



# The Media and Participatory Governance in Ghana: *Trends and Challenges*

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## 1.0 Introduction and Background

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s 1982 Grunwald Declaration on Media Education identified the key role of the media in the process of development and emphasized the media *"as instruments for the citizen's active participation in society"*<sup>1</sup>. Across the world today, the role of the media (traditional or online) is considered crucial for sustainable development, democracy and popular participation.

The development of the media, growth of private and independent media outlets, access to information and a liberal freedom of expression environment have been often identified as key features of a transparent, accountable and participatory democracy. Indeed, a functioning democracy thrives on informed and active citizens, and informed participation underlines the principal role of the media. Nonetheless, the media's role in participatory governance, transcends surveillance of news and distribution of information. The media further plays an active role in shaping understanding, highlighting key issues for the attention of society and ensuring political mobilisation. Thus, the mass media is both an actor and facilitator in the democratic process and popular participation.

In Ghana, the growth of media plurality and press freedom is interlinked with the growth of multi-party democracy and participatory governance, especially in the fourth republic. While the fourth republican constitution provided a legal framework for press freedom, the media also, in turn, deepened participatory governance and consolidated democracy.

For instance, the transition to liberal democracy in 1992, witnessed the repeal of the 'Newspaper Licensing Law', which was passed in the erstwhile military regime to control the press. The repeal saw the registration of dozens of newspapers and magazines which were critical of the activities of the ruling government as well as provided opportunity for the masses to participate in the democratic process of the day.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the repeal of the criminal libel and seditious law in 2001, which prescribed jail term sentences for a number of speech and editorial offences, provided a great guarantee of safety and free atmosphere for the media. The repeal of the libel law bolstered the media in providing more opportunities for citizens in demanding transparency and accountability from duty-bearers and public servants.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, from setting the agenda and advocacy during the country's struggles for independence till today, the Ghanaian media has persistently set the agenda on matters of critical importance, sustained the discourse, and stirred and caused changes.

Drawing on available data and literature, this paper begins with an introduction on the media landscape in Ghana and explains how the media have contributed to promoting participatory and accountable governance. It further discusses the trends, barriers of media and governance in Ghana and makes key recommendations on how participatory governance can be improved.

## 2.0 The Media Landscape in Ghana

Ghana has a vibrant and pluralistic media landscape dominated by privately owned media outlets with radio, TV and online being the three most accessed sources of information. There are currently 398 radio stations operating in Ghana, which has about 91 percent penetration among citizens; 136 authorised television stations, with a penetration of 92 percent.<sup>4</sup>

The [Media Ownership Monitor](#) (MOM) report indicates that as at 2015, there were 135 newspapers registered with the National Media Commission (NMC), the media regulatory body, including dailies, weekly papers, bi-weeklies, sports weeklies, financial weeklies, entertainment weeklies and monthlies and quarterlies. The 2017 MOM report, specifies that newspapers in Ghana have an 87 percent penetration and a reach of 20.4 percent of the population.<sup>5</sup>

According to *Internet World Stats*, a global digital and population data website, as at the end of March, 2019, 10.1million people, which is 33.6 percent of the population, had access to the internet with 4.9million on Facebook. While the data on online news is limited, online news portals remain the most visited websites in Ghana, according to alexa.com, a website rating site.<sup>6</sup>

On sources of news, the Afrobarometer 2018 notes that “Most Ghanaians rely on radio and television as their main sources of news. About one-quarter get news from social media and the Internet at least a few times a month, while regular newspaper readership continues to decline. Young and well- educated Ghanaians are the most frequent users of social media and the Internet, while older and less-educated citizens rely more heavily on radio as a source of news”.

