



## Unlocking the Gates and Setting the Agenda: New Media Brings New Life to Media Culture in Ghana

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Received date: May 05, 2021; Accepted date: May 19, 2021; Published date: May 26, 2021

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Citation: Nkrumah D, Hassan S (2021) Unlocking the Gates and Setting the Agenda: New Media Brings New Life to Media Culture in Ghana. Global Media Journal, 19.40

### Abstract

The media in Ghana has traditionally played agenda setting and gate keeping roles. However, new media threatens this role, and this qualitative study explores this issue from the perspective of some industry players and academics. It established that new media presents new culture of open gates and diminished agenda setting role of traditional media.

**Keywords:** Media; Agenda setting; Framing; Gate keeping; New media

### Introduction

Since the Agenda Setting Theory was propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in the early 1970s, news media commentators have been keeping a close eye on the relationship between issues that make the headlines in the various news media and the issues audiences brood over at a particular time.

Agenda Setting theory holds the view that, even though the news media do not necessarily determine how media audience interpret information given to them through the various media outlets, they give audiences something to think about. This theory states that news plays an integral part in the shaping of political realities. The amount of time spent on an issue and the information relayed in a news story, along with the story's position, determines how much importance audiences place on the issue [1,2].

Walter Lipmann first gave a hint of what agenda setting is in his book, Public Opinion in 1922 when he noted that "the news media construct our view of the world" [3]. In 1972 that Maxwell

McCombs and Donald Shaw further developed the theory of Agenda Setting in their original publication, "The agenda setting function of mass media" [4].

Similarly, gate keeping has traditionally been considered as an important role of the media and the media act as a barrier to the dissemination of news that is considered unethical or against the public interest or good [5,6].

The term was first identified by Lewin Kurt who drew an analogy with the role the wife plays in keeping the gate with respect to the nutritional requirements of the family [7]. Subsequent work by White [8] emphasised the role editors play in determining what news goes out and what is filtered out.

Over time, the traditional media was established as having a critical gate keeping function. However, the emergence of the new media and its adaptability opens a debate as to whether the same propositions can be made of the relevance of Gatekeeping and Agenda Setting [9-11].

### Literature Review

#### New media

New media can be defined as a means of mass communication because that is done through the use of digital technology enabled devices such as computers, smart phones over the internet. It is described as new because before the internet became popular and widely used in order to facilitate the growth of the new media, traditional media mediums namely: Radio, Television, Newspaper and magazines existed. Lievrouw and Livingstone defined New Media as "information and communication technologies and their social contexts, which include three main components: The material artefacts or devices that enable and extend people's abilities to communicate and share meaning;

The communication activities or practices that people engage in as they develop and use those devices; and the larger social arrangements and organizational forms that people create and build around the artefacts and practices.”

The Ghanaian media has witnessed a very rapid growth since the beginning of the 21st century following the repeal of the criminal libel law. This massive growth coincided with the establishment of prominent telecommunication companies whose arrival saw the country achieve a considerable amount of internet penetration in the urban areas [12,13].

## Aim

This study aims at exploring the agenda setting and gate keeping roles of the Ghanaian media in an evolving technological space.

## Objectives

- To establish the roles of the traditional media in Ghana with special reference to the agenda setting and gate keeping roles.
- To study the impact of new media on the traditional media in Ghana and whether any impact finds ample expression in the agenda setting and gate keeping roles of the Ghanaian media.

## Research questions

1. Has the traditional media in Ghana over years and in present times expressed important gate keeping and agenda setting roles?
2. Has the emergence and growth of new media in Ghana redefined the agenda setting and gate keeping roles of the Ghanaian media?

## Theoretical framework

**Agenda setting theory:** Agenda-setting theory refers to how the media's news coverage determines which issues become the focus of public attention. The theory was first introduced in 1972 in *Public Opinion Quarterly* by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in their work "Agenda setting function of the mass media" The theory suggests that the media sets the public agenda by telling people what to think about, although not exactly what to think to think in determining for themselves what issues are important to their livelihood [4].

