

New media and democratization in Ghana: An impetus for political activism

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the democratization process in Africa is being catalyzed by digital media (Web sites and social networking sites such as Facebook and twitter or video/photo-sharing sites such as YouTube and tumbler) inasmuch as they afford the citizens the opportunity to intensify their political activism to determine the future direction of national and local politics. The new media have proliferated and opened up the political arena, making the people more informed, empowered, and motivated to demand a say in the management of national affairs. With particular emphasis on the democratization process in Ghana, the article argues that old media (state-controlled print and electronic media) have serious limitations such as the unidirectional model of information flow from the producers of the media content to the audience as well as censorship by the government, which works to ensure the survival of the status quo. Digital media neutralize official control and open users to multidimensional, multidirectional, and multipurpose functionalities to galvanize themselves toward influencing political decision making. The more accessible these improved information and communication technologies become, the more instrumental will their role be in the democratization process. For as long as the citizens have access to new media, they will use them widely to ensure that governance becomes as transparent and productive as needed. That's what democratization promises them; and that's what they will use new media to accomplish.

Keywords: Digital/new media, social media, social networking, political activism, authoritarianism, civic engagement, collective action, democratization, political participation, political consciousness, political mobilization.

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INTRODUCTION

On December 7 and 8, 2012, Ghanaians voted in general elections to elect a President and Members of Parliament, propping up the Fourth Republic, twenty years since its establishment. A glaring feature of the electoral process - especially in terms of information dissemination and public discourse on political activism - was the deep involvement of digital media (Web sites and social networking sites such as Facebook and twitter), which not only monitored and published results but also provided platforms for analyses of proceedings. Even before the Electoral Commission could declare the official election results, some of the digital media (especially Myjoyonline.com, a respectable Ghanaian Web site) had projected that the incumbent John Dramani Mahama was the winner of the Presidential elections. This projection

virtually changed the political dynamics, especially when the Electoral Commission's declaration confirmed Myjoyonline's projected outcome. The opposition political parties, especially the New Patriotic Party, took umbrage at this development and accused the digital media of aiding and abetting irregularities. The NPP rejected the election results and proceeded to the Supreme Court to seek redress; but it lost by a 5-4 majority decision that confirmed the legitimacy of the incumbent President. These happenings notwithstanding, for the first time in Ghana's political history, digital media attracted public interest for the role that they played in the entire electioneering process. Any talk of Election 2012 will be incomplete without reference to that role.

Obviously, the influence of new or digital media on

contemporary global politics is immense. Whether in the United States (where Barack Obama successfully used them to enhance his 2008 presidential bid and to retain power at Election 2012) or in North Africa and the Middle East (where technology-savvy youths used them in the phenomenon known as the “Arab Spring” to topple dictatorships), digital media have emerged as forces to reckon with in local, national, and global politics. They have the capabilities to so function. By facilitating the creation of social networks, new media encourage the building of agile and responsive organizations that citizen vigilantes use to confront the objectionable status quo. As Howard (2011) puts it, in this global digital media environment, it will be increasingly difficult for the strong men in power to rig elections or to suspend democratic constitutions and pass power to their family members. Historically, then, closing options for authoritarian rule has been an important part of democratization, which digital media facilitate. Howard asserts that since 1995, the most consistent causal features of democratization include a wired civil society that uses digital media to undermine authoritarian rule in the course of national and global public opinion. Thus, over the last decade, information and communication technologies have had consistent roles in the narrative for social mobilization in many ways:

1. Coordinating and publicizing massive mobilizations and non-violent resistance tactics against pseudo-democratic regimes after stolen elections;
2. Allowing foreign governments and diaspora communities to support local democratic movements through information, electronic financial transfers, off-shore logistics and moral encouragement;
3. Organizing radical student movements to use unconventional protest tactics at sensitive moments for regimes, particularly during (rigged) elections, elite power struggles, or diplomatic visits to undermine the appearance of regime popularity;
4. Uniting opposition movements through social-networking applications, shared media portals for creating and distributing digital content, and online forums for debating political strategy and public policy options;
5. Attracting international news media attention and diplomatic pressure through digital content such as photos taken “on the ground” by citizens, leaking videos and documents to foreign journalists, or by diplomats raising red flags over human rights abuses, environmental disasters, electoral fraud, and political corruption; and
6. Transporting mobilization strategies from one country to another, sharing stories of success and failure, and building a sense of transnational grievance with national solutions.

Howard (2010) notes that by their very nature, digital

media constitute a modern recipe for democratization with the sole agenda to undermine power structures and effect political transformation as young people use them to develop political identities online and to build systems of political communication independent of the state and beyond easy manipulation by cultural or religious elites. Many factors account for this role. First, digital media are social networks through which appeals for solidarity are effected. Increasingly, those appeals come digitally as wall posts, tweets, and pixilated YouTube videos hastily recorded by mobile phone users seeing events occurring. Second, digital media relate to the significant structural change in how political life is organized and are used for linking up. This linking up encourages political activism that transcends national boundaries. In this sense, then, democratization has become more about social networks than political change driven by the elites who have over the years been credited as the prime movers of political change. Thus, the political activism done through digital media is spearheaded by tech-savvy activists who can make effective use of social media to catch their dictators off guard, build solidarity, and out-manuever the security services in the “ground game” in a dense urban center (Howard, 2011).

Ultimately, being capable of sharing an immense amount of uncensored and accurate information throughout social networking sites has contributed to the upsurge in agitations for democratization. Through social networking sites, for example, “Arab Spring” activists did not only gain the power to overthrow powerful dictatorships, but they also helped Arab civilians become aware of the underground communities that existed and made up of their brothers, and others willing to listen to their stories. As explained by an “Arab Spring” activist from Egypt, “We use Facebook to schedule the protests and [we use] Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world” (Kassim, 2012). Obviously, then, digital media social networks have broken the psychological barrier of fear by helping many to connect and share information for accomplishing stated political objectives defined by the need for democratization.

Within that context, this article discusses the impact of new media on the democratization process in Ghana, one of the many countries in Africa that have successfully transitioned from authoritarianism to constitutional democracy over the past 20 years. Although recognized as a positive development, this kind of constitutional democracy is not the answer to the problems facing the people. It is described by political analysts as “procedural democracy” (conceived in terms of multi-partyism), which is not the ultimate objective of democratization unless consolidated into “substantive democracy”—in which “equity, justice, civil liberties, and human rights prevail; where citizens enjoy freedom, interests are represented via elected public fora and group participation, and all citizens have equal access to governmental process and

have a say in collective decision-making" (Haynes, 1997, p. 85, cited in Pinkney, 2003, p. 16; Africa Research Institute, 2012). Transitioning from "procedural democracy" to "substantive democracy" is a major challenge. In exploring the subject matter of this article, I will first define core concepts such as "democratization," and "new or digital media" to create the appropriate framework for my later arguments that new media have facilitated Ghana's democratization process; and that the pace of democratization will increase as the citizens access improved technologies for gathering, processing, circulating, and consuming information to intensify their political activism. My hunch, then, is that the more accessible these improved information and communication technologies become, the more instrumental will their role be in the democratization process.

