article adopted a purely qualitative approach in reviewing the literature on digital media, opportunities, and challenges in Ghana. The article utilizes descriptive approach in doing a comprehensive review of literature on digital media in Ghana. Sources of material for this article included published and unpublished academic articles, media reports, and personal and institutional blogs, as well as Web sites.

The theoretical framework for this article is situated on Media Convergence Theory popularised by Henry Jenkins in his book, “Convergence Culture” in 2006. This theory is useful for this article because it explains how technological advancement has resulted in the merger of mass media and led to the introduction of new communication technologies. The core elements of media convergence theory are based on the production, distribution and all the processes in content production to how these contents are transmitted via the internet, digital TV, Radio among others for final consumption.

Literature Review:

The role of digital media in Africa and Ghana can never be under-estimated. It is argued that digital media plays a crucial role and has the potential to help enhance democracy, industrialization and propel socio-economic development according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development- UNCTAD, (2019). In order to achieve the desire goals

of creating enlighten and informed citizens, we need to tap the opportunities presented by the new media. To realize these noble aspirations developing societies need very reliable and credible information generated by digital media for the speedy transformation of Ghana and Africa (UNCTAD, 2019).

Thomas, (2015) argues that the initial introduction of computers was for the purpose of programming and calculation. It is however interesting to note that computers in contemporary times have assisted individuals, governments and corporate organizations in carrying out their daily tasks (Roztocki et al, 2019). This phenomenon has drastically improved human interaction and existence. Over the period the rapid growth in technology has provided humanity with the most reliable and convenient means of storing information. Since then, communication and research have improved greatly through the use of the internet giving rise to digital media (Roztocki et al, 2019). Now, it very easy for people across the globe to connect, share information and express sentiments with millions of people worldwide on issues of mutual interest.

It is a known fact that digital media has affected and continues to affect traditional media in the production and distribution of content in a number of ways. They seem to very serious competition between traditional print media (newspapers) and digital media (Gill et al, 2013). The speed at which the new media releases their news is unprecedented and unmatched. Digital media has made it very easy for people to search for information and current updates online. More sources of news sprout up which bring about due to diversification of news and prevent monopoly. A key challenge, however, is the issue of “fake news” which brings the issue of reliability (Allcott&Gentzkow, 2017). Subjectivity, personal opinions, and biased based news reportage is the order of the day.

Hölig&Hasebrink, (2018) carried out recently in the United States on the new media reported that about 75% of the people are not willing to pay for online content. The report also states that there are still a good number of people who feel that the most reliable source of news is through the newspapers and are ready to pay.

Scholars such as Hölig&Hasebrink, (2018) believe that the use of the internet through mobile phone devices and services have been the greatest break-through and have impacted favourably on digital media in recent years. Hölig&Hasebrink, (2018), reported that 47% of Americans access or get all forms of news on their mobile device. More and more people use their mobile phone devices to source and search for other information online, these developments have therefore broadened the grown field of digital technology.

Poort et al, (2018) state that the entertainment industry is not left out of the numerous contributions of digital media. Music and movies are obtainable on the internet which has been made possible by the exponential growth and demands of digital media. It is now very easy to upload and download music and movies online via varied applications. The movie and music industries, for instance, have adopted digital means to stop pirating by creating online accounts for interested clients to purchase or rent movies and music instead of downloading them illegally (Omenugha, 2018).

According to Paek& Lee, (2018) another industry that has changed by digital media is the Television (TV) industry. Most of the television stations have moved from “analog” to digital transmission through the power of the internet. Ghana signed the Geneva 2006(GE06) Agreement establishing the digital terrestrial broadcasting plan in bands 174-230MHz and 470-862 MHz at the regional Radio communications conference (RRC-06). The agreement demanded signatory countries to migrate from “analog” to the digital terrestrial platform by 17 June 2015.

Even the target was achieved in 2015, the governments of Ghana are hopefully of migrate to digital terrestrial television by June 2020 based on the guidelines provided by the (ITU, 2019, NCA2019).

This digital era has also introduced and invented a lot of devices and applications like Netflix, Pluto TV and Free cable TV among others which allow television viewers to watch and control the content of television programs online (Reuters, 2019). For instance, a viewer can now forward TV commercials, record programs and watch them at a later hour when they have busy schedules (Reuters, 2019). Digital media has increased globalization by making communication with and from other parts of the globe very easy and at less cost. Now with the click of the bottom, one is able to connect with the rest of the world in seconds (Reuters, 2019).

Arguably, the education sector has also had its fair share of the development of digital media technology (Uskov et al, 2019). Scholars and students now have access to billions of educational resources like e-books on to either read through, purchase or download for free on the internet. Another initiative introduced by digital media is online-learning or distance education. People of the world can now have access to education in the comfort of their homes (UNESCO, 2018). This supported by a study by Adu et al, (2018) who reported that the internet and e-learning services have improved drastically in Ghanaian universities over the few years. The study also cited that, 5 out of every 10 students in Ghana have access to the internet.

