

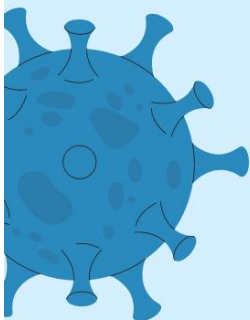


Penplusbytes: Periodic Rapid Analysis



ASSESSING THE CONTEMPORARY GHANAIAN MEDIA

A study of the opportunities and
challenges of the media post
COVID-19 pandemic



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1.0 Introduction

The media in Ghana has developed into an important communication tool pivotal in shaping national discourse on all issues. The media (both new and traditional)—have emerged as the most powerful force in recent years, influencing people's actions, thoughts, and decisions. What started the country's return to democracy in 1993 as a small industry with one national broadcaster (providing both TV and radio transmission services) and mostly state-owned newspapers, is now a vibrant industry made up of over 400 operational radio stations, over 100 TV stations and hundreds of newspapers and magazines, all of which are mostly privately-owned (NCA Q2, 2020 Report; Yeboah-Banin et al., 2020). Other digital media options exist in addition to these, and with the growing adoption of social media amongst the general population, traditional media companies have had the need to find new ways to leverage digital social platforms whose development they have very limited control over.

Today's media is known for performing the functions of information, education and entertainment. These are conventional social functions that media renders to the public, but they are equally crucial for the advancement of development in the country. The media in Ghana has over the years through educating, informing and entertaining raised public awareness of the importance and necessity of carrying out specific actions towards national development. Closely related to these major roles of the media towards an inclusive national development is the media's ability to set agenda for national discussions. Media organizations and journalists have over the years used their platforms to champion issues of national interest like the fight against illegal mining also known as "Galamsey", advocated against corruption, checked abuses of human rights among others. As some media scholars put it, the media is seen as: "a window on events and experience", "a mirror of events in society and the world", "a filter or gatekeeper", "a signpost, guide or interpreter", "a forum or platform for the presentation of information and ideas", "an interlocutor or informed partner in conversation." (McQuill 2010; MFWA 2019).

However, the media in Ghana do not operate in a vacuum. They operate in a larger body called society. As a result, they are faced with myriad of challenges that threatens their continuous existence to perform their duties. These challenges ranges from the frail financial health of many media organizations in Ghana, to issues relating to ethics and code of conduct for professionals,

as well as media ownership and regulation among others. For instance, in recent times, journalists in Ghana have faced threats and physical attacks from members of the major political parties in Ghana. A report by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) indicates that Ghana has recorded 14 cases of abuse of journalists, including five arrests, since the beginning of 2022 alone. Ghana has also dropped 30 places to 60th on the 2022 World Press Freedom Index.

Nonetheless, the media's role in shaping understanding, bringing issues to the fore and generally contributing to the development of the nation cannot be underestimated. Despite the challenges faced by the media in Ghana, there also exists many exciting opportunities in the media.

The usual news production cycle of the media was easily disrupted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Media organisations and journalists had to make drastic changes to meet the demands of their audiences shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In light of this, this paper seeks to assess the various challenges faced by the Ghanaian media as well as the various opportunities available for them in the post COVID-19 pandemic era to extend their reach and impact.

2.0 Literature Review

The media industry in Ghana as earlier mentioned, has undergone comprehensive changes. Media development itself has come a long way in recent years and today adopts a more holistic approach that focuses not only on building private media but recognizes the need for legal reform, civil society involvement, enhanced professional capacity, strengthened institutions that support media freedom and development of technical media infrastructure (Peters 2010). The advent of new media has also changed the face of journalism practice in the country. Today, media organizations can share their products and contents across several digital platforms and in turn has created a lot of opportunities and challenges alike. With the growing adoption of social media amongst the general population and user generated content (UGC) becoming an integral part of the news production cycle, traditional media organizations have had to find ways to leverage digital social platforms whose development they have very limited control over.

The Media Foundation for West Africa's report that discussed the challenges of the role of the Media in Participatory Governance highlighted six main challenges which limits the media's role in promoting popular participation. These are: lack of finances for media organizations to be viable and sustainable, Partisanship and Commercialization, Low Ethical Standards and Professionalism, Worsening Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists' Situation, Media Capture and Clientelism, Culture of Secrecy and Apprehension of Media Enquiries in Public Office. The challenge of professionalism, according to MFWA's report is one that cuts across the media landscapes of West Africa.

Similarly, a study by Seibu (2020) assessed the impact of online media on traditional media (newspapers) in information dissemination in modern time and revealed that both social and traditional media are the main sources of information dissemination in recent times. Social media however, has a higher impact over traditional media because of developments in information technology thereby, making it a critical tool in information dissemination in modern times. Social media comes in the form of news portals, blogs, among others.

A study conducted by Demuyakor (2020) on the opportunities and challenges of digital media revealed that new media has offered the opportunity to have instant communication with others regardless of their distance and many media organizations have also made huge investments towards growing their online presence. However, there are some gaps created by digital media. Lippe et al, (2019) assert that digital media and other very important technologies have widened the gap of inequality as innovations have increased the level of outputs while at the same time simultaneously cutting the cost of low skilled work.

