Social media is a growing phenomenon media essay

Social media is a growing phenomenon in our present information age. For many persons, particularly the youth, social media and other newmedia tools provide the platform to create, disseminate and share information among groups and in other cases consolidate existing connections (Lind &Zmud, 1995; cited in Haythornthwaite, 2002). The power and influences of the social media phenomenon in shaping our world today cannot be overlooked. Its impact is witnessed as a coordinating tool for a significant number of the world's political movements. The angry protests that pushed the removal of Philippine President Joseph Estrada (Shirky, 2011; Safranek, 2012) and the political revolutions that took place in the Middle East commonly referred to as the Arab Spring are but some examples of the potency of the social media in empowering citizens and projecting their will. Again in political campaigning, social media is credited to have contributed significantly to the electoral success of then candidate Barak Obama as his adoption of the technology facilitated his reach to and garnering support from many young voters, and also support his fundraising during the 2008 American presidential elections (" YouTube and the 2008 Election Cycle in the United States", 2009; Haley, 2011/12). In Ghana, a number of the presidential and parliamentary candidates for the 2012 elections have created presence on the various social media platforms targeting their campaign messages at the different social groups found on these platforms. Advertisers, marketers as well as other businesses and brands in Ghana are gradually adopting social media to facilitate interactions between themselves and the audiences they seek to reach. The trend in this means of communication is not much different from what is happening globally.

The social media fad is believed to have enhanced cultural exchanges (Grincheva, 2012), created, maintained and deepened social ties in a significant number of social settings (Haythornthwaite, 2002). For quite a number of people, it is almost impossible to exist in our present world and not be affected by the social media phenomenon. It has become part of our new world which is driven extensively by information and communication.

The importance of civic engagements in democratic dispensations cannot be over emphasised. Various works suggest less civic engagements in many western nations (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010). These works imply decreases, especially among America's young generation, in social and political happenings such as volunteering for community activities and voting to elect political officials. They conclude that such apathy towards civic engagements poses a threat to the country's democracy. Civic conversation or discourse is a useful measure of civic engagements. " Good civic discourse,...enriches the set of ideals and choices by which citizens govern themselves (Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy, 2006)."

Thus in a time where Information and Communication Technology tools are facilitating efficient communication and have become an attraction for many, noticeably the youth, understanding its adoption for the promotion of civic discourses in Ghana cannot be overlooked.

Background

The social media application runs on the foot of the internet technology. The internet in our world today directs the manner in which efficient means of communication is carried from place to place, person to person and culture

to culture. There are expectations that the internet will become ubiquitous (Rao, 2012). Researchers and scholars have divergent opinions of the impacts of the internet and new media technology on our world today. Their opinions are expressed broadly in utopian and dystopian perspectives and cover all aspects of life of which the technology is experienced. The utopians appreciate the Internet as a potentially enormous tool for good. The positive possibilities from the Internet include supporting the practice of democracy, human interactions, concerted political action, education, etc. On the other hand the dystopians, the cyberpunks and the alarmists, see danger in every digital project to the extent of its cause to an ultimate loss of our humanity. The many texts messages, Facebook comments or tweets that pour into radio and television programmes each day according to Utopians proponents are indicative of the internet empowering ordinary citizens to participate and have their voices heard in the discourses on issues that affect their lives in the communities they live in. However, when stories such as the murder of a 25 year old girl by friends she had met on Facebook make the news (Adeboye & Ayodeji , 2012), dystopian proponents have cause to warn of the dangers of the internet technology.

(Bell, 2001) Understanding the internet and all its associated technology and applications requires an understanding of the dimensions under which the internet can be studied. Bell explains three ways to understanding the internet or its synonym cyberspace: the material, symbolic and experiential. Bell cites Stanley Aronowitz (1996) as providing the terms ontology, phenomenology and pragmatics as other synonyms to discuss ways of thinking about the internet technology.

Material stories of the internet technology provide a historical understanding of how the technology came to exist and the transformations it has undergone. Thus the advent of the ARPAnet-a network of geographically separated computers that could exchange information between military installations (Bellis, 2012) is an example material understanding of the internet technology. Symbolic stories of the internet or cyberspace give " literary and generic accounts most notably in cyberpunk but also in science fiction and other speculative fiction (Whittaker, 2004)." Bell, citing Jordan (1999), provides an explanation to symbolic stories of cyberspace as the ways in which the realm of cyberspace is depicted in films and fiction, e. g. Robocop, Matrix. Robocop treats symbolic representations of the bad cop and the good cop (Newitz, 1997), scenarios which are on-going debates in our material world.

