

DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION, DIGITAL MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

Veronica BASSEY-DUKE¹, Njah Bassey ETTA¹

¹PhD, Cross River University of Technology, Calabar, Nigeria

Corresponding author: Veronica Bassey-Duke; e-mail: veronicabasseyduke@unicross.edu.ng

Abstract

This article appraises the role of digital media as a tool for fostering participatory development communication and democracy in Nigeria. Adopting the qualitative literature reviewing approach, with the Diffusion of Innovations theory as the theoretical foundation, the article explores the meaning and types of digital media, thereby dismissing the existing misunderstanding between digital media and social media. Furthermore, the paper presents a critical inference on how digital media and development communication can be effectively synergized to bring about the desired dividends of democratic practice in Nigeria. Drawing from the foregoing, the paper recommends that the effective deployment of digital media platforms to democratic governance and most precisely, to our electoral process can help bridge the gap and serve to strengthen the cherished principles of transparency and accountability in Nigeria's governance process.

Keywords: *Development Communication, Digital Media, Democracy, Nigeria.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of digital media in the 21st century no doubt triggered revolutions in the new media landscape in Nigeria. This development helped to awaken the consciousness of the citizens on the need to overcome their prevailing societal challenges, including gratifying the socio-economic and political needs of the people as defined by them. Before the advent of the digital age, the most popular forms of media were what we now call analog or traditional media - radio, newspapers, magazines, billboards, journals, and the like. Since then, the technological revolution has brought with it many new types of media that now play a major role in disseminating information and entertainment to populations around the world.

The digital age began to unfold in the second half of the 20th century, as computer technology slowly infiltrated different industries and then moved into the public sphere. Yet analog technology remained dominant even through the 1990s. In the years that followed, newspapers, magazines, radio, and broadcast television were still the primary means of communication, with fax machines and pagers becoming most people's first casual forays into the digital world.

With the movement of the Internet from a niche hobby to something common in most homes across the globe, the digital age was fully underway. Most human activities became fully dependent on the Internet and its various resources. This made it possible for most people to walk around with at least one digital media device in their pocket, purse, or backpack, using digital communication at work, on their commutes, and even while out to dinner or shopping. After that, they might come home and play a video game or stream a show, interacting with digital media yet again. Before they go to sleep, they might talk to their digital home assistant, finding out the weather forecast for the following day, and so on.

Broadly conceived as an organized effort to use communication processes and the media to bring social and economic improvements in people's lives, development communication in the era of digital media harbours a plethora of opportunities and challenges that need to be dissected and thoroughly examined to swiftly facilitate the formulation of development communication policies for the execution of social change programmes in urban and rural areas in Nigeria (Okoye, 2021). It is a multi-sectoral process of information sharing about

development agendas and planned actions. It links planners, beneficiaries and implementers of development action, including the donor community. Development communication also obligates planners and implementers to provide clear, explicit and intelligible data and information about their goals and roles in development, and explicitly provides opportunities for beneficiaries to participate in shaping development outcomes. This action ensures that the donor community is kept constantly aware of the achievements and constraints of development efforts in the field.

2. DIFFUSION OF INNOVATIONS: THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Today's human society is described as embedding knowledge societies which are based on the need for knowledge distribution, access to information and capability to transform information to knowledge. *Diffusion* is a social process that occurs among people in response to learning about an innovation. In its classical formulation, diffusion involves an innovation that is communicated through certain channels over-time among the members of a social system (Roger, 2003).

According to Straub, adoption is when individuals integrate innovation into their lives and diffusion as a collective adoption process over-time (Straub, 2009). The Diffusion of Innovation (DoI) theory originates from a French sociologist, Gabriel Tarde in 1903, who carried out the pioneering research on the rate of spread or acceptance of innovations. He found that when plotted on a graph, the rate of diffusion of innovations gave an S-shaped curve. Also, two rural sociologists, Bryce Ryan and Neal Gross in 1943, carried further research into the DoI theory. However, the theory was made popular by Professor Everett Rogers in 1962. The diffusion theory is still very relevant nowadays as it was, when propounded. The only variation in the theory lies in the shape of the curve. Some innovations diffuse rapidly, creating a steep curve while others have a slower rate of diffusion giving a more gradual slope.

According to Rogers, the Diffusion of Innovation theory sees innovations as being

communicated through certain channels over time and within a particular social system (Rogers, 1995). It further portends that individuals possess varying degrees of willingness to adopt innovations. The beauty of the Diffusion of Innovation theory is that it is applicable to practically any type of innovation and it is widely used in different fields of human endeavour ranging from sociology, politics, advertising, marketing, agriculture, and healthcare to engineering and technology. Thus, it is generally observed that the portion of the population adopting innovation is approximately normally distributed over time.