Definition of democratization

The term "democratization" derives from the root word "democracy," which itself is etymologically rooted in the Greek "demos" (people) and "kratos" (rule). Simply put, then, democracy means "rule by the people," which is best encapsulated by Abraham Lincoln's self-explanatory notion of "a government of the people" (one made up of chosen representatives of the people), "by the people" (one brought into being by and based on the collective will of the people), and "for the people" (one constituted to work for the collective good and "owned" by the people). Where conditions deny the people participation in government, they agitate for democratization. According to Nwabueze (1993), democratization is not only a concept nor is it synonymous with multi-partyism; it is "also concerned with certain conditions of things, conditions such as a virile society, a democratic society, a free society, a just society, equal treatment of all citizens by the state, an ordered, stable society, [and] a society infused with the spirit of liberty, democracy, justice and equality" (p. ix). In its fullest sense, then, democratization requires that the society, the economy, politics, the constitution of the state, the electoral system, and the practice of governance be liberalized. Within this context, as explained by Nwabueze, democratization "involves also a process of experimentation over time" and has "a wider meaning and compass than multi-partyism" (pp. ix-x). Nwabueze's definition implies that the prevalence of multi-partyism in a country is not enough confirmation that such a country has been democratized. Furthermore, democratization does not come into being on its own nor can it be said to obtain just because one can point to one or two "democratic" happenings in a country.

Nwabueze notes that for the events happening, shaping, and determining the future direction of politics in any political entity to qualify as a process of

democratization, certain pre-conditions or prerequisites must exist. He identifies 12 of such prerequisites, some of which are (i) a democratic constitution having the force of a supreme, overriding law; (ii) a genuine and meaningful popular participation in politics and government; and (iii) an independent, self-reliant, prosperous market economy (p. 3). Nwabueze argues, however, that although all these 12 elements are crucial for any conception of democratization, they cannot ensure a problem-free democratization unless other factors influence the process. In his view, it is crucial that the spirit of liberty, democracy, justice, the Rule of Law, and order among the people be infused into the democratization process because "the chief problem of democratization [in emergent countries of Africa] has to do not with inappropriateness of the underlying values and principles of liberty, democracy, and social justice as with an inability to imbibe their spirit" (p. 3). To this end, then, democratization must involve "concerted effort to instill the spirit of liberty, democracy, and social justice in the people" (p. 3). In consequence, as he explains, these principles and concepts (elections, universal suffrage, political competition, representative government for the protection of liberty, bill of rights, the Rule of Law, the welfare state, social equality, etc.) have a universal appropriateness and validity. Countries seeking to consolidate their democracy are, however, hampered by the conditions of mass illiteracy and poverty prevailing; thus, it is difficult to reform some of the institutional forms, trappings, and practices (ballot boxes, ballot papers, secret ballot, winner-take-all, etc.) that are direly needed in a democratized society. On his part, Pinkney (2003) considers democratization as "not just a matter of assembling the right ingredients such as economic development, tolerant attitudes, or foreign backing, but of subtle interactions between a variety of individuals and institutions with a variety of resources" (p. x). As he explains, these interactions, in turn, take place against internal and global backgrounds that may encourage or impede democracy.

These definitions of democratization raise important questions on why despite political pluralism and the holding of periodic general elections in African countries hitherto ruled by autocrats (either under a military or one-party regime or those that now claim to be democratic), the process of democratization is still fraught with authoritarian tendencies and political violence. They also draw attention to the mechanisms needed to overhaul such systems to facilitate the democratization process. One such mechanism is the media of mass communication, which I turn to next.

Traditional (old) media and new (digital) media

The types of media classified as traditional or old media are analog, where the modulation of the sound carrier is

analogous to the fluctuations of the sound itself (Pavlik and McIntosh, 2011:68). These media afford a unidirectional model of information flow from the producers of the media content to the receiver or audience (which is often large, heterogeneous, and anonymous). This one-way communication flow constrains the receiver because by their very nature, these media are largely centralized and lack facilities by which members of the audience can communicate with each other or with the creators/publishers of the media content. Examples of these media include print (e.g., newspapers, magazines, etc.) and electronic (radio, TV, telegraphy, telephony, movies, facsimile, photography, etc.). Jenkins (2008) and Williams (2003) explain that in the age of digitized media, the traditional media are moving from their analog base to the digital world (using the Internet) for their products to reach a global audience; but they still retain much of what makes them traditional.

The 1980s saw an upsurge in global information flow as a result of advancements in information and communications technology (ITC) that improved the methods for gathering, processing, circulating, and consuming information. The media became digitized and acquired affordances that the old media either lack or can't match in terms of functionality (speed and reach, quality of output, and interactivity). The Internet, cellular phones, and other portable digital media are some examples. Media digitization involves four main elements: multimedia, interactivity, automation, and ethereality (Pavlik and McIntosh, 2011:69). Of these four elements, interactivity clearly differentiates new media from the traditional ones. Although its exact definition is still being debated, Pavlik and McIntosh claim that interactivity involves three elements: (i) a dialog occurs between a human and a computer program (that includes e-mails, online chats, and discussion groups - as at the other end of the communication flow, a human is interacting with a computer program, the Internet simply being the channel); (ii) the dialog occurs simultaneously or nearly so and affects the nature or type of feedback or content that is received, changing as the dialog continues; and (iii) the audience has some measure of control over what media content it sees and in what order - getting personalized information, magnifying an image, clicking on a hyperlink, etc. (Pavlik and McIntosh, 2011:69, 212–213).

The notion of a dialog occurring (either between two or more people or between people and computer programs) is crucially important. Thus, digital media are not simply an improvement on or an enhancement of other forms of media; they create new opportunities for media-content creators and cause shifts in how media consumers interact with media (Pavlik and McIntosh, 2011:66). Digital media create functionalities that no other media have previously been able to do; and they make audiences more critical media consumers, giving them unprecedented power in what they do in the discursive

environment.

Pavlik and McIntosh explain that new media are also media of mass communication and perform four main functions, namely, (i) surveillance (providing information about the processes, issues, events, and other developments in society); (ii) correlation (interpreting events and issues and ascribing meanings that help individuals understand their roles within the larger society and culture); (iii) cultural transmission (transferring the dominant culture and its sub-cultures from one generation to the next in helping people learn society's rules or how to fit into society); and (iv) entertainment (Pavlik and McIntosh, 2011:20-21). These functions are crucial to democratization. By performing them, digital media give the public unprecedented power to share information with each other and to "talk back" to those in power while enabling them to connect and organize on any number of issues that are important to them with the view to effecting policy changes through online and offline means. These media are particularly potent because (i) they create opportunities for user-generated content; (ii) they have interactivity (enabling users to interact with the computer and each other in synchronous or asynchronous circumstances in chat rooms, discussion forums, etc.); and (iii) they allow social networking and informal exchange of messages on a one-to-one or one-to-many basis (e.g., on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.).

New media ramify into various domains, to be viewed as social media and social networks. Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) defined social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009:61, cited in Obar et al, 2012:3). Web 2.0 refers to the software platform that gave birth to the technology that we currently understand as social media. The term "was first used in 2004 to describe a new way in which software developers and end-users started to utilize the World Wide Web; that is, as a platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion" (60–61). According to Obar et al., whereas the concept of Web 2.0 represents an ideological and technological foundation to social media, user-generated content can be viewed as the variegated methods and styles people use when accessing, consuming, and contributing to social media. In other words, user-generated content can be viewed as the various forms of media, whether it is text, images, audio, video, or a combination of some or all of these elements that are created, added and made available online by Internet users.

