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Digital media and sustainable development: a development communication perspective

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ABSTRACT

Background: Digital media has become an increasingly important instrument for communication, social mobilisation and development in contemporary society. **Objective:** This paper examines the relationship between digital media and sustainable development from a development communication perspective, with particular attention to the Nigerian context. **Method:** The paper adopts a conceptual review approach to examine the meaning, characteristics and types of digital media and their potential contributions to sustainable development. **Results:** The review establishes that digital media is characterised by speed, accessibility, interactivity, multimedia capacity, user-generated content, wide geographical reach and rapid feedback, which enable individuals, governments, development agencies and communities to disseminate and access development-related information more efficiently. Social media, websites, online news platforms, blogs, podcasts, mobile applications, video-sharing platforms and digital streaming services are identified as major forms of digital media that provide opportunities for information dissemination, public education, knowledge sharing, social mobilisation, behavioural change and citizen participation, and that contribute to the economic, social, environmental and governance dimensions of sustainable development through entrepreneurship, education, health communication, environmental awareness, public participation and access to information. However, challenges such as misinformation, the digital divide, inadequate digital infrastructure, limited digital literacy and cybersecurity concerns may constrain its developmental impact. **Novelty:** This paper offers an integrated conceptual perspective that connects digital-media characteristics and typologies to the economic, social, environmental and governance dimensions of sustainable development within a development-communication framework specific to the Nigerian context.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The media has always been functioning to serve human communities [1]. Until recently, Governments in many countries historically exercised substantial control over broadcasting, particularly through state-owned or state-regulated media. However, Digital media has reduced governments' ability to control information flows because individuals can publish independently. However, governments still exercise considerable influence through regulation, censorship, ownership, licensing, surveillance and internet restrictions. The broadcasting channels and their owners and the broadcast messages have grown in line with

technology development, which paved the way for new media outlets to emerge. This can be attributed to the emergence of the Internet in different windows, which allow simple people and independent individuals to create personal media platforms, communicate their messages, share their worries, and initiate their events [1]. Hence, we notice that digital media has expanded the speed, accessibility, interactivity and reach of communication, but it has not simply replaced traditional media. Television, radio and newspapers remain important, particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria. A better expression is that digital media has transformed and complemented traditional media [1].

In bringing about sustainable change in any society, development communication is a powerful catalyst. Effective communication is an important component of successful development programmes, significant economic, social, educational, cultural, or even personal change in society [2]. In today's era of information and technology, no society will reach its full potential without the proper application of development communication in the process of development of the society. This means that all development programs or policies depend on a strong communication framework to excel [3]. Development communication is about effectively communicating development messages to people [2]. No meaningful development or lasting change can occur without adequate and effective communication. In fact, communication can be considered the foundation of sustainable development and change (Ghozeil, 2023). Many development projects have failed because the change agents (development communicators) did not communicate effectively with the people for whom the development projects were intended before the project was initiated.

Communication being the process of sharing ideas, information, opinions, feelings or experiences between two or more people or a group of people through a common language and tools [4], development communication therefore, refers to the use of communication to facilitate development in a society (Szecsy, 2011).

According to the author, development communication techniques include information dissemination and education, behaviour change, social marketing, social mobilization, media advocacy, communication for social change and community participation. In our current environment, marked by rapid advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), it is undeniable that social media has become an inseparable part of the daily routine of modern society (Wahyoedi et al. [5]). Its various forms, such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram and TikTok, have brought about fundamental changes in the patterns of interaction of people, the patterns of information exchange and the way they express their opinions (Tarigan et al. 2023, in Ausat, [5]). The ease and speed of interaction between social media users has paved the way for the rapid dissemination of information and ideas and the overcoming of geographical and cultural boundaries. This phenomenon creates a new dynamic in which public discourse involving complex issues ranging from social, medical, political to economic dimensions becomes more open and accessible at different levels of society, without being bound by physical or time constraints [5]. As a result of this, this paper aims to examine some relevant literature on digital media and how it plays crucial roles on sustainable development communication.

2. CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

2.1. Digital Media

Digital media refers to forms of media that use digital technologies and electronic devices to create, store, process, distribute and access information and communication content. It encompasses platforms and channels such as websites, social media, blogs, podcasts, mobile applications, online newspapers, streaming services and other internet-based communication technologies. Unlike traditional media, digital media allows users not only to consume information but also to create, share, interact with and respond to content. In the Nigerian context, Yar'Adua, Msughter and Usman (2023) explain that digital media has become an important instrument for communication, development and social change, particularly through the increasing use of internet-based platforms.

Digital media can therefore be understood as an interactive and technology-driven communication environment that facilitates the rapid exchange of information across geographical boundaries. Nigerian scholars such as Uwalaka and Nwala [6] further demonstrate that digital media platforms, including WhatsApp and Facebook, can facilitate communication, mobilisation and participation in socio-political activities. Thus, for this study, digital media refers to internet-enabled and electronically mediated platforms and technologies through which individuals and organisations create, distribute, access and interact with information and communication content.

2.2. Digital Media Characteristics

Digital media is characterised by speed, accessibility, interactivity, flexibility and wide geographical reach, which distinguish it from many traditional forms of communication. Digital platforms enable

information to be created, processed and distributed almost instantaneously through internet-enabled devices such as smartphones and computers.

In Nigeria, Bashir, Jibril and Aliyu [7] explain that digital communication combines different forms of communication, including voice, images, sound and text, and transmits them through contemporary technologies such as computers, mobile phones and network technologies. Similarly, Sule [8] notes that the expansion of digital platforms and smartphones has increased access to information, encouraged diverse content consumption and reduced geographical barriers to media access.

Another important characteristic of digital media is interactivity and user participation. Unlike conventional media where communication is often predominantly one-way, digital media allows audiences to comment, share, respond to, modify and generate content. This characteristic makes digital media particularly useful for development communication because development messages can become participatory rather than simply informational. Uwalaka and Nwala [6], in their study of Nigeria, demonstrate that social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook can facilitate communication, mobilisation, coordination and collective participation. Similarly, Yar'Adua, Msughter and Usman (2023) argue that digital media can serve as a vehicle for development and social change, although its developmental value depends considerably on the content communicated through the medium.

Digital media is also characterised by multimedia content, user-generated content, networking and rapid feedback, making it suitable for communicating sustainable-development issues across different sectors of society. Development communicators can combine text, photographs, videos, audio, infographics and interactive features to communicate issues relating to education, health, environmental protection, poverty reduction, agriculture and civic participation. These characteristics can enhance awareness, dialogue, knowledge sharing and public participation in sustainable-development initiatives. Bassey-Duke and Etta [9] specifically identify digital media as a tool for participatory development communication in Nigeria, while Sule [8] highlights increased information availability, citizen journalism, user-generated content, interactivity and engagement as important characteristics of the new media environment.

2.3. Types of Digital Media

Digital media exists in different forms, depending on the technology used to create, distribute and consume information. Major types include websites and online news platforms, social media, blogs, mobile applications, podcasts, video-sharing platforms, messaging applications, email and digital streaming platforms. In Nigeria, the growth of online media has resulted in the increasing use of social media, blogs, mobile applications, podcasts and video-streaming platforms as channels for accessing and sharing information. Uzuegbunam [10] identifies the Internet, mobile media technologies, social media and social networking sites as important components of contemporary digital communication technologies.

Social media and social networking platforms constitute one of the most prominent forms of digital media. They include platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, X, TikTok and YouTube, which allow users to create, share and interact with content. In Nigeria, Uwalaka, Nwala and Chinedu [11] found that social media was an important source of news and information during the COVID-19 pandemic, while Uwalaka and Nwala [6] demonstrated its capacity to facilitate mobilisation and collective participation. Other important forms are blogs, online newspapers, podcasts, video-sharing and streaming platforms, which provide opportunities for individuals and media organisations to produce specialised and multimedia content. Recent evidence on Nigeria's media environment shows the growing prominence of blogs, podcasts, newsletters and digital news platforms, alongside the continued digitisation of traditional media organisations.

These different forms of digital media are relevant to sustainable development communication because they provide multiple channels for disseminating development information and encouraging public participation. For example, social media can be used to mobilise communities, websites and online newspapers can provide detailed development information, podcasts can communicate educational and health messages, while video platforms can demonstrate sustainable agricultural and environmental practices. Okocha, Agbele and Kente [12] note that social media platforms and blogs are prominent forms of new media in Nigeria, while digital media has increasingly become a channel through which individuals and communities participate in social issues. Consequently, the diversity of digital media platforms enables development communicators to select appropriate channels for reaching different audiences and promoting awareness, behavioural change, participation and action towards sustainable development.