Experiential stories, according to Bell, relate to the intersections of the material and symbolic stories of cyberspace in our everyday life. Our daily interactions with the internet technology provide foundations for understanding the internet and its associated new media technologies. Experiential examples of the new media are evident in its ability to allow people: to more easily work from their homes, to form and sustain friendships and romantic attachments, to bank from their homes, to vote and engage in political and social-issue-based discussions and civic discourse, may empower shy people who find it difficult to participate in communication to share their views on issues. A dystopian view sees the advent of theft of personal information, considerable reduction in physical contact and face-to-

face communication, virus threats to data and information storage as well as a lack of productivity in work.

Broadly, the discussions on the study will be situated more in experiential understandings of cyberspace.

New media and social media

New media tools, internet based technologies and applications, provide platforms for social media tools to be used for all manner of conversations including civic discourses (Simon, 2007, pp. 258-259). The new media technology is quickly changing the communication and media industry with its study detailing how digital (computer) technology is applied to mass communications (Hoggatt, 1999). Pointedly the new media technology has not completely dislocated the significance of traditional media channels but thus created a convergence making its impact on society, commerce, and governance phenomenal. The Internet, satellite and cable data transmission, computer assisted mediations and research, multimedia publishing, mobile and phone interactions, and word processing are but examples of new media technology.

New media technology has become revolutionary in its ability to handle " behind the scenes work" and become the finished product (Hoggatt, 1999). Its ability to break down the obstructions of time and space, change the balance of power in equitable opportunities to communicate in the mass media are recorded contributions to the operations of contemporary societies (Nag, 2011; Hoggatt, 1999). A component of the new media

technology is social media which is often erroneously used synonymously to represent new media.

Social media refers to online technologies and practices that are used to share opinions and information, promote discussion and build relationships (Crown Copyright, 2009). The application shares the features of Participation, Openness, Conversation, Community, and Connectedness (iCrossing, 2008). According to iCrossing, social media can presently be found in the following basic forms:

Social Networks: sites which allow people to build personal web pages and then connect with friends to share content and communication. Facebook, Myspace, bebo and Academia. edu are examples of social networks.

Blogs: online journals with entries appearing with the most recent first.

Wikis: websites which allow people to add content to or edit the information on them, acting as a communal document or database. The best-known wiki is wikipedia

Podcasts: audio and video files that are available by subscription, through services like apple itunes.

Forums: areas for online discussion, often around specific topics and interests. Forums came about before the term " social media" and are a powerful and popular element of online communities.

Content Communities: organise and share particular kinds of content. The most popular content communities tend to form around photos (flickr), bookmarked links (del. icio. us) and videos (YouTube).

Micro blogging: social networking combined with bite-sized blogging, where small amounts of content (' updates') are distributed online and through the mobile phone network. Twitter the clear leader in this field.[1]

Social media and New media in Ghana

With about a 10% gain from 5% in internet penetration (Daily Graphic, 2012)Ghana is not likely to be isolated or insulated from global trends in internet and new media use, especially those associated with the social media. Universally, Facebook is noted as the most popular social media platform (eBizMBA, 2012), and is most recognized in Ghana as well. Currently, there are nearly 2 million Facebook users in Ghana ranking the country at number 69in global ranking of Facebook statistics (Socialbakers, 2012). Socialbakers statistics for October 2012 illustrates that Facebook penetration in Ghanais6. 77%compared to the country's population and 126. 98%in relation to number of Internet users. The total number of Facebook users in Ghana is reaching 1, 646, 920 and grew by more than 435, 160 in the last 6 months. About 41% of Ghana's Facebook user population is between 18 and 24 years, an age group that can be found typically beginning university education or exiting into the professional world.

Chart

(Socialbakers, Ghana Facebook Statistics, 2012)

Figure : Ghana's Facebook user age distributions as at July 2012

http://api. socialbakers. com/charts/countries/users. html? country= ghana∫erval= last-month&state= 0

(Socialbakers, Users & Demography for the Ghana, 2012)

Figure : Growth pattern of Facebook users in Ghana as at October 2012

YouTube, twitter and LinkedIn are also popular among Ghanaians. Though their popularity is high among the youth and IT savvy persons, statistics on these social media applications are rather low or unavailable. Statistics for twitter presented by Socialbakers present individual followership rather than an assessment on national. No Ghanaian profile or account is listed in the top 200 global accounts. The same applies with YouTube and LinkedIn.