Agenda-setting is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media. Agenda-setting theory rests on two basic assumptions.

The first one states that the media filters and shapes reality instead of simply reflecting it. For example, news stories are not presented chronologically or according to the number of people affected by them, but rather in an order that a producer or editor determines to be the most "sensational," or most appealing to audiences.

The second assumption states that the more attention the media gives to certain issues, the more likely the public will be to label those issues as vital ones. In other words, agenda setting doesn't

necessarily tell people how they should think or feel about certain issues, but rather what issues they should think about.

**Framing theory:** Framing is a media effect theory rooted in agenda setting; it provides focus and agenda for reporting or presenting a story to influence how the audience will understand the issue. The theory is credited to the works of Erving Goffman. It uses two levels of social construction describe how news is broadcast in the media (1) the perception of the social phenomenon by the journalist reporting and presenting a story and (2) the interpretation of the phenomenon by the audience. The media provides rhetorical analysis of an issue in order to achieve the target response in how the audience perceives the issue. The use of metaphors, spins, storytelling and jargons to in most cases evoke the emotions of the public. It either by the use of exaggeration and other narrative elements to achieve communication goals.

For example, in the recent agenda on the activities of illegal mining, framing helps the media to use metaphors in quantifying the quantum of damages and the direct effect it has on the public. Either through the rhetorical analysis of the extent at which the sodium cyanide and Mercury pollutes the water bodies or the domino effect the unavailability of fertile lands for farming can have on the food security of the country.

**Gate keeping theory:** According to Pamela Shoemaker and Boris Johnson, gatekeeping is the "process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people every day, and it is the centre of the media's role in modern public life. This process determines not only which information is selected, but also what the content and nature of the messages, such as news, will be."

Kurt Lewin first coined the term "Gate keeping". It's nothing but to block unwanted or useless information by using a gate. Here the person who make a decision is called "Gatekeeper". At first it is widely used in the field of psychology and later it occupies the field of communication. Now it's one of the essential theories in communication studies. In the context of mass communication, the media plays the role as the gatekeeper who receives sensitive political information from their sources.

A typical news media may receive a plethora new on different topics with different levels of importance. By determining that some of the news stories are not worthy of publication, whether because it infringes on their house policy or whether it reveals grave shortcomings of the government of the day, the media is playing a "gatekeeper" role.

In news medium editor play vital role. He must decide what kind of news items will publish and what should not. Every day the news channel receives various news items from all over the world. The channel has its own ethics and policies through this the editor decide the news items for publish or aired. In some cases, few news items are rejected by the editor due the organizations policy or the news items which are not suitable for publishing.

## Methodology

Semi structured interview guides were used for the collection of data for this study. The interviewees involved individuals in the academic field of communication and media practitioners in Accra the capital city of Ghana who were purposively selected to reflect desired knowledge and media experience required. The respondents included editors of state owned and private newspaper editors, online news website editors, communications lecturers, and journalists. Apart from the interviews conducted, observations were made of the various media to understand the correlation between the interview data and how the themes apply to media practice. Thematic analysis of information gathered was conducted.

## Findings

The main themes established from the interviews are as follows:

- Nature of the agenda setting role of the Ghanaian Media in contemporary times.
- Nature of the gate keeping role of the Ghanaian media in contemporary times.
- Nature and impact of new media journalism in Ghana.
- Importance of traditional media in an era of new media dominance in Ghana.
- Credibility and verification of news in Ghana.
- Impact of new media on agenda setting and gate keeping roles of the Ghanaian media.

### Q1. What is your general view on agenda setting as far as news selection and political discussion in the traditional media are concerned?