Obar et al. claim that a missing element in Kaplan's definition is the social networking component, adding that "social media site" and "social networking site" are often

used interchangeably. Thus, to help develop a conceptualization of social media sites, they quoted Boyd and Ellison (2008) as describing social networking sites as “Web-based services that allow individuals to: (i) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system; (ii) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and (iii) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (211). According to Boyd and Ellison’s conceptualization of social networking sites, the nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.

These various uses of new media enhance political activism too, as we will soon see in the case of Ghana. In 2012, Ghana was ranked number one in Africa for having the highest Internet speed (Dowuona, 2012). As such, new media (Web-based media and cellular phones) are widely used by the citizens to facilitate the transmission of politically and economically relevant information for purposes of political activism. This use of new media is not adventitious because it is a fundamental necessity in this digital media environment, where information flow becomes multidimensional (Akosah-Sarpong, 2012). The development of accessible and affordable telecommunications infrastructure in Ghana is on course. Problems such as political instability, drastic changes in government policies, corruption, and lack of other infrastructure (such as electrical power) have not thwarted the spread of information and telecommunication technologies. The media environment is robust and congenial. Given this generally liberalized environment and a virtually unimpeded access to improved communication technologies, more people now easily gather and eagerly share information. This proliferation of new media has opened up the political arena, making the people more informed, empowered, and motivated to demand a say in the management of national affairs - which motivated my research on the role of new media in the democratization process in Ghana.

Political activism is historically established and involves actions or efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic or environmental change, or stasis through channels of communication to facilitate civic engagement and collective action. It involves “various forms of political communication, especially those that have a democratizing function” (Obar et al., 2011:2). It can take various forms; but two major strands of it are civic engagement and collective action. As Ehrlich (2000) defined it, civic engagement is a process that involves moving an individual away from disinterest, distraction, ignorance, and apathy and towards education, understanding, motivation, and action. For Ehrlich, “civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-

political processes.” (iv, cited in Obar et al., 2012:3).

Defining collective action, Tarrow (1998) said it refers to the pursuit of a single goal or multiple goals by more than one individual. Collective action can take many forms, “brief or sustained, institutionalized or disruptive, humdrum or dramatic” (3), and includes a range of activities, “from voting and interest group affiliation to bingo tournaments and football matches. But these are not the forms of action most characteristic of social movements. Movements characteristically mount contentious challenges through disruptive direct action against elites, authorities, other groups or cultural codes” (5). Central to the concept of collective action is political mobilization, a process that can involve a variety of strategies and tactics for bringing people together to effect political, social, and ideological change. As Nedelmann (1987) puts it, the focus is often the development and maintenance of a form of social relationship between actors, individuals, and parties, with the goal of participating together in mobilization activities within the political realm, such as interest formation, community building, and forms of action (181–202).

Political activism is often facilitated by an effective means of communication. Linking political activism to social media, Obar et al noted that “groups believe that social media can facilitate civic engagement and collective action by strengthening outreach efforts, enabling engaging feedback loops, increasing speed of communication and by being cost-effective” (3). It involves the use of social media and social networking sites such as the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, blogs, wikis, and mobile applications (e.g. SMS), listservs, wikis, e-mail and mobile applications to communicate with citizens. The truth is that political activism through both social networking and social media sites ensure the mobilization of public opinion for democratization.

Political activism entails political consciousness and political participation - two vital elements that frame the scope of the activism, its depth, and the extent to which it is taken. Clearly, without political consciousness, the citizens cannot know what is at stake nor will they actively participate in the actions needed to change the paradigm to their advantage. Political consciousness, then, becomes the cognitive imperative for shaping and shaving the actions and motives of the political activists. Broadened from its initial Hegelian conceptualization, political consciousness typically refers to the idea of a human being who is self-aware or has a sense of one’s personal or collective identity, including the attitudes, beliefs, and sensitivities held by or considered characteristic of an individual or group. In this article, the perspective on political consciousness is largely derived from Karl Marx’s (1848) explanation in *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels, 1969), where he explores consciousness in terms of one’s political state of mind. For Marx, consciousness describes a person’s political

sense of self. That is, consciousness describes a person's awareness of politics. For Marx, an authentic consciousness is linked to understanding one's true position in history. Unlike Hegel who placed God behind the workings of consciousness in people, Marx saw the political economy as the engine of mind (98–137).

To Marx, consciousness is always political because it is always the outcome of political-economic circumstances. Thus, what one thinks of life, power, and self is always a product of ideological forces (ideology defined as how social being determines consciousness, which results in certain belief and value systems depending on the particular economic infrastructure existing at the time). In the Marxist conception, then, consciousness is a reflection of the political economy in which case a person's thoughts tend to be shaped by his or her political and economic circumstances. In a politically charged sense, becoming "politically conscious" is often meant to connote that people have awakened to their *true* political role, their *actual* identity (Wikipedia, 2011). For Marx, this means that the working classes will become conscious of themselves as the agents of history and will unite and share in the wealth of labor. This is their historical role and their right (as opposed to working for wages, fighting wars on behalf of capitalists, and so forth). In effect, then, the relationship between knowledge and politics is such that the former can be used to either stunt or stimulate one's political awareness. Developing a politically charged social consciousness is the necessary step before an individual or community becomes politically active. Being politically active suggests a willingness to participate in political activities. Political participation, thus, connotes the conscious involvement of an individual in politically motivated agitations or activities as a result of which the individual seeks to either undermine or to prop up the status quo, depending on what is at stake. Obviously, then, there is a direct relationship between political consciousness and political participation, all pointing to one focus: political activism. And when well connected, these elements catalyze the democratization process. Political activism is blind without political consciousness and it is empty without political participation.

A brief history of governance in Ghana

To appreciate the impact of digital media on the democratization process in Ghana (called the Gold Coast in the colonial era), one must first know the political history and governance styles of the country. Political activism in Ghana dates back to the colonial times, especially after the intelligentsia and the traditional rulers began confronting the British colonial establishment regarding political rights. The various Constitutions drawn up by the colonial administration progressively factored in the demands of the indigenes. The 1948 nationwide

rioting and arson virtually brought the colonial administration down to its knees, preparing the grounds for self-government to be granted the country on March 6, 1957, though the British Monarchy still called the shots until July 1, 1960 when Ghana became a Republic. The country's governance types can be categorized into four, namely, (i) pre-1957 British colonial rule; (ii) post-independence socialist-oriented, authoritarian, and one-party rule under Dr. Kwame Nkrumah in the First Republic, especially from 1960 to 1966; (iii) intermittent military dictatorship (from 1966 to 1969; 1972 to 1979; and 1981 to January 1993); and (iv) constitutional democracy in the Second Republic (1969 to 1972), Third Republic (1979 to 1981), and Fourth Republic (1993-present). (Ocuquaye, 1980; Jeffries, 1989; Gyimah-Boadi, 1994). These different governance types have their peculiarities but none arouses interest in the democratization process as does the military rule of Flt.-Lt. Jerry John Rawlings (under the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, June 4, 1979 to September 24, 1979, and the Provisional National Defense Council, Dec. 31, 1981 to January 7, 1993). Developments under Rawlings provoked political activism toward democratization. The media of communication played a big role in this campaign. I will, therefore, explain briefly the political situation under Rawlings as the basis for discussing the role of digital media in the democratization process, generally. I chose this period because it is pivotal to the transition from authoritarianism to constitutional democracy and reflects the strategic use of new media by the citizens to influence the politics of the country, especially since the old media (TV, radio, print media, and cinema) were government-owned and stringently controlled as official mouthpieces.