## 2.1 Freedom of Expression Environment and Regulatory Framework for Media Operation

Following the return to the liberal democracy in 1992, after years of turbulence in the press freedom and freedom of expression landscape owing to the recurring military takeovers, Ghana has maintained a stable democracy and a generally free media landscape. Consequently, Ghana ranks high in the World Press Freedom Index—currently 2<sup>nd</sup> in Africa and 27<sup>th</sup> in the world.<sup>7</sup>

Chapter 12 of Ghana’s 1992 Constitution guarantees freedom and independence of the media; Article 162 (3) of the Constitution embodies press freedom in the country:

*“There shall be no impediments to the establishment of private press or media; and in particular, there shall be no law requiring any person to obtain a license as a prerequisite to the establishment or operation of a newspaper, journal or other mass communication or information.”*

Additionally, in 2001 the country repealed the criminal libel of law which prescribed punitive actions and prison terms for a number of press offences. Also, in March 2019, the Parliament of

Ghana passed the Right to Information Bill into law which has further been assented by the President and will come into force in 2020. Despite these guarantees in the Constitution of Ghana that frees the media landscape, liberates journalists and promotes exchange of ideas and sharing of diverse opinion, there exist some provisions that are hostile to free expression. Specifically, the following provisions under Section 208 of Ghana's Criminal Code (1960) are inimical to press freedom and freedom of expression:

- (1) Any person who publishes or reproduces any statement, rumour or report which is likely to cause fear and alarm to the public or to disturb the public peace knowing or having reason to believe that the statement, rumour or report is false is guilty of a misdemeanour.*
- (2) It is no defense to a charge under subsection (1) that the person charged did not know or did not have reason to believe that the statement, rumour or report was false unless he proves that, prior to publication, he took reasonable measures to verify the accuracy of the statement, rumour or report.*

The above provisions remain a workable tool that stifle free press and freedom of expression in the country.

There are two main media regulatory institutions in Ghana—**National Media Commission (NMC)** and the **National Communications Authority (NCA)**. The NMC principally deals with media content while the NCA is responsible for frequency allocation, regulation and infrastructural development. Established in 1993 in accordance with Articles 166 to 173 of the 1992 Constitution, the National Media Commission (NMC) has oversight responsibility over the media to promote and safeguard the freedom and independence of the media, encourage responsible practice, and investigate, mediate and settle complaints made against the media. The commission is made up of 18 members drawn from a broad spectrum of media and other professional stakeholder groupings, to ensure neutrality and insulate it against governmental control.

The National Communications Authority (NCA) was also established in 1996 by an Act of Parliament (Act 524) to promote broadcast pluralism, to oversee the allocation, administration and utilisation of the country's frequency spectrum and ensure that communications services are provided throughout Ghana. The NCA therefore allocates frequencies and grants licenses for the operation of radio, television, telephone and other telecommunication services in the country.

## 3.0 The Media and Participatory Governance in Ghana

Media scholars have provided a general list of mediation roles or functions that the mass media have been known or perceived to play in participatory governance in society. 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.”<sup>8</sup>

Over the years in Ghana’s fledgling democracy, the media have played very meaningful roles in sustaining and advancing democratic participation, and this is very perceptible during elections. The media drives electoral democracy through coverage of political parties’ activities, stimulation of public debate, critical analysis of political issues and providing education on electoral processes and general governance issues.

The media contribute to transparency and accountability by providing information about what government is doing and by exposing wrongdoing to citizens. As an institution, they are one of the pillars of accountability, with the structural rights that enable them to act as checks on power. This is because the media provides the easiest and most efficient means by which governments communicate with their citizens, and by which information flows among different strata and sections of society. The media also provide an enabling form and space for citizens to provide unrestrained feedback to government on national issues.

### 3.1 The Trends

#### 3.1.1 Media Convergence to enhance Reach, Accessibility and Participation

Media convergence is the merging or blending of multiple media forms into one platform for purposes of delivering a dynamic experience. In Ghana, the legacy media are increasingly merging with social media and other digital media platforms to increase their audience reach and perhaps harness the strengths of the emerging digital messaging apps. For example, a radio station would have a website and many other social media accounts or pages where audience can engage and share their opinions on stories and media reports.