2.4. Role of the Media in the Society

According to Wilbur Schramm (as cited in Dunaway & Baumgartner, [13]), the role of media in development can be divided into three parts. The media in development seeks to inform, instruct and participate. The correct social, political, and economic impact is the primary factor in the growth of a society.

Both national and international information should be included in this. People need to be aware of several factors that impede progress. People need to know the latest happenings around them and the world. This can only be possible with the use of the media. The media covers all aspects of human interest, ranging from weather, politics, health, finance, fashion, music, war, science, religion, etc [13].

The need for increased news has evolved into the creation of dedicated TV and radio channels and magazines. People can listen, watch and read the latest news whenever and wherever they want. In a very short period, citizens get the latest information [13]. Distance does not constitute an obstacle. Via the newspapers, individuals get information every day and this makes everyone updated on the current events. The Media possess the power to select issues and events in the world we get to know about, they decide what constitutes news, they filter and frame issues, they contextualize the problem, they set the political agenda, and they create both the consciousness and on matters that include human rights (International Council on Human Rights Policy 2002, as cited in Lambert, [14]). The media seeks to fulfil the role of instructing the public. One requirement for progress is widespread literacy. This is made feasible by teaching the populace fundamental skills. The media in general is crucial in this. Through media programs, the media can educate and inform the public.

According to Nelson Mandela, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” Malcolm also said, “Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today”. The power of the media is extensive and huge, because of this, it can be used to educate people with very little cost. The Media is the cheapest means of mass education. In a remote village, a single radio set can spread the word about education. Television programmes can be done to educate people on the various fields of life.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. The fourth SDG is tagged Quality Education. The goal seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong opportunities for all. To achieve this, the media has to be involved. Media content has been pushed out on different platforms to hasten the achievement of this Sustainable Development Goal. Along with family, schools, and religious organizations, the media also becomes part of the process by which people learn societal values and come to understand what society expects from them. The media educates individuals. People get to know what is needed to know regarding health problems, environmental protection, and more via television and radio programmes.

The last role of the media in development according to Wilbur Schramm(as cited in Dunaway & Baumgartner, [13]) is to participate. The nation's total development depends on the citizens' voluntary and active participation. A liberal society is capable of allowing such engagement. Through conversation, confrontation, and debate, this awareness is made possible. People can learn about current concerns, take part in developmental programs, and improve society's level of living by participating in discussions and debates. Through its message to the general public, media in emerging and underdeveloped nations aims to bring about developmental change. Media outlets analyse, analyze, and criticize societal problems and important development areas. The message should be conveyed in a way that motivates regular people to progress and change.The media in its aim to develop change functions as a decision-maker and teacher.

2.5. Sustainable Development

Sustainable development refers to a pattern of development that satisfies present human needs while ensuring that the resources and environmental conditions required by future generations are not compromised. It involves balancing economic growth, social well-being and environmental protection so that development can be maintained over the long term. Asemah and Imafidon [15] explain sustainable development as a long-term approach to organising society that considers present and future needs, including environmental preservation, natural-resource conservation and social and economic equity.

In the Nigerian context, sustainable development involves promoting economic and social progress while ensuring responsible management of natural resources and protection of the environment. Abdulkadir et al. [16] emphasise that sustainable development requires meeting present needs without undermining the capacity of future generations to meet their own needs. Similarly, Mamman and Adamu [17] stress the importance of effective management and conservation of natural resources in achieving sustainable development in Nigeria.

Therefore, sustainable development can be operationally defined as the process of achieving long-term economic and social advancement through the responsible use of resources, environmental protection and equitable distribution of opportunities, while preserving the ability of future generations to meet their needs. This definition is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where sustainable development requires addressing poverty, resource depletion, environmental degradation and social inequality simultaneously.