Three military regimes had ruled Ghana before Rawlings' emergence on June 4, 1979. Just like its predecessors, the Rawlings-led military government controlled state and regime in an alliance with soldiers, police, senior-level bureaucrats, and the mass media (especially the state-owned print and electronic media, radio and TV of the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation), who somehow cooperated with a wide network of grassroots "cadres of the Revolution" and middle class groups and associations to help Rawlings "secure hegemonic political control over society" (Gyimah-Boadi, 1994:126). Some significant characteristics of this military dictatorship included the suppression of opposition and the Rawlings government's refusal to repeal obnoxious decrees such as Law 4 (which allowed indefinite detention without trial); Law 91 (which limited the application of *habeas corpus*); and Law 78 (which permitted the execution of political offenders) (p. 137). Official mass media were actively used to advance the government's agenda and private ownership of media discouraged. Such was the situation for almost a decade.

Arguably, the claim can be made that the foundation for democratization began being laid in 1988 when the

Rawlings government introduced the decentralization program (encapsulated in PNDC Law 462) to “demystify” governance. Under this decentralization program, a three-tier system of governance was implemented: (i) the central government with responsibility for the entire country; (ii) the Regional Coordinating Council (one for each of the 10 regions); and (iii) the Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Assemblies (each with jurisdiction over a specific political administrative area). The main strength of this local government system lies in (i) the devolution of power from the top to the bottom, although the law does not give complete autonomy to the lower levels; (ii) the allocation of one-fifth of the GDP to the Assemblies for local development purposes (to be disbursed by the Office of the Administrator of the District Assemblies Common Fund); (iii) an elective mechanism by which two-thirds of the Assembly members would be elected every four years by the citizens with the remaining one-third appointed by the President; and (iv) the empowerment of the Assemblies to enact and enforce by-laws. This innovative local government system somehow brought government to the doorsteps of the people and virtually created the parameters that the broader democratization process in national politics would depend on later.

The Rawlings regime survived numerous coup attempts and dissident activities in the 1980s. Undoubtedly, by the early 1990s, agitations for democratization intensified, aided by a fearless press and widespread persistent opposition to Rawlings’ dictatorship. These agitations were spearheaded by the home-based politicians, the clergy, middle-level bureaucrats, and Ghanaians in the Diaspora. Rawlings caved in to pressure from these opponents, backed by the international (donor) community, which facilitated the transition to constitutional democracy and the establishment of the Fourth Republic on January 7, 1993. Even then, Rawlings remained powerful, having metamorphosed into a civilian President on the ticket of the National Democratic Congress to rule for 8 years (January 7, 1993 to January 7, 2001) before handing over to the New Patriotic Party’s John Agyekum Kufuor who also ruled for 8 years (January 7, 2001 to January 7, 2009). Upon winning the 2008 general elections, Professor J.E.A. Mills succeeded Kufuor but died on July 24, 2012, to be succeeded by his Vice, John Dramani Mahama. Ghana held general elections in December 2012, won by Mahama but disputed by the opposition New Patriotic Party (led by Nana Akufo-Addo). The Supreme Court is currently looking into that dispute. This stage of the democratization process is characterized by political pluralism and multi-partyism — what we can safely call “procedural democracy” — but fraught with problems that must be solved before the country can move to the stage of “substantive democracy” (as noted by Nwabueze, recalled here for emphasis: the prevalence of certain conditions such as a virile society, a democratic

society, a free society, a just society, equal treatment of all citizens by the state, an ordered, stable society, [and] a society infused with the spirit of liberty, democracy, justice and equality” (Nwabueze, 1993, p. ix).). The citizens’ recourse to new media to keep the authorities on their mettle is a necessary condition too, which prompted my research.

METHODOLOGY

This primary research explored the liberalization, proliferation, and deployment of new media in Ghana over the past 20 years and how their overarching influence on public discourse promotes freedom of speech in the country—and how that freedom of speech itself facilitates political activism and connects with the desire for democratization. Of particular interest was the political activism enabled by these media, beginning from the early 1990s—a period of more open and robust agitations by the citizens for democratization of the state and regime—and how that political activism influenced the transition to constitutional democracy and sustained the momentum of democratization to date.

Research sites

The research sites included Web sites (the Internet and all its affordances such as discussion boards, chat rooms, blogs, social networks, and Internet telephony (e.g., Skype) as used for teleconferencing), and the cellular phone (used for Short Messaging Service/Text Messaging, recording and sharing of video, audio, and graphics files). The assumption was that these new media were also used in diverse ways to influence political activism. Social media were also consulted. Currently, over 700,000 Ghanaians are registered with Facebook. Out of this number, 470,560 are males, representing 68.3%, and 218,480 are females, representing 31.7%. Those between the ages of 18 and 24 dominate the social networking site, making up 44.9%, followed by 25 to 34-years-old who represent 32.0% (Gyesi and Asieme, 2012).

The contents of the Web sites, especially the aspects that provided for interactivity (e.g., discussion forums and chat-room dialogs) were researched to determine their contributions to political activism. To streamline the investigation, the major Web sites with a wide coverage and patronage by Ghanaians (both home and in the Diaspora) were chosen. These Web sites create opportunities for political debates and citizen journalism, which influences public opinion on national politics. A randomly chosen cross-section of Ghanaian Internet users identified these major Web sites as Ghanaweb.com; AfricaNewsAnalysis.com; MyJoynonline.com; CitiFmOnline.com; RadioXYZ.com; ModernGhana.com; PeacefmOnline.com; VibeGhana.com; and SpyGhana.com. For the research, Web sites in other domains (e.g., those belonging to the government, individual politicians, political parties, and pro-democracy institutions) were also consulted. Because the traditional media also have an online presence, I consulted their Web sites too. Also consulted were Weblogs of individual Ghanaians doing citizen journalism.

Management of the Web sites was another area that was investigated. Ten WebMasters were randomly chosen to be interviewed, but only four of them agreed to participate. Even then, those at the two most popular Web sites (Ghanaweb and Myjoynonline) did not respond to the questionnaire sent to them. WebMasters were included because the researcher wanted to know: (i) their rationale for creating the Web sites; (ii) their management of the sites, including moderation of user comments and contributions to the chat-room and discussion forums; (iii) their

assessment of their Web sites' impact on public opinion and the democratization process; and (iv) whether they had ever been threatened by government or pressurized by anybody to skew their operations for political leverage.

Data were also gathered from 60 users of cellular phones out of the 150 contacted to participate in the research. They were asked questions related to their use of cellular phones for various purposes such as text messaging, sharing video, audio, and graphics files as well as uploading files on YouTube and Flickr to share with friends. They were also asked to describe their experiences, using cellular phones to connect with friends through social networks such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Skype, and others. Additionally, they were asked questions regarding their use of cellular phones for political activism, including mobilizing friends and political allies to either participate in online discussion forums or to organize offline for political purposes.

Research question

The two main questions that guided the research were: (i) To what extent do new new/digital media influence political activism in Ghana? and (ii) How does that political activism affect the democratization process in Ghana?