For instance, in a morning show on a prominent radio station in Ghana today, beyond accessing the show on a frequency from a radio set and engaging in phone-ins to share opinions, the following different media platforms are deployed to enhance reach, accessibility and participation:

- A live stream on the website of the radio station for audience to listen
- A live streaming (video) of the show on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram for audience to watch

- Audience may as well share their opinions from the Facebook page of the radio station on the issues being discussed for the host to broadcast to the teeming listeners
- Audience may also send their written thoughts or audio (voice notes) to WhatsApp (a social media messaging app) where the host will read to other listeners
- Audience may also 'tag' the host of the show in their thoughts and contributions on the issues being discussed on Facebook and Twitter
- The show may as well advertise a common hashtag for audience on Facebook and Twitter to comment on. The hashtags indexes all the comments and make it easily accessible by the host
- The Show may also run polls on Facebook or Twitter to seek the views of their audience on a particular subject

The above media convergence experiences are in no doubt enhancing the participatory governance as it presents multi-media platforms for individuals to participate in governance whilst enhancing the reach of the media outlets.

### **3.1.2 Social Media as the New Tool for Participatory Governance**

The advent of the internet and availability of the different digital media platforms have been harnessed by both government and political actors, and the citizens to deepen participation. Today, messaging apps like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have become a major media platform where popular participation occurs frequently. While democratic participation can be classified in many different levels such as conventional and unconventional participation, social media is being utilised across all levels.

In Ghana today, social media, aside from aiding communication, reportage, commerce and interactions has also become a means of activism by the Ghanaian people. This has led to more questions being asked by the people, and the demand for better standards and accountability from duty bearers - political leaders, public service holders etc.

#### **i. Social Media for Conventional Participation**

Conventional participation is the kind of engagement that is in accordance with laid down rules and regulations, and uses the instruments of representative democracy to make input in governance. Example includes voting during election, engaging political party campaigns and rallies, making contribution in town hall meetings etc. Social media is today being deployed in different forms of conventional participation by Groups, especially political parties and movements, as effective tools for mobilizing individuals and supporters.

In a study, the General Secretaries of the four main political parties with representation in Ghana's parliament, namely the National Democratic Congress (NDC), New Patriotic Party (NPP),

Peoples' National Convention (PNC) and Convention Peoples' Party (CPP), were interviewed on political participation and social media. The study identified the following as the ways the parties are deploying social media:

- -Discussing and soliciting voice and opinion on key topical issues affecting the State;
- -Mobilising support and membership for the Parties; and
- -Fund Raising.<sup>9</sup>

The findings of the paper demonstrate the indispensable role social media is playing today in the political party mobilisation and popular participation.

## **ii. Social Media for Unconventional Participation or Social Accountability**

This is the form of participation that is contrary to the laid down rules and regulations. Unconventional participation may not go through the formal governmental apparatus or processes, but remain the alternative ways citizens engage with government. Examples include protest march and demonstrations.

The civic space in Ghana today is more open. In recent times, one of the famous and quintessential forms of unconventional participation is the Dumsor Must Stop (The power cuts must cease) demonstration in 2016. It was a protest by citizens on the incessant erratic supply of power. The citizenry led by a few renowned entertainment personalities started a campaign on both Facebook and Twitter with the hashtag #DumsorMustStop. Thousands of citizens contributed to the campaign on social media for weeks, before they finally convened at a designated spot in Accra to engage in a march through the streets to register their displeasure on the power cuts to government.<sup>10</sup> Social media was thus used as a tool to initiate the campaign, solicit for support and mobilise demonstrators to gather offline to press home their frustrations and demands.

## **iii. Social Media for Inclusive Participation**

Hitherto the penetration of the internet and availability of social media and other messaging platforms, the traditional or legacy media—Radio, TV, Newspapers—were the only means to mass communication. The legacy media however has always been largely available to a few and limited dominant class of people made up of the elites in society and the economically powerful who have prerogative access to them.

In contrast, the user-generated nature of the social media platforms affords every individual or groups of people in society the opportunity to engage and share their thoughts and opinions to the mass public on issues that affect them. The use of the social media has therefore contributed in including the voice of the youth and ordinary citizens on critical national issues.

