MEDIA AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ESSAY

How has the emergence of a networked public sphere enabled greater participation in developmental issues? What are the limitations and obstacles of new communications in development?

The internet has opened up the public arena in a way that has never been known. The networked media such as the *Facebook* has influenced and shaped people's contributions to the social, political and economic debates in recent times. The basic idea of what a public sphere should accomplish in a democracy is to provide a space for expression and debate of important social ideas (Havens and Lotz, 2012, pp. 11).

What is a public? Hartley (2011, pp. 218-219) explained Habermas' view of the public sphere as "an arena that is free from commercial interest and state control wherein individuals gather to debate, share knowledge and construct opinions that can influence the society. It is a "network for communicating information and points of view" (Habermas; 1996:360).

Scott (2014, pp. 13) noted that the "most apparent role of the media in development is to be a channel for delivering information to the public". This is easily appreciated when one takes a look at how inter-related the public and private spheres are to other important institutions that shape development both locally and globally and the fact that the early media (such as the town crier or even the church bell) traditionally have enormous influence on the public even before the conventional press or the internet was invented (Figures 1 and 2).

The social media enhances social relations between vast numbers of humans. A Town Crier for instance would reach a few audiences, while the traditional press and broadcast media extended these possibilities. The internet-enabled social media further enhanced and opened connection with the mass audience on a scale unparralled in the history of human communication. It is estimated that around 2.44 billion people will be using the social networks by 2018 (Guzman, 2016).
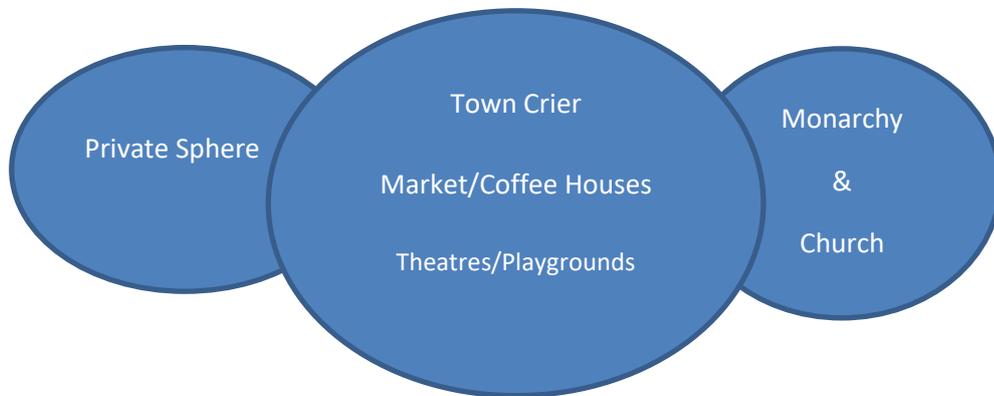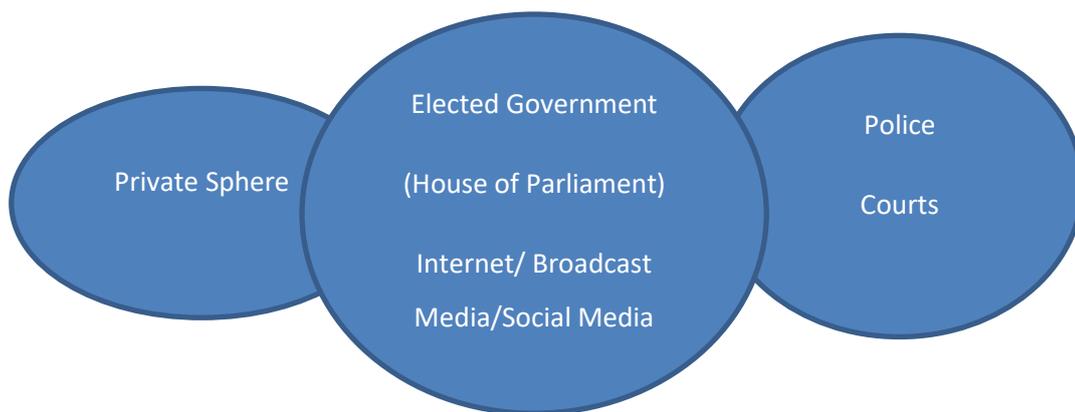
Figure 1: Traditional Public Sphere

Private Sphere

Town Crier

Market/Coffee Houses

Theatres/Playgrounds

Monarchy

&

Church

Figure 2: Modern Public Sphere

Private Sphere

Elected Government

(House of Parliament)