The ongoing revolution in digital media and the diversification in the fields they affect offered us a better understanding of their various innovations, diffusion, adoption, acceptance, and usage. In his diffusion of innovations theory, Rogers mentioned that the rate of adoption is partially influenced by perceived attributes - relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, complexity, and observability as innovation characteristics (Rogers, 2003). On the one hand, four of these characteristics - relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, and observability, as perceived by members of a social system - are positively related to the rate of adoption. However, on the other hand, the complexity of an innovation, as perceived by the members of a social system, is negatively related to its rate of adoption.

Relating Diffusion of Innovations (DoI) theory to this discourse, it is indisputable to say that the social benefit of digital media helped foster social interactions and this makes it remain one of the reasons why it was easily and rapidly adopted for electoral purposes in Nigeria. More so, digital media have also reduced the inequalities of opportunity between rural areas and urban centres, with the introduction of Internet services, which delivers information to remote locations in a matter of seconds (Unwuchola et al., 2017).

3. EXPLORING THE MEANING AND TYPES OF DIGITAL MEDIA FOR DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION

The word "media" applies to many things in the 21st century, from mass media to news media,

and from traditional media to the many emerging forms of digital media. It can be difficult to succinctly define the word. But its origin can be traced to the Latin word *medius* or *medium*, which means “the middle layer.” Media is an expression that brings some type of information or entertainment from one body to another. Often times, there exists a misconception or misunderstanding between the meaning of digital media and social/new media of communication. To some scholars, the two concepts represent one and the same thing. But there is a clear distinction between them. Social/new media are subsets of and types of digital media. What is digital media? What does it encompass?

Digital media refers to any communication media that operate in conjunction with various encoded machine-readable data formats. Digital media can be created, viewed, distributed, modified, listened to, and preserved on a digital electronics device. Similarly, the *Business Concepts Team* (2022) defined digital media as any kind of media which can be processed, analysed, stored and distributed by electronic digital machines or devices. Digital media is a type of media which covers content and promotions delivered through digital platforms including electronic media, mobile phones, computers, podcasts, applications etc.

Kaplan & Haenlein gave a commonly used definition of social media as derived from the business and management literature to refer to 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 & Haenlein, 2010). Organizations, governments and people use digital media for various purposes including information sources, entertainment, games, business etc. It provides a very useful platform for communication and information sharing. Digital Media is similar to traditional media in terms of its ability to deliver content and value to audience or potential customers but it differs in the fact that it is totally digital in nature, its effectiveness can be measured easily and it is highly interactive and shareable.

According to OKP University (2022), traditional (non-digital) media includes several

types of communication technologies, some of which have existed for hundreds of years. Newspapers, magazines, books, and other printed materials were among the first types of traditional media. Those forms of media persist, joined in the 19th century by the telegraph and in the 20th century by radio and television, the first examples of mass media. The digital era, however, meant a whole new set of media transmission methods and devices. These days, most types of digital media fit into one of these main subgroups:

- **Audio:** Audio forms of digital media include digital radio stations, podcasts, and audiobooks. These services can be accessed on sites such as *Apple Music*, *Spotify*, *Boomplay*, *Tidal*, *Pandora*, *Sirius*, etc. These sites provide a wide range of musical stations and allow users to listen to databases of millions of songs on demand.
- **Video:** Many digital media outlets are visual, from streaming movie and television services such as *Netflix* and *YouTube*. These websites serve as the most popular live video streaming destinations on the web.
- **Social media:** social media sites such as *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *LinkedIn*, *Snapchat*, *Pinterest*, *TikTok*, *WhatsApp*, *Telegram*, *Reddit*, *Messenger*, and *Tumblr* enable their users to interact with one another through text posts, photographs, and videos, leaving “likes” and comments to create conversations around pop culture, sports, news, politics, and the daily events of users’ lives.
- **Advertising:** Advertisers have made their way into the digital media landscape, taking advantage of marketing partnerships and advertising space wherever possible. The internet has moved away from the use of pop-up and autoplay ads, which flooded early websites and drove away visitors. Instead, advertisers look toward native content and other methods of keeping consumers invested without overselling their product.
- **News, literature, and more:** Traditionally, people consumed text via books, print newspapers, magazines, and the like. Even though digital media has proliferated, the desire for those kinds of reading experiences has endured. The proliferation of literary websites, the popularity of resources

like *Wikipedia*, and the rise of e-readers like the *Kindle* all further underline the continued importance of written work in digital media.