### **3.1.3 Citizens' mobilization and increased citizen activism to induce responsiveness from government**

Legacy media in Ghana today are easily able to trigger citizens' mobilization and action on different subjects and issues in many ways. The media teams up with civil society actors, pressure groups and citizens to raise sustained advocacy or campaigns around issues that have the potential to trigger authorities' responses and action to induce responsiveness from government on issues that are raised in the public domain. An example is the advocacy by Occupy Ghana, a civil society group in Ghana that engaged the Auditor General to take action on "Surcharges and Disallowance" following successive media reports on financial irregularities that had characterized the Auditor General Report over the years in Ghana.

### **3.1.4 Gauging Public Opinion**

Democratic governments are often guided by public opinion, and public opinion is often gauged and reflected through the media. Citizens are thus able to attract the attention of government when very critical and salient issues are brought to the public through the mass media. People are more inclined to contact media organization to register their displeasure than even resorting to the law enforcement agencies when they feel their issue demand the urgent attention of government. They believe the media will amplify their voices and get the authorities to act in a much quicker way. Some individuals will also raise the issues on social media to attract attention. There are more questions being asked, more analysis of the issues by the general public and more agitation for better services from duty bearers. Communities have perhaps never felt more confident in staging protests and demonstrations to demand for service delivery than now.

### **3.1.5 Increased investigation, Fact Checking & Joint campaigns by the Media**

What we see today is impact of some good evidence driven journalism, increased investigation, fact checking and joint campaigns by the Media. This has led to the uncovering of more scandals, increased accountability from government, better policies implemented and increased expectations from elected officials. eg: the Fight against illegal mining in Ghana (known as Galamasey), the media campaign for continuation of the Abandoned Hospital Projects, Adenta demonstrations against lack of footbridges, #RedFridays to advocate for #PasstheRTIBillNow campaign among many others.

## 4.0 Challenges of the Role of the Media in Participatory Governance

Despite the indispensable role the media plays in participatory governance in Ghana, there exist a number of challenges that inhibit this crucial contribution of the media. Some of these challenges in fact threaten the continuous existence of many media outlets and the freedoms enjoyed by them. The following are some of the challenges that limit the media's role in promoting popular participation.

### 4.1 Sustainability Challenge and Weak Supporting Institutions

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the media's role in popular participation and good governance is the frail financial health of many media organisations in Ghana. Media outlets have been struggling to remain financially viable and sustainable. Media houses are continuously grappling with the difficulty in raising enough revenues to cover the operational costs and staff remuneration, together with other financial obligations such as revenue taxes.

The challenge is further worsened by the increasing capture of the advertising space by the online global media giants like Facebook, Twitter and Google—following the penetration of the internet—which hitherto used to be safe revenue generators for many media outlets. The media sustainability challenge is symptomatic of the failing financial economy, weak institutions and business environment of the country. Thus, the media is simply one of the many institutions that are struggling to survive in the adversely difficult economic situation in Ghana.

The sustainability challenges consequently diminish the capacity of the media to play the roles of surveillance and news gathering to inform the public of the business and activities of government as well as the sampling of the views and concerns of the public.

### 4.2 Partisanship and Commercialisation

Following the menacing challenge of viability, many media organisations are increasingly shirking the roles that have characterized their contribution to participatory democracy in pursuit of financial sustainability. The media has therefore become extremely commercialized—sometimes prioritising the pecuniary gains ahead of public interest (the public's right to know) and news values. Also, in cases where the media outlets decide to do news stories, oftentimes they resort to sensationalism, gossips, and reports that will easily generate more listeners, viewers and clicks.

In many instances also, in expectations of favours, financial supports and contributions from political forces with deep pockets and powerful influence, the media panders to political partisanship and acts as 'conveyor belts' of the rhetorics, ideas and activities of the political figures. The media thus at one end neglect its gatekeeping roles while in another plays its agenda framing and agenda setting role but in the interest of the political forces that be—not in the interest of the public and a genuine quest to engender participation.