Lippe et al, (2019) is the view that digital media has changed the fortunes of the world permanently. The evolution of digital media has made more people realize the vital role of the internet and believe digital media have a greater chance of shaping and changing the world now and the future

Opportunities and of Challenges of Digital Media in Ghana:

Digital media, over the years, have opened up and eliminated many barriers of information exchange and go beyond national boundaries (UNCTAD, 2019). The new media has offered people of the world the opportunity to have instant communication regardless of the distance. A lot of new media, both broadcast and print have over some time invested a lot of resources in digital media and have mobilized a very significant number of audiences online. Every credible news medium in recent years has built and created digital audiences than what the print media use to do years back (Sehl, 2016).

A Scholar such as Gill et al, (2013) has reported that a lot of internet users have built new media sits for online news in order to be tangent with the changing trends of the world. Those news organizations do not only produce news but are very instrumental in the distribution of news, notwithstanding the use of search engines and other media. The digital media landscape is generally dominated by a few dominant stakeholders who have succeeded in accumulating large followers and audience.

A study by Roztocki et al, (2019) cited that a lot of media organizations have made substantial investments in the development of online news media. This activity by media organizations is geared towards attracting a significant number of audiences and businesses. Many of these Media organizations have enjoyed market power and control until the 1990s; where advertisers and audiences at this period had little or no alternatives in accessing media services, but between 2000 and 2010, these monopoly enjoyed by the print and television stations reduced drastically as a result of the proliferation of many digital media alternatives (Gill et al, 2013).

New media, both legacy organizations, and digital-born organizations have increased revenue based. The main sources of revenue for these organizations are through advertising and consumer sales on digital media outlets like the World Wide Web, digital radio, TV, Facebook, and bloggers, though more are pursuing alternative sources of revenue (Lippe et al, 2019).

The digital media industry has grown and expanded to almost part of Ghana over the past three decades. Experts believe that in spite of the numerous gains made, the industry still faces major obstacles (Adu, et al, 2018).

Paek & Lee, (2018) say that digital media is a very good avenue to the sharing of information but can also be a very good tool for the dissemination of maleficent content and propaganda. Some scholars such as ... believe that social media is used by some extremist groups to mobilized and recruit people to carry out their agenda. The group of society that is so much affected by digital media is young adults and children due to their lack of stable social support networks.

Cambron, (2019) therefore suggests that many social media platforms, such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter occasionally review their terms of conditions to forbid activities such as, “terrorist activity”, “gory content”, “threat of violence” among others. Over the period several avenues have been created by relevant stakeholders to educate all manner of groups on the need to stay away from extremism (Cambron, 2019). The challenge in achieving this target is, however, the lack of a strong and consistent global internet governance regime in the management of digital media

Another drawback of digital media according to John, (2019) is the lack of online freedom of expression. As people continue to use social media for all interactions, including political, what experts are worried is about expressing those discussions within the framework of global norms and which aspects of people’s expressions should be prohibited (John, 2019). The question(s) that arise is what aspect of a progressive discourse can be regarded as offensive in another. The United Nations, for instance, has come out with a compilation of international standards for freedom of opinion expression.

Scholars such as Lippe et al, (2019) have agree that, notwithstanding the increase in productivity and other opportunities created by digital media, there are still some visible gaps created by digital media. Experts think digital media has widened inequalities as a result of the fall in global economic output. It is very true that digital media and other very important technologies might have driven near-term inequality as innovations have increased the level of outputs while at the same time simultaneously cutting the cost of low skilled work (Lippe et al, (2019). In terms of diminishing work effectiveness and outputs, digital media has the potency to do so. Workers are also distracted due to the multiple digital media platforms and over-reliance on the vast quantities of information as well as content available to them. Digital media is changing the levels of empathy in society, which results in fewer hours that such consumption leaves for face-to-face interaction. Copyright and intellectual property might be compromised due to the large volumes of information sharing via digital media (Omenugha, 2018).

Another challenge of digital media according to Peter, (2014) is the change in our social communication skills. Before the advent of digital media, what use to bond the people was their social connection. Face-to-face interactions were seen as a building block of society. This promoted the sense of social connections and brought millions of people together, including families, friends, and co-workers. Unfortunately, an online interaction introduced by digital media is now the order of life, which has invariably broken the social bond that existed between humanity (Peter, 2014).

Reuters, (2019) reported that digital media has led to a lot of newsroom jobs lost. This is an indication that digital media news continues to grow over the years. Even though some experts believe traditional news media, will be affected drastically, leading to the folding up of many, they are most likely never be fully extinguished. Experts proposed that traditional news media outlets should adopt innovative ways of remaining relevant within the media landscape.

Conclusion:

One cannot deny the fact that digital media is now part and parcel of the global community. The daily activities of millions of citizens around the globe are solely relying on the power of digital media. To establish the needed frameworks for the survival of the turbulence, all stakeholders in the digital media in Ghana and Africa need a coordinated strategy to migrate from “analog” to cell phones, internet and to generate the needed content accessible to a majority of citizens. The legal framework to regulate digital media is also very important for the realization of making Ghana a digital hub in Africa. Digital media should be seen as the instrument of development and prosperity. Even though digital media have improved and made our lives better, it also has the potency of causing mayhem and undesirable damage to our society. What is required of us to make maximum use of digital media is to judiciously maximize its opportunities and minimize the drawbacks.

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