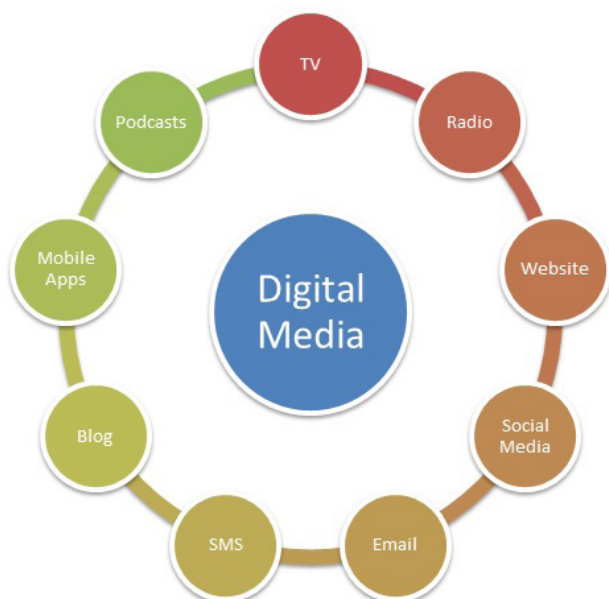


Fig.1. Digital Media
(MBA SKOOL, 2022)

4. DIGITAL MEDIA IN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION: A CRITICAL INFERENCE

Development communication emerged in the 1980s, largely because of the inability or inapplicability of the four classical theories of the press to solve or address the matters that were peculiar to the Less Developed Countries (LDCs) of Asia and Africa. These classical theories did not cover, in particular, the peculiar development needs and problems of the developing nations - poverty, poor economy, religious/ethnic violence, illiteracy, poor/absence of effective health care service delivery, etc.

The emergence of digital media technologies, on the other hand, brought with it the radical transformation of virtually all aspects of national life. With this came the democratization of information and communication instruments which further fast-tracked the emergence or the acceleration of the technological progress, resulting in the impetuous dissemination of innovations in the world, thus introducing cardinal changes to the social aspects of life, among which the media takes not the last place.

Recent debates on the meaning of development in the ICT for development literature centred around three main discourses - modernization, dependency and human development (Sein & Harindranath, 2004). The modernization paradigm believes that development is linked to the insertion in a market economy, with the common notion that underlying this insertion provides people more than mere survival (e.g., just enough to eat and live in a slum). Development, understood from this perspective, inscribes people in an accumulation process. The dependency discourse posits that economic growth in developed countries results in the underdevelopment of poorer countries, mostly former colonies that may be subject to negative terms of trade and technology and industrial dependency.

The human development discourse is focused on building capabilities and realizing individual potential with people at the centre of the development process economically, environmentally, socially and even politically. This perspective formed the meat of this article because development communication, if centred on the human capacity development, is capable of helping people to progressively improve the quality of their environment, invest in a better livelihood, acquire more sophisticated equipment and have easier access to means of working, as well as benefit from wider participation in politics and other decision-making processes. It is against this backdrop that digital media for development communication automatically complicates the linear understanding of socioeconomic progress, development benefits and beneficiaries and moves away from normative understandings of "users" in emerging economies as unique and utilitarian beings and more as *typical* participants in this digital age (Bruns, 2008; Rangaswamy & Arora, 2014).

5. SYNERGIZING DIGITAL MEDIA AND DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION FOR EFFECTIVE DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

A decisive role can be played by communication in promoting human development in today's new climate of social change. As the world moves

towards greater democracy, decentralization and the market economy, conditions are becoming more favourable for people to start steering their own course of change. But it is vital to stimulate their awareness, participation and capabilities. Communication skills and technologies are central to this task. But these skills and technologies at present are often underutilized. Policies are needed to drive and encourage effective planning, designing, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of communication programmes.

Major changes and new emphases appeared on the development communication scene. Consequently, societies are freely opening to debates and markets to individual initiatives; privatization and entrepreneurship are being encouraged; new technologies are becoming widely available; the management of government services is gradually being relocated closer to the users, if not handed over directly to users themselves, in order to cut costs and seek partners more committed to effective implementation. Indeed, a host of structural adjustments are profoundly affecting most aspects of production and human interactions. These structural adjustments make demands, and have direct economic and social effects on people.