Participants

To gather data, the research was conducted using unstructured interviews with 100 users of the various Web sites through e-mail and telephone calls. These participants had provided contact information that was gathered from the various Web sites regularly visited by the respondents. A total of 150 of participants were targeted to be interviewed, but 50 declined. Before being interviewed there was no prior knowledge of who the respondents were, their political affiliations, or where they resided. The information used in this research work that helped in identifying the respondents for interviewing was gathered from the Ghanaian Web sites. The respondents had all attained higher education and either resided in Ghana or in the Diaspora. Their occupations varied (as self-employed business entrepreneurs, teachers, public sector workers, etc.). They claimed to be computer-savvy enough to use the Internet without anybody's assistance. Most said they owned their own computers while others (especially those residing in Ghana) said they often used Internet cafes or friends' computers.

Interview questions

The interview questions were: (i) How will you rate your use of the Ghanaian Web sites (Regularly; Frequently; Often; Seldom; Not at all)? (ii) How many times do you visit these Web sites in a day? (iii) Which is your favorite? Why? (iv) Which content on the Web sites (news reports/feature articles/discussion forums/chat rooms) best serves your needs? (v) What best motivates your use of these Web sites (Reading of daily news reports; participating in discussion forums; commercial adverts; social networking); (vi) How do these online media influence your political activism online and offline? (vi) What will you lose if you don't visit these Web sites?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data were gathered on the exchanges between some participants in some synchronous discussions. The findings revealed that the discussions were politically

motivated and were held on the basis of different political persuasions (e.g., left or pro-Nkrumahist or Rawlings; right or Danquah/Busia ideology; and center, or those not committed to either but guided by pragmatism) or some other framework (such as home versus Diaspora) to determine how the use of new media for political activism might influence the drift of public discourse and opinion. The rhetorical positions of those in the Diaspora and their compatriots residing in Ghana were also analyzed to see if there was any tension between them on the basis of such variables as contrasting worldviews, rival political affiliations, location and circumstantial experiences concerning the workings of Western democracy, and political expectations were adequately analyzed.

Much of the exchanges indicated similarities in the conception of democracy among them, even though their political rhetoric and attitudes toward the democratization process differed. Interactions were mostly done in English (Ghana's national official language). Some contributors occasionally wrote some comments in their mother tongues (particularly Akan and Ewe) and openly declared their political persuasions and ethnicity. Although the two languages lacked alphabets, the Web users improvised symbols and other characters to express their thoughts, an ingenuity spurred by their communicative intents. The exchanges pointed to ethnic rivalry and different political persuasions as causes of the noticeable tension between the contributors — which must also be considered as part of the forces impelling political activism in the democratization process. These approaches helped me research the cause-and-effect aspects of the participants' new media experiences in public discourse concerning the democratization process. They also enabled me to complement textual analysis of their online activities which, then, helped me to triangulate my data for analysis. These analyses are not meant to be evaluative or judgmental but only descriptive insofar as they shed light on the impact of the new media on political activism in this democratization effort.

This research showed that digital media are potent tools being used in Ghana to influence the democratization process in diverse ways. Perhaps, we can appreciate better new media's impact if we examine how their functionality and affordances facilitate information production, distribution, and consumption during political activism. These media are ubiquitous and easily accessible; they are Ghanaian-owned with contents that the users can relate to; and their contents are written in English, which is used by literate Ghanaians.

The research revealed that as the hub of the digitized media environment, the Internet is the most widely used medium by Ghanaians to participate in the democratization process. It ensures a more connected and engaged public as, by its nature, it enables audiences anywhere in the world to participate in a global dialog about events/issues and can bring individuals into

direct contact with each other, although they are separated by geography, [ideological formations], and political and cultural boundaries (Pavlik and McIntosh, 2011:17).

Cellular phones and portable communication gadgets are also widely used. Also pertinent to any discussion of the impact of new media are Frequency Modulation (FM) radios which, although may be categorized as traditional media, perform functions similar to those of new media, especially so in the case of Ghana because most of the Web sites have FM radios embedded in them and are used for political activism.

The findings on Web sites

Generally, the Web sites can be categorized into three: (i) corporate-owned and designed for commercial purposes; (ii) private-owned and also designed for commercial purposes; and (iii) official or public (government, political parties, or civil society groups), used mainly for information dissemination without any commercial interest. Apart from the third category, Web sites designed for commercial purposes are mostly owned by Ghanaians based at home or in the Diaspora, using servers not susceptible to control or interference by the government or its agents (e.g., National Communications Authority). Web sites owned by partisan political groups and activists have facilities for photos, audio/video/graphics files, a contact page, and a donation widget (a means for soliciting funds for political campaigns).

History of Ghanaian Web sites

The history of Ghanaian-owned Web sites is quite intriguing. Beginning from the first Web site that emerged in the early 1990s (known as "Okyeame," which served the university community), the online scene has expanded since then, especially with the emergence of Ghanaweb in 1995 as the most popular among Ghanaians (both home and in the Diaspora) and other Internet users worldwide. It is the main source of information on daily happenings in the country and the first Web site to introduce feature articles and a discussion forum ("Say It Loud"). The WebMaster of Ghanaweb does not censor readers' comments and allows interactivity to such an extent that users can create their own threads to engage others in discussions about any issue (political, social, economic, or ideological). A conservative estimate indicates that the Web site attracts more patronage from Ghanaians in the Diaspora than those at home because of easy access to computers and uninterrupted Internet service. Ghanaweb archives its contents, especially the feature articles and comments of patrons, which enables users to return to

previous posts for data to enrich discussions.

The next popular Web site is MyJoyOnline, established in 2001. Unlike Ghanaweb.com, the management of this Web site has more control over its contents. This editorial oversight ensures that articles are carefully read and edited before being published. Quality control seems to be the hallmark here, as some commentators have confirmed (Amenyo, 2012). As a news organization based in Ghana, it publishes up-to-date news reports (some as "Breaking News") and also moderates comments on news reports and feature articles to remove inappropriate ones (either because of intemperate language or anything else that defies the Web site's editorial policy). Anybody who reacts to opinion pieces or news reports gets a message saying: "Thanks for your comments. The web administrator will review and approve your comments." There is no guarantee that the comment will be published. Instances of readers' complaints about their viewpoints not being published came to notice, confirming the prevalence of some form of editorial gatekeeping.

The Web sites have integrated features of the traditional media and contain modules on radio and television so the users can listen to live programs such as news/TV broadcasts, political debates, and discussions on topical national issues. These features indicate the extent to which these online media are involved in the information culture. Almost all the Web sites have integrated social media such as Facebook and Twitter and other file sharing services such as YouTube (for video), and Flickr and Picasa (for photos), thereby enhancing their functionality. The main features at the Web sites that encourage political activism include: Opinion Polls; navigation menus on politics, news reports, and digital archives on the 2004/2008/2012 general elections; columns for feature articles and opinion pieces; module on short messaging service (SMS); and links to resources on the government, the Constitution, political parties, and civil society groups. These facilities provide information in political activism. The Web sites afford their users the opportunity to generate and contribute ideas for political education, raising each other's consciousness and providing input for public policy or political mobilization offline.

In the research, I noticed trends distinguishing them along such lines that formed an underlying framework for my study. With so many online media sites promoting public discourse, providing some way of describing their various approaches to democratic participation could be helpful. One distinct trend is that while some of the Web sites (e.g., Ghanaweb.com, ModernGhana.com, PeaceFmOnline, and VibeGhana.com) publish reader comments without regard for how responsible the comments are, others (especially MyJoyOnline.com) have fewer comments from readers, which even seem relatively measured.

The research revealed how some politicians also used

the online media. For instance, a former Deputy Minister of Information (Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa) had a Web site (<http://www.okudzetoablawka.com>), which was linked to Facebook and other media. The leader of the Progressive People's Party (Dr. Paa Kwesi Nduom) had a Web site too and was the only politician most aggressively using his online presence to reach out to the electorate.