Internet/ Broadcast

Media/Social Media

Police
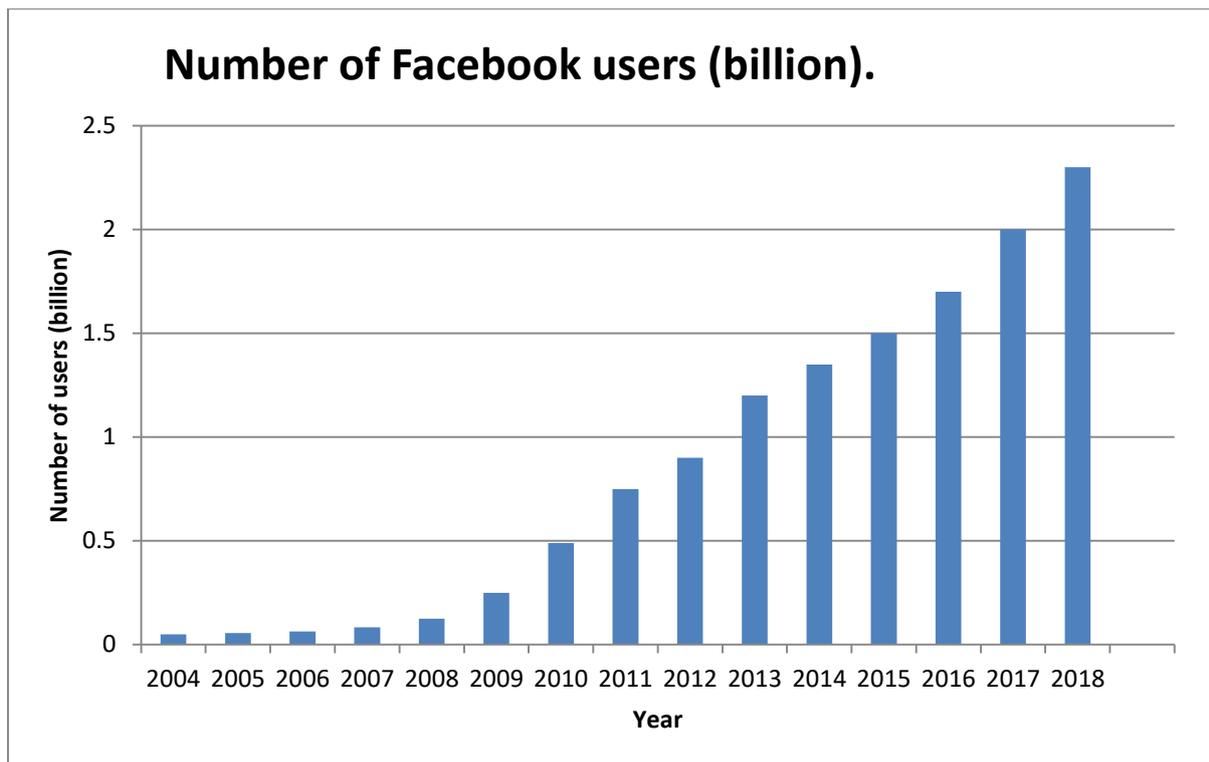
Courts

Number of Facebook users (billion).

Figure 3: Facebook Active Users' Projected Increase

In a networked public sphere, new media such as Facebook act as a platform to exchange information and form public opinion. Thornham et-al (2009 pp. 105-110) pointed out the role of the media in shaping local and global opinion about social issues. This ability to discuss, mediate and point to the direction of action is what the social media enables in development. Scott (2014, pp. 15) pointed out that "information acquisition by the individual is a vital part of the developmental process" and for any reasonable change in behaviour as a result of such a challenge as ignorance to be achieved, 'relevant information' need to be made available to such individuals.

Networked public sphere has tackled the issue of ignorance-induced lack of capability by making available vital information that can help to educate and re-orientate individuals in different communities towards tackling issues such as illiteracy, poverty or disease. Sen (1999, pp. 137-138) posited that information is a vital key in the treatment of 'capability handicaps' and suggested that developmental issues must not be looked at narrowly in terms of 'needs' and the 'needy'; but relevant information to tackle the causative factors of such needs must be readily made available to the afflicted.

Van Dijck in Fuchs (2014, pp. 36) described the social media as a 'user-centred' platform that facilitates 'communal activities'. The idea of 'commune' or 'community good' is central to community advocacy and developmental issues that Media for Development (M4D) seeks to address. The ease with which the general public can gain access and use a 'change agent' is vital in development. This is what networked social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter offer. The social media encourages a culture of participation amongst its users. It has grown to be a formidable cultural capital that is consumed or used across all known human cultures and class divide.