2.6. Digital Media and Sustainable Development

The world is transforming at a great pace and the attendant opening of the digital economy is transforming economics globally. Nations around the world are harnessing the potential of digital resources and cyberspace to grow and transform their societies in all sectors. Social media platforms are helping state and non-state actors reach out to numbers of people previously unimaginable, at minimal cost [18]. Muhleisen in Ajiya [18] states that: "Digital platforms are recasting the relationships between customers, workers, and employers as the silicon chip‟s reach permeates almost everything we do, from buying groceries online to finding a partner on a dating website. As computing power improves dramatically and more people around the world participate in the digital economy, we should think carefully about how to devise policies that will allow us to fully exploit the digital revolution‟s benefits while minimizing job dislocation" (p. 1).

Developing nations have the greatest need for the application of digital technology to resolve teething and recurring problems, and if digital technology is well applied, sustainable solutions can be developed to address these challenges. Within this conceptual context, the digital world offers great potential in helping us improve and transform our nation and usher in a nation we can all be proud of. However, as exciting as this may sound, it is imperative to state that how we harness the astounding power of digital and internet resources to develop our societies and nation at all levels depends on our perception, perspective, and understanding of how the digital world can be leveraged to improve our economy, accelerate national development, combat cybercrime, and deepen the bonds of unity among the component entities that make up our nation Nigeria. It is not possible to fully discuss the potential of digital technology to transform national economies in a single write-up. Thus, this paper identified key areas of how digital technology that can be transformative tools as outlined by Ajiya [18] thus: Job creation and youth engagement; Improvement of the economy; Improvement in governance process; Promoting unity and national integration; and Improvement in national security.

In terms of job creation and youth empowerment, youth unemployment in developing countries is increasing. Computers and the digital world have become part of the larger youth culture and can serve as a veritable platform for youth engagement if properly harnessed to provide sustainable employment for the teaming number of youth in our nation. Tim et al. [19] corroborate that the top ten countries for ICT job outsources are India, Poland, Ukraine, Philippines, Brazil, Mexico, Canada, Argentina, Belarus, and Romania. These countries benefit a lot from the offshore deployment of ICT services in terms of financial gains, youth employment, and knowledge transfer. Nigeria is the most populous black nation in the world with a knowledgeable and intelligent youth population. Proper coordination and articulation of a national agenda for engagement and employment in the digital space would offer a great opportunity for youth employment as has been done in the countries mentioned above in the following areas: Digital marketing and advertising; Improvement of the economy; Web and mobile software development; Online content creation like graphics animation content; Online learning and educational services; and Drop shipping and e commerce [18]

On the improvement of the economy, the World Economic Forum, in its 2013 report identified five ways technology and digital services can help improve the economies of developing nations in terms of: Business innovation; Workforce transformation; Contribution to GDP; Direct job creation; and The emergence of new services and industries. According to Ajiya [18], the report stated that since Information and Communication Technology (ICT) ecosystem is one of the fastest growing industries globally, with the ability to impact and stimulate other sectors of the economy, it has become an enabler of innovation and development. This is especially for countries that have developed ways of harnessing the immense potentials and transformative power of ICT.

Concerning the improvement in governance process and citizen engagement, ICT tools have helped nations to streamline and improve their processes, organisational effectiveness. efficiency and From the implementation of Government to Government Solutions and Citizen to Citizen Solutions, all developed societies have developed robust government and governance structures that are wholly founded on well designed and structured digital platforms. E government has been simply defined as the use of ICTs to improve the activities of public sector organisations and provide quality services to citizens. Therefore, developed societies have harnessed the powers of ICT and digital services to: Improve the processes of governance; Reduce the cost of governance; Improve citizen participation in governance; Make government services more accessible to citizens; Improve democratic processes; and Improve and increase access to education. For the promoting unity and national integration, the Internet and cyber world can be used as a tool to promote national integration and encourage unity across divides in the national life of a nation.

Effective use of the Internet would help accelerate the dissemination of the right kind of information, facilitate constructive engagement of citizens, and create a platform for peaceful engagement. However, as

much as ICT is a tool for promoting national development, it can also become a tool for promoting disunity and disruptive tendencies in a nation. This is evident in the manifestation of hate speech on social media platforms, disrespect for religious beliefs and promotion of ethno-religious discord using social media, misinformation and propagation of fake news and malicious information on the Internet, with the intent to disrupt national wellbeing. Improvement in national security and the combating of cybercrime in Nigeria has depreciated to a low state, particularly with the spate of terrorism, kidnapping and banditry. It of course includes cyber securities.