The aforementioned findings point to the fact that, the media (both traditional and new) have contributed significantly to national development. However, there are still some challenges which ought to be addressed in order to experience the full opportunities offered by the media.

3.0 Methodology

The study was conducted covering the Ghanaian media landscape and it assessed the contemporary Ghanaian Media to establish the opportunities and challenges thereof in the media today with particular emphasis on leveraging new digital tools. The methods used were document review and interviews. The document review looked at sources including published academic articles relating to the subject matter, media reports, personal and institutional blogs and web sites. The data gathered from the documents review as well as the interviews were analyzed and grouped into themes. The themes pertained to the media landscape in Ghana, Challenges and opportunities for the media in Ghana, the kind of support journalists need in their newsrooms in order to be effective and how COVID -19 has impacted news production cycle using technology. This was done by juxtaposing the information from the documents with that of the data collected through interviews. The gaps identified during the analysis were presented as conclusions and recommendations.

4.0 Findings and Discussions

In pursuance of the objectives of this study, four themes were identified for the purpose of analysis and the analysis were done based on the identified themes. The themes related to the media landscape in Ghana; Challenges and opportunities for the media in Ghana; the kind of support journalists need in their newsrooms in order to be effective; and how COVID -19 has impacted news production cycle using technology.

4.1 The contemporary Ghanaian Media

There has been a lot of positive development in the media industry in Ghana in recent times. This is largely due to the deregulation of the media space which has given room for the establishment of new media houses across the various media jurisdiction, (ie. print, online, broadcast) among others. The media environment in Ghana can be said to be one which is growing and very encouraging for prospective media startups. Despite the positives, there have also been hitches relating to journalists' safety as there are several instances of attacks on journalists, self-censorship and influence from politicians and media owners. There is also a growing concern about low journalism standards. "A lot of the journalists in Ghana have not been trained", a lecturer at the department of Communications at the University of Cape Coast noted. He added that media houses in Ghana are not ready to offer good salaries and incentives and as such usually engage people who are not trained and do not have much knowledge of what goes into journalism practice. Hence, there are a lot of infractions in the media today. However, from the document reviews and the interview, there is an enabling environment for media growth in Ghana.

4.2 The main role of the media

The traditional role of the media still remains to educate, inform and entertain. However, media enthusiasts believe that in a developing country like Ghana, the media's role must go beyond just educating, informing and entertaining people. The media has to be more inclined towards advocacy and development issues. It must be more focused on developmental initiatives to create the enabling environment and spearhead the desired development by narrowing its lenses on the issues of under development to bridge the gap between developed and undeveloped areas of the country. It must deepen its advocacy to be the voice of the voiceless in championing human rights, right to

information, good governance and economic justice. “The roles of the media can be contextualized to suit our specific context. The role of the media should be in tandem with the development aspirations of the country. The media should assume a posture where they augment Government development initiative to bring development in the country”, a lecturer at GIJ mentioned.

4.3 The media’s use of social media

Social media offers a new point of contact between media producers and media audience who are both important in the media business. Due to its ubiquitous nature, social media is giving traditional media a run for its money for which some people have postulated that social media will gradually replace the traditional media, resulting in a fragmentation of audiences, position which has been widely opposed by many media enthusiasts.

In Ghana, the media’s use of social media has been good but there is room for improvement because social media is only an assistance. In recent times, a lot of the issues that have generated national discussion in mainstream media have come from social media. While it took some media houses a long time to realize the power of social media, they are gradually beginning to have a strong social media presence in response to the demands of their audiences. “It may not be as perfect compared to other parts of the world where social media is a central component in the activities of traditional media, the Ghanaian media is gradually picking up. Now, most of the media in Ghana have social media presence and have started livestreaming on their social media handles”, a lecturer at the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ) noted.

These development shows that the Ghanian media is leveraging well on social media to complement their role. Indeed, it could be said that the media in Ghana is catching up with the trends in social media usage. The downside however, can be seen in the high cost of internet, poor internet penetration, language barriers, gender inequality, which all adversely affects accessibility of news content on social media.

4.4 COVID-19 and news production cycle in Ghana

For many people around the World, COVID-19 has been a blessing in disguise especially in developing countries where digital technology has not advanced. COVID-19 has shown that certain things can be done differently, especially in developing countries. In the newsroom, the

impact of COVID-19 on news production has been enormous. Journalists interviewed for the purpose of this article have indicated how COVID-19 encouraged them to use technology more in their news production. For many of them, COVID-19 has helped improved their news gathering by relying more on telephone interviews, Google Teams and Zoom for conferences and interviews. “The office WhatsApp platform has become an additional medium of communication. News editors post assignments on the platform. Until recently, zoom meetings were organised once every week to discuss story ideas”, a journalist recounted. Another journalist also stated that “COVID-19 has accelerated plans for digital transition. Business plans include more remote working and faster switch to reader focused business models as well”. One of the most positive impacts of the COVID-19, according to a lecturer at the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ) has been that, third world countries like Ghana have come to realize the importance of digitization or the use of digital technology. These technologies save time, money and efforts.