Ghana was one of the first African countries to get connected to the Internet between 1989 and 1990. However, the extent of use of the new media technology generally among Ghanaians is limited (Sey, 2011). This is a result of the underdevelopment of existing telecommunications infrastructure, though in recent times significant investments have been in developing them. The investments have been supported by a national communications policy which highlights the Government of Ghana's commitment to accelerating the socio-economic development process of the country through ICT (Republic of Ghana, 2003, p. 14; cited in Sey 2011). In the wake of this policy, there has been considerable improvements in internet connectivity which begun in the early 1990s with the slow bandwidth dial up access to the now high speed broadband connectivity.

Mobile phone telephony is not only big on the African Continent but equally the predominate mode of telecommunications in Ghana. This is attributable to the generally poor development of the fixed line infrastructure in the country. As at the year 2007 just over one fixed line existed per 100 inhabitants (Sey, 2011). Ghana's National Communications Authority announced a mobile telephony penetration rate of about 88. 6% as at January 2012 with the leading service provider recording over 10 million subscriptions (Myjoyonline, 2012).

New media uses of in Ghana

Several accounts have been given for the varied uses of the new media technology in Ghana. The technology is appropriated to businesses and community development. For some Ghanaians the Internet serves as an " escape" mechanism to " connect with the Western world as a poverty reduction strategy (Sey, 2011 citing Slater & Kwami, 2005)". The Internet provides a means to connect with people in developed countries who are seen as prospective sources of financial aid for their migration out of Ghana. Those with no intent to physically leave the country enjoy Western life, indirectly, through foreign content online available via new media tools. Other uses of the new media include sending e-mails, finding and communicating with pen pals, applying to schools abroad, watching movies, listening to music, and playing games (Alhassan, 2004; Burrell, 2009; Daily Graphic, 2003; Slater & Kwami, 2005; Cited in Sey 2011). Political parties have also embraced the new media technology and are using social media particularly to grasp the attention of young people. A Communication official of the New Patriotic Party says the party adopts a writing style suitable for

the social media in its messaging as the technology creates a better communication channel between the party and voters. The National Democratic Congress says the interactive nature of social media facilitates incorporating feedback from voters into the party's decision making processes (Boakyewaa & Pokua, 2011). Amongst Students of the University of Ghana, the most popular social media tool is Facebook (Oduro, 2011). Oduro says Facebook uses are varied; including meeting new friends, sharing information on academic work, and updating family and friends with what is happening in one's life.

With mobile telephony, Ghanaians surf the internet, store music, receive SMS alerts on international and sports news, send funds, chat via instant messaging services like What's App or BBM, and even watch mobile TV. Some political parties are raising funds for their political activities through the use of SMS systems (Amega-Selorm, n. d). As the 2012 Presidential and Parliamentary elections draw close, civil election monitoring is being promoted via mobile telephony. The African Elections Project is enabling mobile phone users to be part of the election reporting and monitoring (GNA, 2012).

Civic discourse and principles of civic discourse

Making reference to the Hurricane Katrina which devastated the Gulf Coast of the United States of America, the Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy (2006; pp1) suggests that civic discourses may have the potential to help mitigate the impact of crisis and also help prepare for the next. According to the ICDD, energies spent on media discussions following the disaster which focused on blames and accusations could have been used

to discuss how victims of the disaster could be helped. The ICDD suggests that focusing on what mattered rather than blame games could have helped address human need during the crisis or its immediate aftermath.

" Civic discourse is purposeful communication carried out among citizens dedicated to sharing perspectives and constructing possible actions on issues that matter (ICDD 2006)."

Effective civic discourse ought to establish principles of inclusiveness, reflection, reciprocity, rationality, recognition of difference, and moderation. Thus the following are identified as Good Principles of Civic Discourse:

Provide framework for dialogue (establish ground rules; framework should recognize any cultural differences)

Provide all with voice (create safe rhetorical space; manage inequalities of access and power)

Focus on issues. Invite/encourage a variety of perspectives (inclusiveness)

Value evidence variety – testimony, statistical evidence, narrative story telling