### 4.3 Low Ethical Standards and Professionalism

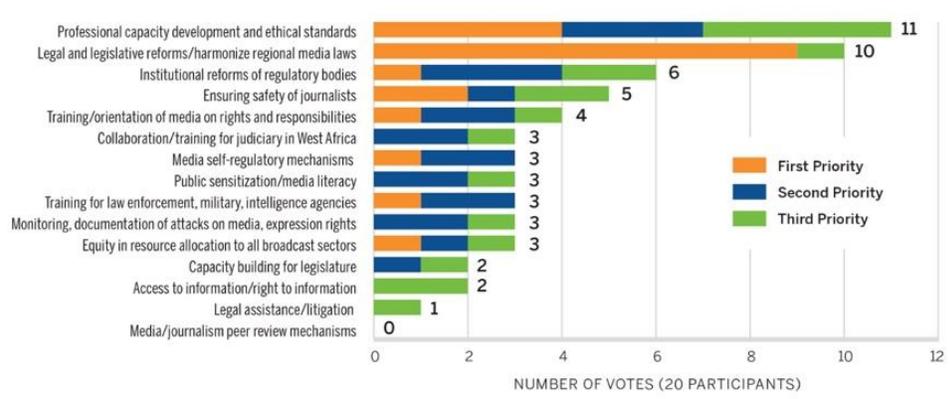
Generally professional standards exhibited by the media and journalists have been considered to be low, causing a dwindling trust of the media by many audiences who consider some members of the media to be corrupt. This has further resulted in a drop of the public’s support of media freedom in the country.

In the 2018 Afrobarometer, only one in three Ghanaians (36%) support full media freedom—a sharp drop from 55% in 2014. This is further worsened by the finding that a majority of Ghanaians (57%) say the government should have the right to prevent publications by the media it (government) deems harmful to public interest.<sup>11</sup>

The situation presents a very saddening conflict on the role of the media in promoting democratic participation in Ghana. This is because the media which is expected to be serving the interest of the public is losing the support of a majority of the same public owing to low professionalism and ethical standards exhibited by the media.

Indeed, the challenge of professionalism is one that cuts across the media landscapes of West Africa. In a recent study on challenges to media development in West Africa by the Media Foundation for West Africa (CIMA) and the Centre for International Media Support (CIMA) which consulted a range of media operators, media experts and academics, representatives of media policy and regulatory bodies and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the report indicated ‘Ethical Standards and Professionalism’ as the top most priority area for media development intervention.

**FIGURE 1: Results of a Ranking Exercise on Media Freedom Priorities**  
 Participants were asked to indicate, among the range of issues explored in group sessions and discussed in plenaries, what their top three priorities would be for media development interventions under the theme of media freedom.



Source: MFWA/CIMA Reports, 2019

## 4.4 Worsening Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists' Situation

Despite being touted one of the freest media and free expression destinations in Africa, Ghana records considerable incidents of press freedom violations, especially attacks against journalists and media organisations. These incidents are further aggravated by the lack of redress or punitive measures against perpetrators of the violations.

According to the [MFWA's Freedom of Expression Monitor](#), between the period of 2014- 2018 Ghana has recorded 71 violations, out of which only one has been redressed. This unfortunately contributes to deepening the culture of impunity—where perpetrators are emboldened to continue infringing on people's right to express their divergent opinions on issues without any punitive consequence.

Further, recent happenings in Ghana demonstrates a dreadful waning of press freedom and worsening safety of journalists' situation. The Freedom of Expression Monitor indicates that from February 2018 to March 2019, a total of 22 violations against journalists and media organisations were recorded. Half of the 22 violations were direct attacks against journalists. The attacks include the January 16, 2019 cold-blood gunning down of renowned Investigative Journalists Anas Aremeyaw Anas' compatriot Ahmed Hussein -Suale, who had played a leading role in the Anas' 2018 "Number 12" expose which revealed the deep-seated rot and corruption in football administration in Ghana and Africa.

Indeed, these attacks among several others culminated in the drop of Ghana 4 places down—23 to 27—in the 2019 World Press Freedom Index.<sup>12</sup>

The deteriorating situation of the press freedom can have dire consequences on the media's ability and confidence to play the watch dog role, ensure transparency and demand for accountability, as it may lead to nurturing a culture of fear and self-censorship among journalists.