However, the only deficiency is the lack of awareness of such technologies, lack of knowledge of its existence and the use of such technologies as well as the lack of funds to purchase these technologies. Yes, the Ghanaian media is trying to be effective in leveraging on the opportunities that COVID-19 has brought to bear in their news production but they are challenged. The challenge here is that, most journalists in Ghana do not have the required technology, knowledge of how it is used coupled with the lack of resources to invest in the technological space. The media must therefore learn lessons about how they can cut down on human resource and use technology to influence things.

4.5 Threats and challenges faced by the Ghanaian media

The document review and the data from the interview points to a common direction so far as the challenges of the Ghanaian media is concerned. The issue of journalists abuses and threats, financial constraints, censorship and influence from media owners and politicians are a common challenging feature in the Ghanaian media landscape. In May 2022, the Reporters without borders mentioned that media outlets in Ghana are often faced with financial challenges, low salaries and poor working conditions. Lina Paulitsch and Lisette Hummelink in their article “the Problems of Journalism in Ghana” published on the website of the Central Press newspaper in December 2012, noted that in the outside World, Ghana’s media is considered free and independent but with a

closer look, most Ghanaian journalists work under hard conditions, which forced them to abandon their neutrality and professionalism. They concluded their article by stating that the problems or challenges of the Ghanaian media are all connected to one source- which is Money. There is also a challenge of inadequate training and poor remuneration, logistical challenges

4.6 Opportunities for the Ghanaian media

For journalists, media enthusiast and academia who were interviewed, there exist opportunities for the Ghanaian media to develop and sustain its operations. According to a lecturer at the GIJ, the existence of stakeholder group that oversee the day-to-day operation of the media in Ghana provides hope for media development. Nevertheless, there is the need to empower bodies such as the National Media Commission (NMC) to play its role of sanitizing the media landscape effectively.

Another opportunity is the creation of online news portals. Most newspaper organizations in Ghana have online versions which is an opportunity. This can be made richer with training and technology. Media organization can be proactive in supporting journalists, investment more in data journalism and fact checking and organize regular training and workshops for journalists to improve their writing skills.

4.7 Driving innovation in newsrooms

Innovation makes journalists less dependent on opinions and more dependent on facts. It is important that news leaders encourage innovation in the news room. They should be very welcoming and willing to try new ideas by creating an enabling environment where innovative ideas could be pursued. It is only through this that journalists can get that desire to drive innovation. A stifling newsroom environment will discourage journalists from thinking about innovative ideas and to apply them. A critical look at the current media shows more complacency. A lot of the media houses are sticking to the old ways of doing things while society has advanced. Newsrooms can adopt innovations around data journalism, robotics, mobile news, digital walls, blockchain, etc.

4.8 What local newsrooms need in other to thrive

Local newsrooms need competent people to survive. Local newsrooms need well motivated people, well resourced, paid the right salaries. Local news rooms need support in terms of training, equipment, workshop. They also need government and private sector investment. Government and others who are interested in development, must invest in the media in terms of training and providing them with equipment.

5.0 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study which sought to assess the opportunities and challenges of the Ghanaian media, the following recommendations are suggested:

Firstly, the media in Ghana must go beyond performing its traditional role of just educating, informing and entertaining people and focus more on using their platforms to champion developmental initiatives. Doing this will enable the media bridge the gap between developed and underdeveloped areas of the country.

Local or community news outlets needs to adopt some of the following strategies to thrive: Direct fundraising from the community; increase outreach for memberships or subscriptions; develop new forms of premium content that can be paid for by target audience and tap into a growing number of grants for newsrooms.

Also, the media must fully embrace the endless possibilities of technology. Capacity of journalists must be built in the area of technology to enable them make use of various technological devices to execute their task. Media organization can be proactive in supporting journalists, invest more in data journalism and fact checking and organize regular training and workshops for journalists to improve their writing skills

As the findings revealed, journalists are constantly attacked in line with the performance of their duties. The safety of journalists and media organizations must also be prioritized considering the crucial role they play in demanding accountability from duty bearers. Media owners must play a critical role in providing insurance for journalists and advocating for their safety. Journalists should also be ethical and professional in their work to reduce some of the reported attacks.,

Additionally, regulatory bodies and media owners must put in place measures to ensure journalists and other individuals within the profession adhere to the profession's code of conduct.

5.1 Conclusion

Unquestionably, the media in Ghana has played a key role in national development and continues to do so. Although Ghana's media has had several triumphs throughout the years, it is important to note that some challenges still exist. Even though the expansion in numbers, ownership

diversity, pluralism, and spread of media outlets have increased over the past years, all has not been well with the Ghanaian media industry. Major regulatory gaps have emerged, the main regulatory agency has become inactive, professional standards have declined, the safety of journalists is deteriorating, and media outlets are still struggling for survival.

As a result, significant reforms are needed in Ghana's media industry to strengthen the media and enable them to continue playing a vital part in the growth of the country. They include regulatory reforms, building the capacity of journalists and critically examining the general working conditions of Ghanaian journalists.

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