The political parties also have their Web sites, even if not regularly updated. For instance, the ruling NDC advertises itself at <http://www.nationaldemocraticcongress.com> while its rival (the NPP) uses <http://www.thenewpatrioticparty.org> to promote itself. Some government officials have their own Web sites too, but they aren't properly managed. The Office of the President is hosted at <http://www.presidency.gov.gh>, and that of the Vice President is at <http://www.vpghana.gov.gh>. The government too has its own Web site at <http://www.ghana.gov.gh>, where news reports on its activities are published regularly. The Electoral Commission also has its own Web site to publicize its activities.

The circumstances surrounding the Presidential and Parliamentary elections in 2004, 2008, and 2012 provide useful insights into how the citizens used this medium. My findings revealed that many Ghanaians (especially those in the Diaspora) relied on the Internet for results of the elections and expressed their opinions through the same means.

Purpose of the Web sites

Data from the management of the Web sites indicate that they were designed: (i) to disseminate information to the general public; (ii) to compete keenly with other media on quality content delivery; and (iii) to pool the opinions of intellectuals on pressing issues to raise political awareness. As explained by the WebMaster of SpyGhana.com, "The opinions and feature articles that we provide for the consumption of the general public serve as a mouthpiece for the voiceless citizens and as an information bank for government officials, students and research fellows who visit our Web site."

The U.S.-based moderator of the Ghana Leadership Union's Web site revealed that the major concern that dominates the exchanges in this forum is leadership crisis, as is reflected in his comment:

BTW before I retire I'd like to see GLU established as a strong lobby group or Political Action Committee in Ghana with strategies to galvanize some of our friends to do: (i) peer-to-peer confrontation with officials as you and I and others have done in the past, and then followed by (ii) leadership to organize thousands to do mass confrontation as demanded under peaceful exercise of

rights in a democracy, (iii) others to help in class action law suits to enforce rights of people to strengthen our democracy, with contributions by GLAs. If we get only 400 people around the world to donate \$100 each per year, that is \$40,000 that can be used to purchase material, hire a few hands, and lobby and push for change; (and where these fail), (iv) organize mass demonstrations against or in support of rights and demands for living conditions changes in Ghana (Danso, 2012).

Such agitations online are not surprising because that is what such forums were created to encourage.

Data from the management of these Web sites revealed their contention that support for political activism and opening up the public sphere would facilitate public participation in the democratization process. As the WebMaster of SpyGhana.com explained,

I often wondered why there was so much ignorance amongst my people (Ghanaians) on various aspects of our national life. I found it strange to believe sometimes what I hear on the airwaves. Some countrymen are either misinformed or have no idea all together on very important issues affecting us as a people. So I thought of a way to contribute in my own small way by starting this Web site as a channel to spread information to the Ghanaian public and the international world as a way of influencing public opinion.

In response to the question on political interference, a Ghana-based respondent WebMaster had this comment about the impact of his Web site: "We have had many calls from the President's office; and constantly, all the big parties are in contact with me to have influence, which of course I have resisted to stay neutral." As he revealed, some political debates on radio include references to opinions expressed in the feature articles published online. So also do political party activists tap into such opinion pieces as they take the conversation offline for political mobilization.

Contents of the Web sites

The Web sites also publish feature articles or opinion pieces on diverse themes, especially news analysis and commentary on happenings pertinent to the political administration of the country. The feature articles are well patronized and commented on. Depending on the subject matter, an article on Ghana, for instance, may attract as many as 300 comments on the average a day. Topics related to political and ethnic rivalry are always well commented on. The feature articles are mostly based on happenings in the country that the writers interpret as either detrimental to democracy or that must be handled properly to nurture democracy. So also is anything

concerning the former Presidents, especially, if the subject matter is controversial. The various Web sites publish such articles everyday because of the high demand for them. Ghanaweb and MyjoyOnline also regularly publish news scoops and up-to-date reports that are culled by the less popular Web sites and newspapers. Non-Ghanaian Web sites also cull such items to publish, especially if the subject matter has implications for the international community.

The research revealed that numerous articles are based on leadership crisis, intra- and inter-party problems, inadequacies of the institutions of state, tribal politics, bribery and corruption, sycophancy, and injustice (Bokor, 2011, 2012, 2012). Such articles provide useful insights. It is not surprising that the Web sites afford such opportunities for users to interact online. As Pavlik and McIntosh explain, feature articles may be a starting point for a much more robust discussion among Web users in the form of online discussion groups (Pavlik and McIntosh, 2011:86).

For the 2012 general elections, the most popular Web sites created special pages, where they provided information on the daily happenings. They designated these spaces as “Official Elections Page” and gave special coverage of the elections, providing minute-by-minute information on the results. Some created special effects and pie charts to portray the results. By so doing, they helped their users monitor the elections. Some of these Web sites tracking the results were able to project the winner of the elections, something that was to incur the displeasure of the losers (especially the New Patriotic Party). As such, these Web sites got entrapped in the inter-party rivalry and were accused of colluding with the Electoral Commission and the incumbent government to rig the elections. The election petition is being heard by the Supreme Court but no management of the Web sites is part of the suit.

Patronage of the Web sites

A sampling of the data from the participants confirms that patronage of the online media is high. Ninety out of the 100 interviewees said that they visited a Web site or two more than once every day to read news reports and feature articles. Only 10 interviewees said although they used the Web sites, they did not visit them on a daily basis. The interview results indicated that apart from reading news reports, the users also participated in chat-room or discussion forums. Some of them said they regularly generated threads on topics of their choice (mostly related to the democratization process) and also responded to comments on other people’s threads. They described what they did as relevant to national politics, as explained by one interviewee:

I cannot do without these Web sites, especially

Ghanaweb. The first thing I do in the morning is to log on to read current news and to contribute viewpoints in the discussion forum. I often post my own threads based on specific topics of interest to me as far as our democracy is concerned and comment on or respond to others’ comments. I also read the feature articles and respond to them or e-mail the writers to continue the conversation in another way. I consider my participation as part of the efforts to grow our democracy. Without these facilities at the Web sites, I and the many others who exchange ideas can’t do so—and it won’t benefit our democratization process.

Another respondent based in the United States (considered as the Diaspora) said:

To me, our democracy couldn’t have advanced thus far had we not been given the space in which to meet, interact, and exchange ideas with people we don’t really know but whose ideas we need as part of the debate on our national politics. These Web sites are indispensable at this stage and I can only imagine what their impact will be in future as more and more of them become easily accessible to users.

Such viewpoints confirm the relevance of the Web sites to Ghanaians (especially those in the Diaspora) who need to be informed about happenings in the country and to participate in the discourse on the democratization process.

Ghanaian patrons in the Diaspora

Ghanaians residing in the Diaspora use the online media to participate in the democratization process in different ways, especially to connect with their compatriots resident in the country, as is evident in this quotation from this response:

As a Ghanaian living abroad, it helps us to know how to support elections in our various constituencies. For instance, if I am able to view online the projects that my Member of Parliament is undertaking in my constituency and his future projects, it gives me an idea of what is going on. I can even speak to my family back home to give him another chance and because I am the breadwinner of my family-and I support over 20 of my family members who are over 18 years-I know I can lobby at least 20 votes to support my MP in the December 2012 elections or make him lose the same figure if he is not doing well (Lawal, 2012).

