

USING THE VIRTUAL PUBLIC SPACE FOR THE 2020 ELECTIONS CAMPAIGN

OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a global new normal in which social gatherings are largely prohibited, as a protocol against the spread of the virus. In Ghana, the government has responded to the threat of the virus spread by enacting the Imposition of Restrictions Act (1012), within which public gatherings are restricted. These developments have made the virtual space the new avenue for large social gatherings and public conversations. It is within this context that Ghana's December 2020 Elections are taking place.

With the restrictions on public gatherings, political parties and election candidates are now compelled to rely heavily on the virtual space in engaging with the electorate. Unlike in previous elections, they are now almost wholly dependent on the virtual space for reaching large numbers of people.

Within this new electoral context, virtual media such as radio, television and Social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp), and now, increasingly webinars, have rapidly developed into important mechanisms for public engagement. Virtual media have provided political parties with an efficient and effective means of reaching a wide audience. It is also facilitating easy interaction amongst the electorate.

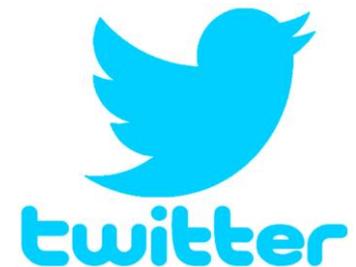
Virtual Media

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Key Issue

The virtual space in Ghana is however largely unregulated. This has opened it up to irresponsible use, such as perpetuation of hate speech, misinformation (disinformation, fake news), cyber attacks, and other forms of abuse.

The irresponsible use of the virtual space poses a deepening threat to the country's ability to hold credible and peaceful elections in December 2020. This presents yet another test case of Ghana's democratic resilience.





IDEG Webinar



Against this backdrop, IDEG organized a Webinar to kick-start a discussion on the unregulated nature of the virtual public space in Ghana and its implications for the achievement of peaceful elections with credible outcomes in December 2020. The Webinar was themed **“Using the Virtual Public Space for the 2020 Elections Campaign; Opportunities, Challenges and the Way Forward”**. It took place on Wednesday, 8th July 2020 from 10:00am - 12:00pm (GMT).

Panelists were the Executive Secretary for the National Media Commission (NMC), **Mr. George Sarpong**; the Executive Director for the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), **Mr. Sulemana Braimah**; and a Tech Innovations Expert and Founder of Penplusbytes, **Mr. Kwami Ahiabenu II**. The Webinar was funded by the kind courtesy of the **Danish Embassy in Ghana**

Key Issues Emerging

Opportunities: the added value of virtual media in elections

- The restrictions on public gatherings have established the power of the internet and social media as a tool for political mobilization.
- Ghana's electoral processes currently do not make sufficient use of new digital technologies for efficiency

Key Issues Emerging

Challenges: Threats to democracy posed by unregulated virtual space

- Ghana's current media and communication regulatory framework does not provide for regulation of the virtual space, contributing to the following challenges.
 - Dominant ownership of the media space (radio and television) by the two largest political parties, fostering a duopolistic characteristic to the virtual public space
 - The virtual space is fast turning into another propaganda tool.
 - Unchecked abuse of the virtual media space
- Trade-off between regulation, censorship and respect for freedom of speech remains a challenge.
- Disciplines and ethics of a democratic culture are being eroded by the abuse of virtual space.
- Limited access of citizens to the virtual space constrains their full participation in this new space.

The Way Forward

There is the need to explore more ways of using digital technologies to make its electoral processes easier and more efficient.

There is the need for political parties to be committed to adhering to best practices in using the virtual space throughout the electoral cycle.

Strong collaboration needed between Ghana's regulatory agencies.

The government, civil society, and citizens should explore ways of regulating the virtual space through public discourse.

IDEG was highly commended for kick-starting this all-important discussion.

Follow-up Event: GTV Talking Point

Following IDEG's Webinar, the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) and GTV invited IDEG and the webinar panelists to feature on the live national current affairs program "Talking Point", on Sunday 12th July 2020 on the theme "Elections Campaign Under COVID-19: Using the Virtual Public Space".

The panelists on the program were Senior Research Fellow of IDEG, Mr. Kwesi Jonah, Executive Director of Penplusbytes, Ms. Juliet Adime Amoah, and Executive Director Media Foundation for West Africa, Mr. Sulemana Braimah.

The program further generated public interest and lively discourse on the subject. The public is invited to look out for new and exciting programs on the topic.