The networked public sphere has breached social, geographical and cultural barriers in its usage. Scott (2014, pp. 160) cited Kennedy (2009:1)'s argument that "the new technologies supply us with new ways of acting at a distance and new ways of influencing future events". Participation does not have to be physical and in real time or on-the-spot. It is now possible to donate money via the social media platform for any good cause globally.

Dudman (2017) reported that Facebook is to roll out donate buttons to UK and European users to allow them donate to their chosen charities (Figure 4). Branston and Stafford (2010, pp. 246) observed that the social media has gained importance in the area of charitable giving and mobilisation for community actions and mobilisation respectively. The adaptability of the social media for charitable online fundraising, advocacy campaign etc. shows that the networked media has been a success at enabling greater participation in development issues.

In spite of the widespread acceptability of the social media, it has been argued that access to the internet may hinder the participation of a large section of the population. Van Dijk (2005, pp. 14-16) observed that there is inequality in the internet and computer mediated technology on which the networked public sphere is based. He argued that unequal distribution of resources causes unequal access to digital resources which brings about unequal participation in the society (or in social causes).

Habermas' normative idea about public sphere gave a universal meaning or justification for a rational public sphere - that a public sphere should be able to accommodate difference as a vital principle (Barker, 2012, pp. 202-203). The inequality in the access to new media artefacts and resources is a challenge to Habermas' notion of an even public sphere free of commercial or state control, as modern media has increasingly reflect the infractions of the bourgeoisie's influence and its tendencies which inevitably excludes certain people from full participation in public deliberations or engagements. (Hartley, 2011. pp. 217-219).

With networked media, the producer and audience can launch and structure programmes to meet the demands of a target or niche audience in order to deepen the reach of the audience. Liebes and Curran, 1998 (pp. 170-173) observed that the public sphere has become 'sphericles' that has been carved into 'distinct communities of information' where participation is expanding and deepening; meeting the needs of targeted audience. They noted that internet networking has enhanced participation in the areas of protests and mobilisation for groups such as the Amnesty International, Rainforest Action Network and others.

The advantage of face-to-face interaction as opposed to larger group reach or mass mediation was also stressed. Sparks (2007, pp. 24) pointed out that social attitudinal change that leads to development usually happens when an individual or persons secure their own self-image which is normally attained by direct contact. The use of online networking for social, political and developmental purposes has been criticized for making people passive and physically in-active. It has been argued that in spite of the importance of the networked media, there is need for both online and off-line activities (usually referred to as face-to-face contact) in developmental and activism issues (Niven, 2011, The Guardian Online).

Castells (2000, pp. 501) also described networks as 'open structures' that can expand without limits. The modern networked public sphere is able to expand without limits across multi-platforms thereby making participation in developmental issues at an all-time high across different human cultures and classes. This ability to bridge; as well as open up discussions across different cultures is a plus for networked media and an attribute that makes it attractive for developmental issues.

Despite this advantage, the need to acquire the necessary skill for a middle-level or professional use of the social media can be expensive and difficult to attain due to the infrastructure and manpower needed to achieve this. Cost effectiveness of a media application is also important. Sparks (2007, pp. 23) argued that the mass media provides a cost-effective means of reaching a large number of people especially through the radio. The fact that the social media has been able to assimilate the traditional media such as the radio and television makes it a formidable M4D tool.

Training is key to achieving deep social networks penetration especially from the producer side. Such training on social media capacity-building was held by the Good Governance Africa (GGA)'s Lusophone Centre at a 2-day event in Luanda, Angola from 08 to 10 June 2016. The event was aimed at Angolan civil society actors who wanted to understand how

social media works, and how to effectively employ these tools in their work. The event according to report helped 20 civil society organisations practice skills gained over the capacity-building exercise on social media, combining theoretical learning with practical techniques. The exercise created a user-friendly platform for a more effective integration on key governance-related matters in Lusophone Africa.; which will ultimately impact positively on developmental programmes in the region.

A lot of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) are now using the dominant paradigm of development communication along with the concept of social marketing to sell their developmental programmes. Social marketing is a mix of advertising and marketing activities that seeks to drive awareness about a product. When this is used together with networked media, it opens up a vast area of pro-social opportunities which is highly needed in development (Waisbord, 2000, pp. 5-8). For example, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) combines such social marketing concept at a high level along with bespoke network media applications to implement, assess and track its programmes such as the Girls Education Project (GEP) Phase 3 in Nigeria (DFID, 2017).

Networked public sphere in form of social media allows user-generated content to be listed and reviewed. This helps the development communicator to get valuable feedback from the people (audience). Sparks (2007, pp. 32-33) submitted that "the condition for creating a developmental message that is comprehensible to the audience is that the producer and the audience are 'homophilous', sharing the same language, assumptions and belief systems" etc. In fact, a new paradigm may have been established in media for development (M4D) issues; whereby INGOs are now able to look beyond the barriers of politics and culture to make use of the opportunities in the digitally inspired networked public sphere to fix developmental issues (Scott, 2014, 38-43).