Another respondent WebMaster commented on what the

democratization process in Ghana will lose without the involvement of the Web sites:

When you tune into most Web-based radio stations, you will hear a lot being discussed by panelists on some of the topics mentioned in feature articles and comments published by the Web sites; and their pieces of advice as well as some suggestions on what the government must do to solve the problems posed derive from such articles. Won't the public be denied such insights without the Web sites?

Most of the respondent WebMasters expressed optimism that these online media will continue to play significant roles in providing news and offering platforms for public discourse on democratization. One said:

The goals of the discussion forum are simply to bring people together to share ideas and think about how best to contribute towards the development of Ghana, regardless of where they live or their political interests. Indirectly, our Web site impacts the democratization process too and will continue to be reckoned with as far as projecting public interests is concerned. The future is bright for Web sites in this climate of democratization.

Clearly, these Web sites have a compelling impact on political activism as they encourage users to participate in the discourse about the affairs of state and governance. They have archives where important information (like the Ghanaian Constitution) is stored for access by users.

Rivalry among the Web sites

The research revealed the existence of turf wars between the (management of the) Web sites themselves, especially as some take rival political positions and use their columns to spread vile propaganda in an attempt to manipulate the gullible citizens. Official responses to some of the propaganda in the online media indicate that government officials either use these media or monitor goings-on there. It is inferable from the official statements from government circles reacting to some publications on these online media. Some government functionaries may also be participating in discussion forums under pseudonyms; so also will operatives of the security agencies do to gather intelligence for use by the government to formulate public policy.

Questions may be raised on standards—the quality of these Web sites, the lack of decorum in the discussion forums, or the downright disregard for civility, resulting in an open uttering of hate speech or instigation of ethnic rivalry by some contributors. These Ghanaian Web sites

may lack state-of-the-art qualities and can't be compared with highly influential ones like the *Huffington Post*, but they serve their purposes. Lack of decorum in the exchanges and the open display of ethnic hostility only reflect the level of frustration that some have faced in the democratization process. As these Web sites continue to bring together the citizens to interact, the online discussions become the barometer for gauging their anxieties, apprehensions, and expectations as the democratization process drags on.

Findings concerning social networks

The use of social media (especially Facebook and Twitter) for political activism is another significant aspect of the citizens' online experience. On their own, the social media serve other useful purposes, as revealed by data from the respondents who confirmed using Facebook to pass on vital information to others for political activism. Many of the issues discussed on Facebook and Twitter center on political developments in the country. An assessment of some Facebook pages that I chose randomly showed that some of their contents were feature articles and photographs culled from Web sites and shared with friends. Even seemingly trivial occurrences assume prominence for political expediency. For instance, when former President J.E.A. Mills mispronounced the word "economy" as "ecominy" in his State of the Nation address in 2009, it became an instant hit. Some ingenious political activists turned that slip-of-the-tongue into a ring tone for wide circulation online and among cellphone users. Images caricaturizing some politicians are also widely circulated on social networks for political leverage.

The use of social media for dialogs also encourages political activism, a fact underscored by the very rationale of social networking itself. As Brian Solis (Public Relations professional and social media expert) explains, a social network is "a shift in how people discover, read, and share news and information and content. It's a fusion of sociology and technology, transforming monologue (one-to-many) into dialog (many-to-many)" (Pavlik and McIntosh, 2011:253). The users may also take practical action offline for political mobilization instead of merely discussing issues online. This use of social media and Web 2.0 is often a prelude to organizing events and protests and shows that the citizens are not content with mere discussions. Such use of social media and the interactions they encourage occurs without the need for any traditional media channels; and the users boldly launch scathing attacks on the authorities during their interactions because government control is virtually ineffectual. Ghanaians use social media for such purposes, as is evident in their interactions on Facebook, particularly, where they take issues with the political administration at the local and national levels without let

or hindrance.

The research also showed that the online media also enable political advertising (both positive and negative) by the political groups. Despite some instances of negative advertising against people in authority, the users are not perturbed by any threat of libel suits. At least, so far, no libel case has been successfully prosecuted, although some politicians have threatened to sue some commentators and feature article writers for defaming them. This peculiar use of the online media raises serious questions concerning ethics. The Internet may be a politically liberating tool of mass communication but it can also be used to spread rumors and hate, as is evident in the anti-government propaganda by the opposition on some of the Web sites. Despite their merits, then, the online media lend themselves to abuse by unscrupulous people to subvert systems or those they do not like. These media can also be used to settle personal scores as messages or articles are published to tarnish the image of people in authority.

Findings concerning mobile (cellular) phones

The use of cellular phones for political activism is extensive, according to my research findings and anecdotal evidence from the respondents. Most of the respondents said that they owned cellular phones and other portable media. Nonetheless, some political parties are known to have purchased some for their agents to use for various assignments, including monitoring the electoral process, especially during the 2004, 2008, and 2012 general elections. These agents gathered and communicated information to their leaders on such issues as voter turnout, late arrival of ballot materials at the polling stations, electoral malpractices concerning manipulation of the voters register, shortage of ballot materials, irregularities in the collation of results, technical glitches, and provisional election results at the polling stations. They provided details that enabled their leaders to contact the Electoral Commission (EC) to act promptly. Personnel of the security services monitoring the elections also used mobile phones to coordinate their activities.

This use of cellular phones created some controversies, though. In the 2004, 2008, and 2012 elections, for example, agents of the political parties communicated provisional election results from the various polling stations to their leaders even though the EC had not authenticated and certified them as official and incontrovertible. Some Web sites (e.g., Peacefonline, Ghanaweb, MyJoyOnline, etc.) also published provisional results communicated to them by their correspondents long before the official ones were released by the EC. Discrepancies between some of those provisional results and the EC's certified official ones created tension. Based on the provisional results

from their agents in the 2004 elections, the NPP leaders quickly announced that the incumbent (Kufuor) had won the Presidential elections instead of waiting for the Chairman of the EC to do so. This action created tension as the rival NDC disputed those results and the EC's certified ones later, which favored the NPP. To date, former President Rawlings and many others in the NDC have refused to accept those results. To them, the elections were either rigged by the Kufuor government or the party's pre-emptive move to announce itself as the winner had frustrated and prevented the EC from announcing the official results to reverse what the NPP had already announced. In the 2008 elections too, the various party agents used cellular phones to expedite communication between them and their leaders, text messaging their observations, and documenting incidents. For instance, the NPP circulated what it claimed were images of physical attacks on its agents recorded on cellular phones at some polling stations in some hostile constituencies in the Volta Region.

The NPP's petition against Election 2012 was widely publicized on Facebook and other social media, where commentators gave varying viewpoints on the case to sustain public discourse on the democratization process.

The research showed that short message service (SMS) or text messaging is also widely used for political activism. Some politically active citizens use FrontlineSMS technology in the poll monitoring process. During the 2008/2012 elections, for example, party activists and local and international election observers equipped with such gadgets felt empowered to conduct election monitoring on their own terms.

Also revealed is the use of new media by the Constitution Review Commission (CRC), which was set up by ex-President Mills to collect and collate views for a possible review of the 1992 Constitution. It also used SMS and text messaging extensively to expedite its activities. In a June 1, 2011 report, entitled "Post-Conference Activities of the CRC," the Commission acknowledged the importance of SMS to its work, saying that among technologies that it used for the consultations were "new media technologies (phone calls, SMS, e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, etc.)." According to the Commission:

Many Ghanaians at home and abroad also participated actively in the Conference by watching it live on Ghana Television and on the Internet and sending in their views by SMS messages to the short code "1992" across all Mobile Telephone networks or through the Internet. The views recorded from the Internet were from as far apart as the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Tunisia (Fiadjoe, 2011).