## 4.5 Media Capture and Clientelism

The return to democratic governance and the subsequent freeing of the media landscape to allow the thriving of private media organisations paved the way for the elites, the economically powerful and political forces to occupy and own the media. Whilst nominally this pattern of media ownership may not be the challenge itself, in the case of Ghana, these ownership forces, most often than not, have influence on the production and output of reports by the media outlets to the extent where stories are given slants and focuses that are consistent with the ideals and thoughts of owners. Even in the case of state-owned media outlets, stories are often given frames that project the government in very positive lights. It also withholds the media from being critical of these political and economic forces.

The Media Ownership Monitor report, for instance, traced some of the influential media outlets in Ghana to the owners and their political affiliations, demonstrating an obviously possible conflict of interest on the owners' position and that of the media outlets' objectivity in producing stories to engender a genuine public discourse.

“Out of the monitored media outlets, [a third are either state-owned or have shareholders with political affiliations](#), amongst them high-level politicians. For example, the acting Chairman of the governing New Patriotic Party (NPP), Frederick Blay, is a majority shareowner of Western Publications Ltd., publisher of Daily Guide and News One newspapers (*a leading newspaper brand in Ghana*). [Dr. Kwabena Duffour](#), the listed shareowner of the Excellence in Broadcasting Group Ltd. (*a conglomerate of media outlets*), was former Minister of Finance and Economic Planning in the erstwhile National Democratic Congress government. Also the Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Communications - the body where legal steps concerning the media sector are initiated and discussed - [Kennedy Agyepong](#), has direct ties to the media through his wife, who manages [Oman FM](#) and Net 2 TV as a CEO.”<sup>13</sup>

These ownership patterns cast a slur on the media's objectivity to set an open agenda for the public to engage and share opinions.

## 4.6 Culture of Secrecy and Apprehension of Media Enquiries in Public Office

Democratic participation thrives on the availability, access and dissemination of information. Thus, information must first be available, and the media must have the ability to access and disseminate the information to the public who relying on the information will be able to participate in the discourse of national issues.

Unfortunately, in Ghana there is a seeming culture of secrecy and an opaque arena in which government conduct business. Holders of public offices are very often apprehensive of divulging information to the public or even opening up to the media. In some cases, activists, individuals and media organisations enquiring to know the details of government's deals and contracts have had to drag public officials to the law courts to have access to documents, since the officials never divulge details of such contracts to the citizens they are supposed to represent.<sup>14</sup>

## 5.0 Recommendations

The outlined challenges and trends in the media's role in participatory governance call for many interventions and actions from different stakeholders such as the government, media owners and regulatory bodies and citizens. The following recommendations are suggested:

### 5.1 Government

The government must ensure:

- The laying down of appropriate and adequate structures to guarantee the proper implementation of the Right To Information (RTI) Law when it becomes operational in 2020 as it remains an effective tool to fight against secrecy and corruption in public office as well as the access to information for media and the public.
- The repeal of the provisions under Section 208 of Ghana's Criminal Code (1960) which are inimical to press freedom and freedom of expression.
- The prioritization of the safety of journalists and media organisations to safeguard the crucial role they play in participatory governance, transparency and accountability and intensify efforts to punish press freedom violation perpetrators.
- The institution of a media fund and financial support for the media as has been promised by previous governments <sup>15</sup> to sustain the media in Ghana.

### 5.2 Owners of Media Outlets and Media Regulatory Bodies

The media regulatory bodies and owners of media outlets must ensure:

- The highest ethical standards and professionalism in the media landscape by instituting stiff punishments for journalists who breach the ethical codes or are engaged in dishonest acts that bring disrepute to media and its image.
- The pursuit of perpetrators of violations against journalists and media workers to ensure they are punished to dismantle the deepening culture of impunity of crimes against free press.
- The continuous capacity building of journalists to meet the current demands of media and journalism practice to enhance the role of the media in participatory governance

## 5.3 Citizens

The general citizens are also encouraged:

- To provide maximum support to the media despite the challenges of low ethical standards and professionalism, knowing that the original objective of the media is to serve the interest of the public and their absence thereof will incur negative impacts on the citizenry.

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