The big question is: how should digital media for development communication be theorized? Nicholson et al. (2016) proposed that for this to be successful, it should be viewed with a critical, human development and institutional conceptual lenses. Corroborating with this submission, Ivan Illich in one of his writings: *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), outlined the characteristics that define *convivial* tools, serving as guidelines to the continuous process by which a society's members defend their liberty. The four criteria are:

- i. Users, rather than the designers of the technology, must have the power to shape it according to their tastes, desires and needs.
- ii. Convivial tools must promote communities and encourage and maximize communication among the members of the society.
- iii. Convivial tools must make the most of the energy of individuals, and maximize and encourage creativity and imagination of users.

- iv. Users of convivial tools must not only be mere consumers, but also producers and contributors to the technology (ILLICH, 1973).

The digital media sector in Nigeria has recorded phenomenal growth over the years, helped largely by the country's predominantly young population. The role of digital media innovations in the Nigerian electoral system, beginning from the fourth republic (the creation of INEC as the electoral body), helped foster a participatory democratic system of governance through the conduct of free and fair elections, encouraged active political participation and the empowerment of Nigerians in political issues. Some initiatives such as the National Telecommunications Policy and the National Information Technology Policy (both formulated in 2000), the National Information Technology Development Agency Act 2007 and the regulatory and supervisory frameworks provided by the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) and the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) are instrumental to these changes (Maryville University, 2022).

In the telecommunication sector, for instance, Nigeria moved from approximately 400,000 available fixed telephone lines pre-1999 to over 196 million available mobile telephone lines, of which 147 million are active, by May 2015, effectively highlighting Nigeria's telecommunications market as the fastest growing in Africa (NCC, n.d.). Obviously, the digital media boosted the political participation of Nigerians as it opens up avenues for political discourses, political campaigns, voter registration, the actual voting, writing and signing of petitions, the joining of interest groups that engage in lobbying, political advocacies, monitoring and reporting of cases of violation of the electoral process such as frauds, rigging, intimidation, violence, monetary inducements (vote buying), underage voting etc. (Unwuchola et al., 2017).

A poor electoral process is one of the major impediments to an enduring democracy in developing nations (Omodia, 2007). In Nigeria and in most of the other countries in Africa, the freeness and fairness of elections constitute the central factor in ensuring democratic survival. The purpose and significance of elections is understood to give citizens

an opportunity to select a government of their choice. Silverman (1992) pointed out that elections empower citizens through enhanced participation in decision making and development planning.

The adoption and application of digital media in Nigeria's democratic practices in the last few years has brought with it tremendous advancements. This has changed the communication situation within the country as citizens now have online platforms that serve as a new "political capital" where people resort to and participate in political discourses and interactions (Abubakar, 2011). Citing Kweon and Kin (2011), Abubakar further maintained that social media (one of the platforms provided by digital media) have become a main source of personal orientation, anonymous interactivities and social community on a variety of issues that involve politics and political discourse. Mayfield (2010) and Bradley (2009) attributed the social media capacity of boosting political participation to its connectedness and textual/audio-visual appeal. For sure, the *Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn*, SMS, call services, etc. have made political participation much easier, faster and even more cost effective than ever before (Roggers, 1983).

There is also a dark side of social media use affecting both of these dimensions, from cyber-bullying, to mindless "buzzing" in an unhealthy competition, to organizing riots and spreading hatred and hate speech, misinformation, miscommunication, and so on. As Suntai & Targema (2017) captured it:

However, the abuses that characterize the platforms are equally worrisome, given the threats they harbour, and the damage they portend for Nigeria's fragile democracy. In a country that is grappling with the challenge of unity in diversity, the various platforms if utilized otherwise can deepen the divides that already exist, and plunge the country into a deep dark ditch. Practices such as dissemination of outright lies and deliberate falsehood, dangerous, injurious and vituperative speech capable of spreading hatred among others can overheat the polity, and make nonsense of the budding democracy which the country strives to consolidate.

However, Oseni (2015) summed it up that the social media age represents a revolution to Nigerian democracy; those who must win elections must first win the will of the people. The days of changing election results by returning officers are gone. By the power of social media, citizens know who is going to win the elections before the results are officially announced by the election umpires - Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Digital media have become a force and we must live up to this reality.