Individuals now make use of the social media to speak out against societal ills like genital mutilation, women abuse, infrastructural need in a community, issues of governance and healthcare programmes etc., leading to public opinion being formed. Fuchs (2014, pp. 77-80) relates the social media with politics and power. The ability of people to build their own networks and access the internet enabled network public sphere deepens collaboration, empowers them and allows community development agendas to be set and executed. Scott (2014, pp 118-121) described the media as a 'civic forum' where plurality of ideas and

diverse interests from various social sectors are discussed in the public with the ultimate goal of enhancing development.

Castells (2015, pp. 250) described the pattern of networked social movements whose existence online and offline do sometimes lead to street occupation. The end result on certain occasions is a spill out or flow from the internet via the social networks into the urban space; leading to call for a change or outright destruction of the existing structure or power. (Scott, 2014, pp. 115) opined that the networked media can be adapted for agenda setting for democracy and good governance which in turn imparts on development. During the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, the social networks was important in the campaign to inform and change the health and safety behavioural attitude of the people to ensure their safety and curtail the spread of the epidemic (Hossain et-al, 2016).

Finally, it is worthy of note that access to information that can be used for developmental purposes is no longer controlled by one individual or state. The limitations and obstacles (poor access and government control) notwithstanding, the emergence of a networked public sphere has enabled   greater participation in developmental issues as there has been a bridging of the gaps in social, political and geographical spheres with the enhancement of information sharing brought about by the new technologies.

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Appendixes:

DFID Department for International Development (DFID)

GEP Girls Education Project (GEP) Phase 3 in Nigeria (DFID, 2017)

https://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk/countries/NG/projects
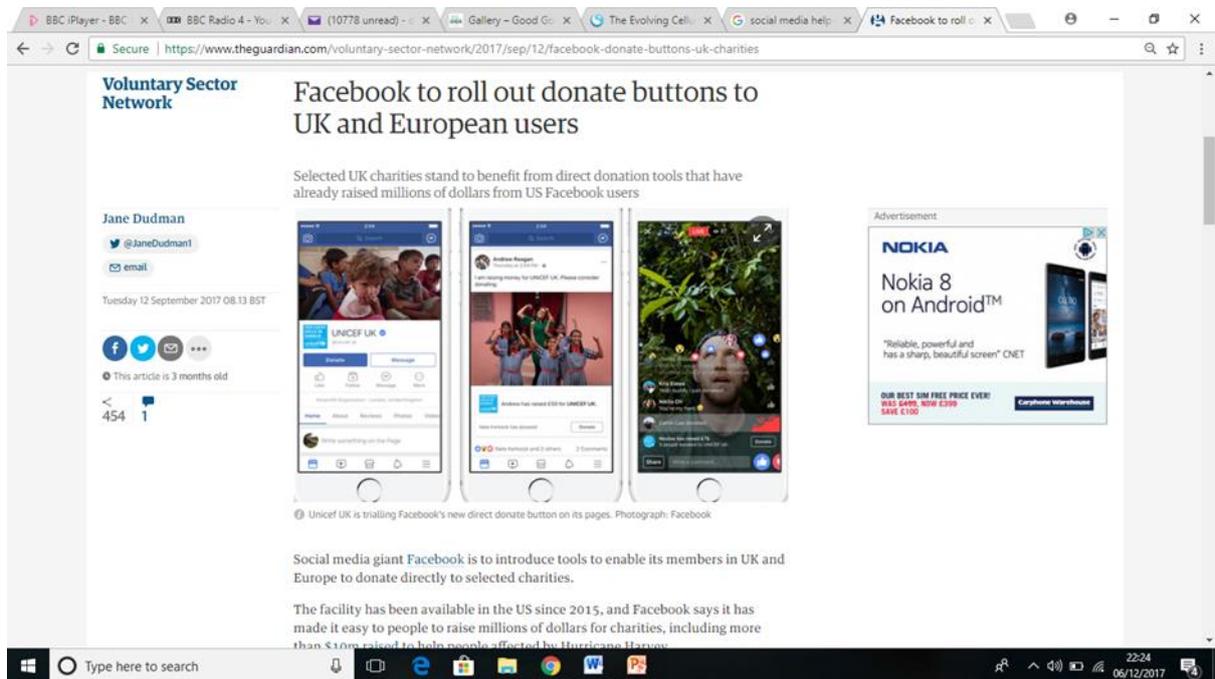
https://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-202643

Figure 4: The Guardian News (2017)