Cyber criminals are capitalizing on low cybersecurity literacy levels to perpetrate online fraud and swindle Nigerians and foreigners alike of their hard-earned resources. The absence of effective policing of our cyberspace and weak implementation and enforcement of cybercrime legislations have emboldened unscrupulous elements to keep feasting on Nigerians [18].

3. DISCUSSION

This paper is guided by the assumptions of the Development Media Theory propounded by Dennis McQuail in 1987. The theory seeks to explain the normative behaviour of the press in countries that are conventionally classified together as developing countries. The thesis of this theory is that mass media have a role in facilitating the process of development in developing countries. The theory assumes that the mass media and communication can positively influence the development process. Thus, the development media theory advocates mass media support for the development goals of a country. The theory postulates that for developing nations, government and media should work in concert to ensure that media aid the planned beneficial development of the country [20]. Therefore, Nigeria been categorized as one of the developing countries should target her programmes towards development pursuit. Media in developing countries are to promote their country‟s development goals such as social and economic development, political stability, cultural development, national integration and to direct a sense of national purpose.

Anaeto [21] observes that media must accept and carryout positive development task in line with national established policy, and freedom of media should be open to economic priorities and development needs of the society. McQuail [22] sum up the principles of development media and stated that the media should give priority in their content to the national culture and language and information that link with other developing countries. Thus, despite the recent criticism concerning normative theories the theory is found to be relevant in the context of this paper as the tenets of the theory recognized the position of the media in the developmental process in the society. This position is consistent with development communication scholarship that treats communication as integral to participation and social change [23], [24], and with the principle of intergenerational equity in the Brundtland formulation of sustainable development [25] and in the 2030 Agenda [26].

4. CONCLUSION

Digital media has become an important instrument for promoting sustainable development through development communication. Its characteristics, including speed, accessibility, interactivity, multimedia capacity, wide geographical reach and user participation, have transformed the production and distribution of development information. Digital platforms provide governments, development organisations, media practitioners and citizens with opportunities to disseminate information, educate the public, share knowledge, mobilise communities and encourage participation in development activities. The paper establishes that digital media can complement traditional media while creating more interactive and participatory communication processes. This makes it particularly relevant to development communication, where dialogue, feedback, behavioural change and community participation are essential for achieving meaningful and lasting development outcomes.

In conclusion, digital media should be regarded as a strategic development communication tool rather than merely a channel for entertainment and social interaction. Its contribution to sustainable development depends on the quality, credibility, accessibility and relevance of the information communicated. Consistent with the Development Media Theory, digital media can support national development by promoting education, economic opportunities, social participation, good governance, national integration and public awareness. Therefore, stakeholders in Nigeria should strengthen digital infrastructure, improve digital literacy, promote credible development-oriented content, encourage inclusive and participatory communication, and address cybersecurity and misinformation. When strategically and responsibly utilised, digital media can empower citizens, strengthen development communication and contribute significantly to inclusive, equitable and sustainable development in Nigeria.

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Tope Joseph Olorunmola: conceptualization, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. Basir Amoda Ajijola: conceptualization, supervision, writing – review and editing. Halimat Abdulrazak: investigation, resources, writing – original draft. Khadijat Olubukola Saliu: investigation, resources, writing – original draft. Fatimoh Zubair Shade: validation, writing – review and editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

AI USE DECLARATION

Artificial intelligence tools were used to assist with the formatting and layout of this manuscript during the editorial production process. AI was not used to generate the substantive content, conceptualization, data, analysis, or conclusions of the research, all of which remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

INFORMED CONSENT

Not applicable – this study did not involve human participants. It is a conceptual review based on existing scholarly literature on digital media, development communication and sustainable development.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This research did not involve human or animal subjects; it is a conceptual review of existing scholarly literature and policy-relevant sources on digital media and sustainable development, and therefore no institutional review board approval was required. Where research does involve human subjects, the authors affirm that such research would be conducted in full compliance with all relevant national regulations and institutional policies, in accordance with the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki, and would be approved by the authors' institutional review board or equivalent committee.

DATA AVAILABILITY

This study is a conceptual review; the literature and sources analyzed are cited throughout the manuscript and are publicly available through their respective publishers.

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