To continue ascertaining the views of Ghanaians via text message, the Commission launched a Text-In Campaign Service in December 2010. The text-in submissions were

automated and very easily processed. This was the first time that a Ghanaian Public Service Institution had used Text Messaging as a means for aggregating the views of the citizenry on a matter of public importance. In three months, around 20,000 people shared their views on the 25 issues distilled from 65,000 submissions through text messages. Exceptions were made for Ghanaians (especially those in the Diaspora) using the Text-In campaign, which confirms the importance attached to new media in the democratization effort. Although the closing date for the receipt of submissions was December 31, 2010, the Commission extended it to June 30, 2011, to allow for "submissions made through the text-in campaign." The Commission noted that the "renewed Text-In Campaign will serve as a mechanism through which the thousands of people who still contact the Commission to make input into the review process can do so cheaply and privately from their own mobile phones, further enriching the final output of the Commission."

The Commission's work is crucial to the democratization process because it will result in a referendum to amend the 1992 Constitution, which has been widely criticized as full of many loopholes, the most contentious of which is the Transitional Provisions that indemnify architects of coups d'état and former military governments. As is contained in the First Schedule ("Transitional Provisions") of the Constitution of the Republic of Ghana, Sections 34 and 35 indemnify all the military governments and their functionaries while Section 37 restrains Parliament from amending the indemnity clause: "Notwithstanding anything in Chapter 25 of this Constitution, Parliament shall have no power to amend this section or sections 34 and 35 of this Schedule" (Akoto, 1995). Critics have cited this Indemnity Clause as hindering democratization and shielding former President Rawlings and his appointees. They are agitating for it to be expunged for justice to be served because the overthrow of previous civilian governments by the military is an act of treason for which the architects must be held liable and punished for disrupting the earlier democratization efforts. That the Constitution has been archived by Ghanaweb for easy access by users is a clear testimony of the role of new media in the democratization process.

Findings concerning online frequency modulation (fm) radios

Most of the Web sites consulted in this research had embedded FM radio modules. Although categorized among old media, the FM radio shares many similarities with new media and performs important functions as such. With its speedy delivery and wide coverage, call-in service, and vigorous discussion sessions on topical issues, the FM radio contributes much to the

democratization process. If participation and discussions such as newspaper reviews, political exchanges between political party representatives, and interactions with elected officials are encouraged on FM radios, far more people may become engaged in the political process than has been the case to date, which will go a long way to affect the way leaders govern. The benefit is that the vigilance to keep governance as transparent as possible will be an ongoing effort. As Pavlik and McIntosh explain, it is the shift toward more transparency that the new media in part represent and that many government leaders may find the most threatening to standard ways of conducting political business (Pavlik and McIntosh, 2011:477).

We may view in this context the Ghana Government's boycott of Multi Media News Group and its repercussions. The Multi Media News Group comprises Joy FM, Multi TV, Adom FM, Asempa FM and other sister-media houses across the country. Although the government cited instances of what it described as "open and manifest bias" by the Multi Media News Group against it and the political party it represents (the NDC), its boycott triggered spontaneous condemnation from many segments of the population, which forced it to rescind that decision a few days later. In effect, the media are always connected to the government and the public in many complex ways, and any miscalculated move on the part of the government will cost it dearly.

Once the citizens know the power that the new media give them, they will use it to intensify their political activism and catalyze the democratization process, not cower before any politician. They know that in the kind of digital politics that they are engaged, there is a direct relationship between media power, themselves, and democracy, which they understand in the context of political activism. They recognize new media as their "saving grace" and will maximize their benefits to achieve the objectives of democratization. Ultimately, then, these media facilitate public discourse and support initiatives to influence the democratization process.

CONCLUSION

Of course, it is undeniable that the state needs hegemony in order to consolidate domination on behalf of the ruling class and state hegemony is promoted by dominant class values that are consolidated by social institutions such as the media, education, the legal system, etc. Therefore, for the media to now be used to galvanize political activism in the people, it means that the media are deconstructing ruling class ideology and, therefore, the digital or social media are becoming a counter-hegemonic force. These media might also be abused for other purposes in the course of political activism; but their affordances are essentially suitable for the civic engagement and collective action that

undergirds the political activism propelling the democratization process in Ghana.

In seeking to consolidate democracy, any interactive communication technology that empowers the people to involve themselves in political decision making will have a big impact on their footing. One benefit of the increased use of new media in political activism is their enhancement of mass communication, which is advantageous to democratization. Because of their efficacy and ability to attract the youths and get them involved in the political process, new media are influential. The youths use technology (especially social media) adeptly and become a powerful force in helping organize people as well as volunteering for politically motivated activities offline (Pavlik and McIntosh, 2011:475). Although Pavlik and McIntosh were not writing on the situation in Ghana, their perspective reflects how new media help the youth in their political activism. This enablement by new media is evident in the online and offline political activism by Ghanaians.

The mix of blogs, online videos on social media, and citizen journalism and political discussions on Web sites have enhanced the public's access to unlimited amounts of information. Because of their interactive nature, these new media promote spontaneous and synchronous interactions that generate input to shape public opinion, influence attitudes to governance, and expedite democratization efforts. For the 2012 general elections, the exchanges at the Web sites were more pointed and animated. Even as they confront their own peculiar challenges, the new media incorporate some of the old media to enhance interactions among users. Posting viewpoints in chat-room forums or calling in to radio talk-shows is an attempt to encourage civic engagement; and the generation of some debates in such forums implies that they are promoting civic engagement, at least, among the people who are posting comments on the forum. It is encouraging that social media are also involved, facilitating conversations between the citizens and their elected officials. Such exchanges affect the way leaders govern and how the citizens position themselves in the political system to perform their citizenship duties even as they safeguard and seek to enjoy their rights.

Arguably, the democratization process in Ghana and other Third World countries is catalyzed by internal dynamics and often reinforced by external forces. The democratization process is of interest to the established democracies and the donor community too, especially such international institutions as the International Monetary Fund and its affiliate, the World Bank. These external forces have persistently called for good governance and transparency in Africa, and are inclined toward making it one of the conditionalities for loans. Influenced by the use of new media for political activism, the democratization process in Ghana is on course. Its success, however, fundamentally depends on the caliber of its politicians and political parties, an informed and determined citizenry, and strong institutions of state to

augment civil society groups' activities in the pursuit of democratic ideals. Concerted efforts are needed for dispassionately tackling the inherent problems that militate against the democratization process. All stakeholders need to be more committed. By successfully transitioning from authoritarianism to constitutional democracy, the country has already braved the storm to attain procedural democracy; but that is not the end of the journey. Making progress to the next stage in the democratization process to achieve substantive democracy demands that all the appropriate structures be put in place and requisite habits of mind cultivated. Obviously, consolidating the country's democracy will not happen without a strong and unwavering political will, backed by sustained citizen political activism through information gathering and dissemination. This is where the role of new media becomes pivotal. One fact is certain: for as long as the citizens have access to new media, they will use them widely to ensure that governance becomes as transparent and productive as they expect. That is what democratization promises them; and that is what they will use new media to accomplish.

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