Seek common ground and consensus when possible

Avoid personal attacks

Resist relying on ideological sloganeering

Seek to understand rather than to persuade

Problem statement

Studies suggest citizen's disconnections from civic life in our present information society (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010). These are noticeable among younger generations in Western democracies (Putnam, n. d.). The United States, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom have all recorded younger people's withdrawal in participating in conventional politics and government (Bennett, 2008, p. 1)which constitute civic activities, in alarming numbers. Americans in the last three decades of the 20th century has witnessed much less engagements in terms of political participation, charitable contributions, involvement in community organizations, and even participation in social activities with some of these trends obvious among college students (Sander & Putnam, 2010; Putnam, n. d.). Despite a withdrawal from offline civic life, studies suggest interests in online civic engagements. Online engagement sites facilitate offline activities permitting the youth to access information about issues that affect them as well as create and maintain connections with their peers for feedback. Ghana is not insulated from the phenomenon of civic recession. A district director of the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) in an online publication revealed the decline in civic engagements attributing it to polarised political discourses often at the grassroots (GNA, 2012). The long historic periods of military authoritarian government has probable contribution to Ghana's civic recession. These were periods characterised by a stifled atmosphere for free civic discussions without fear of arrest and or detention. However, the new democratic dispensation gives opportunity for civic participation in social and political discourses mainly through traditional media. The younger generation of Ghanaians, a good of whom maybe enrolled in the universities,

increasingly seek to master the use of the internet and new media technologies including social media to express themselves, explore their identities, and connect with peers the opportunity to utilise social media to promote civic discourses amongst their social networks is not readily known.

The study thus seeks to ascertain the use of social media for civic discourses amongst students of the University of Ghana and will speak to the questions:

Are students of the University of Ghana engaged in civic discourses?

Are the discourses extended to or carried via the social media?

Are there any benefits of engaging in civic discourse via the social media?

Are the civic interactions on the social media platform guided by principles of civic discourses?

Purpose

This study looks to identify and assess civic discourses of students of the University of Ghana as carried via the social media site.

Traditional media following their innovations have provided channels for civic discourses. Professional journalism may account for education on what is civically and politically relevant (Akilah, 2012). Thus the publication of journals, articles, letters and the broadcast of views from varied perspectives provide opportunities for all manner of citizens to engage and be engaged on issues that affect them and the communities they find themselves in generally.

However, Robert Putnam's description of a generation of Americans cut off from traditional forms of community life and civic engagement and have become passive consumers of mass media (Theater, 2007) suggest that the traditional media may have lost its lead in facilitating civic engagement amongst American citizens. Until recently, the print and broadcast media were restricted in their ability to provide all the characteristics of openness, participation, conversation, connectedness and community at the same time as the social media provides. With about seven (7) billion of the world's population online or accessing the internet through its varied sources (Internet World Stats, 2012), the broadcast media particularly incorporates social media tools in programming to encourage contributions from its audiences. The print media has also adopted a presence on the internet and incorporated social media characteristics in order to maintain relevance in our increasingly sophisticated world.

Objectives

The study objectives are:

to evaluate whether civic discourses take place among students of the university of Ghana.

to identify the forms of such civic discourses students of the university of Ghana are engaged in.

to ascertain whether such discourses conform to the principles for civic discourses.

Significance of the study

There is a gap in literature detailing or explaining civic interactions among Ghanaian students particularly those in tertiary institutions. With the advent of the phenomenal social media, many a youth who are mostly likely to be in tertiary education are engaged in various activities on social media.

This study will thus provide data and contribute to filling the gap on social media uses for civic discourse interactions among students of the University of Ghana and make recommendations on the possibility of nurturing a generation of elites who adopt technology to further discourses that affect how they are governed and their society at large.

Findings from the study can help in selecting and developing alternate communication channels for the promotion of civic discourse in Ghana and among an increasing youthful population enchanted by the new media and its varied applications.

Structure of the thesis

The design, procedure and findings of the study are presented in seven (7) separate chapters. In each chapter an introduction of the chapter details is presented. The first chapter sets the context of the study by introducing the place of social media in our world today. It further presents patterns of understanding the internet technology on which the social media application is delivered. An overview of new media technologies is also presented situating the nature of use in the Ghanaian context. The aim of the study, research questions and significance are all placed in this chapter.

Chapter Two (2) presents the theoretical framework for the study. Three theories underpin this study: a) Democratic theories would be discussed, b) Discourse Theory and c) Deliberation Technology Theory. Chapter Three (3) presents a review of some scholarly works conducted around the use of online technologies and tools for civic or citizen conversations and participations in decision making processes. Chapter Four (4) details the methodology used for the study. A detail of the design, data gathering procedure and analysis of the data are explained. The Chapter Five (5) presents findings from the study from which interpretations and discussions are provided in Chapter Six (6). The final Chapter Seven (7) concludes with summarises of the results, limitations of the study and recommendations for further studies in the subject area.

A list of sourced work is presented in the appendices section. The section also includes data gathering tools used for the study.