The digital media have further strengthened the basic features of a democratic setting where the supreme power of the state is vested on the people because they make political decisions that concern the state, either directly or through representatives **periodically** appointed by them. According to O'Reilly (2012), the prospect of a participatory democracy was enhanced with the advent of Web 2.0. The internet created a new platform of communication, where views and ideas about political and other social issues are shared and deliberated upon. The advent of Web 2.0 transformed political activities by giving more power to the people and improving the communication channels between the government and the governed.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Obviously, the strategic deployment and application of digital media has yielded positive impacts in Nigeria's pursuit for effective democracy. Nigeria as a nation is gradually moving towards the continual use of digital media in supporting development communication efforts which in turn yielded responses by target audiences. There seems to be a positive movement away from the old ways of doing things especially before, during and after elections. The 2011, 2015 and 2019 elections in Nigeria witnessed phenomenal improvements in the use of digital media and its various types in the overall electioneering process. Irrespective of how one views it, digital media represent formidable forces in the consolidation of democracy and democratic gains in any given nation. The information gap, which they help to bridge,

benefits democracy in no small measure, and serves to strengthen the cherished principles of transparency and accountability in the process of governance. Nigerian democracy is speedily heading towards this enviable destination courtesy of the digital media. These extended the frontiers of political participation and interaction between the rulers and the ruled, the government and the governed. Thus, it is a positive development that needs to be acknowledged, as it makes democracy in the country to live up to the expectations of its generic definition - government of the people, for the people, and by the people (Suntai & Targema, 2017).

References

- ABUBAKAR, A. A. (2011) Political participation and discourse in social media during the 2011 Presidential Electioneering. *The Nigerian Journal of Communication*, 10(1), pp. 96-116
- BRUNS, A. (2008) *Blogs, Wikipedia, second life, and beyond: From production to produsage*. New York: Peter Lang.
- ROGGERS, E. M. (1983) *Diffusion of innovations*. New York: The Free Press.
- ILLICH, I. (1973) *Tools for conviviality*. New York: Harper Collins.
- KAPLAN, A. & HAENLEIN, M. (2010) Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons*, 53(1), pp. 59-68.
- MARYVILLE UNIVERSITY (2022) *What is digital media? All you need to know about this booming industry*. Available from: <https://online.maryville.edu/blog/what-is-digital-media/> [08 January 2023].
- MBA SKOOL (2022) Digital Media - Meaning, Importance, Types & Example. Available from: <https://www.mbaskool.com/business-concepts/marketing-and-strategy-terms/17895-digital-media.html> [09 January 2023].
- NICHOLSON, B., NUGROHO, Y. & RANGASWAMY, N. (2016) Social media for development: Outlining debates, theory and praxis. *Information Technology for Development*, 22(3), pp. 357-363.
- NCC.GOV.NG (n.d.) Subscriber Statistics. Available from: <https://ncc.gov.ng/statistics-reports/subscriber-data> [10 January 2023].
- O'REILLY, T. (2012) *Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software*. Available from: <https://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html> [10 January 2023].
- OKOYE, J.I. (2021) *Digital media and the future of development communication in Nigeria*. London: Routledge.
- OMODIA, S. (2007) Governance and democratization in Africa: The Nigerian experience. *The Social Science*, 2(2), pp. 134-138.
- OSENI, A.L. (2015) *How social media revolutionized election in Nigeria*. Available from: <https://opinion.premiumtimesng.com/2015/04/05/social-media-revolutionises-nigerian-elections-by-audu-liberty-oseni/?tzt=1> [08 January 2023].
- RANGASWAMY, N. & ARORA, P. (2014) ICTs for leisure in development. *Information Technology and International Development*, 10(3), pp. v-vii.
- ROGERS, E.M. (1995) The origins and development of the diffusion of innovations paradigm as an example of scientific growth. *Science Communication*, 16(3), pp. 242-73.
- ROGERS, E.M. (2003) *Diffusion of innovations*. 5th ed. New York: Free Press.
- SEIN, M. K. & HARINDRANATH, G. (2004) Conceptualizing the ICT Artifact: Toward understanding the role of ICT in National development. *The Information Society*, 20, pp. 15-24.
- STRAUB, E.T. (2009) Understanding technology adoption: Theory and future directions for informal learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 72(2), pp. 625-649.
- SUNTAL, I. S. & TORDUE, S. T. (2017) New media and democracy in Nigeria? An appraisal of the opportunities and threats in the terrain. *Brazilian Journal of African Studies*, 2(4), pp. 198 - 209.
- UNWUCHOLA, A. A, ADINLEWA, T. & UDEH, K. (2017) An appraisal of the role of ICT as a tool for participatory democracy in Nigeria. *MCC*. 1(1), pp. 69 - 87.