**Respondent 1:** Agenda setting is still relevant in the Ghanaian media. A lot of agenda setting has been going on for some time now. However, the Ghanaian media is still not strong enough in terms of financial resources, in terms of training and technical knowhow to be able to set agenda for the public and then for the consumers of news. So, the media really do not set much agenda in Ghana. They are just followers of news to some extent and they always rely on the newsmakers (politicians, businessmen, media cabals) to make news. And also, for agenda setting to be effective, there should be strong networking between the media houses, and we don't see that happening.

**Respondent 2:** Without sounding too academic, we know as media people and communicators that agenda setting has to do with focusing our lenses on issues of importance or focusing on making a change that we want to see happening. So, for instance we can decide as a media organization or as a media unit that there are too many bad roads in Ghana within the various suburban areas and so that is where we want our conversation to be today. So, a lot of our stories will be on roads in Accra or the whole of Ghana. So, we send reporters to all parts of the country and then get their report on the condition of the roads in all the

areas and so we put our energy on it. That is something you will not find with an organization like mine.

**Respondent 3:** Yes, generally the media is a mirror of society so the media normally would want to know the things that the public want to see and read and present it to them. But at the same time that the media want to write what we want to read and listen to, we also set certain agenda in the sense that there may be things happening and depending on how media houses report it, that will be the trend it will follow. So agenda setting is quite a very important thing that the media usually do.

**Respondent 4:** When it comes to agenda setting, it all has to do it the particular media house and what they seek to achieve. Normally when the media house is state-owned, there is a tendency to try and be balanced as much as possible; sometimes coverage may be a bit skewed favourably towards the ruling government for obvious reasons. But for most of the private media houses, it is more to do with what they believe in, where they stand on an issue and how they seek to propagate it. For example, in Ghana, there are certain media houses, Radio, T.V, that are mentioned with regards to being in the corner of certain political parties. Of course, some come out to admit that others still insist that they are doing a professional job but clearly their content give an idea of the direction they toll.

**Respondent 5:** Yeah, media agenda setting is no different from what appears in other parts of the world. It is one of the ways media establishments use to bring to the public space issues which need to be tackled by the appropriate state agency or as it were members of the public themselves to make a subject or an issue to get people involved in discussing it with a view to solving a problem within it. So yes, Ghanaians are more interested in political issues than others, so when you set an agenda and it is not political, it wouldn't receive the necessary support from members of the public.

**Respondent 6:** The media is all about content and the type of agenda you set connects you with your audience. For example, if there is a particular issue that you want to speak to, the way you couch your story and the way you present it to your target audience goes a long way to have an effect on them. People rely on the media for everything information. Without proper agenda you cannot have that impact you want to have on your audience and of course so you need to consider the public interest as well.

## Analysis

**Agenda setting:** All respondents accept the importance of the agenda function role of the media. They acknowledge the media plays an important role in setting the agenda for national discourse although there are varying levels of acceptance of the practicality of this function of the media. The general observation that the media may be subservient to their own selfish beliefs or at the mercy of other external influencers stands out as a concern for a few of the respondents. Respondent Six refers to a deeper level in the agenda setting function almost identifying the second level agenda setting whereby journalists put stories in particular frames; "For example, if there is a particular issue that

you want to speak to, the way you couch your story and the way you present it to your target audience goes a long way to have an effect on them," he explains. Clearly, all respondents are sensitive to the agenda setting function of the media although there is lack of unanimity in the how well the "purity" of the agenda is safeguarded from the external "contamination" from political.

**Q2. Is the Agenda Setting function of the media as effective as it was in the past (20 years ago)? Do you think it is dying out?**

**Respondent 1:** The media now must survive first and everything they do is about money. If the agenda is set by someone who is a powerful person and has financial resources to continue to hold that agenda over a certain period of time, it works. Otherwise, ordinarily, hefty chunk of the media we can say do not set their own agenda. Let me give you a scenario. We were studying media reportage on agriculture in the print media. We selected over 160 copies of individual newspapers from each of the four titles that we chose. They rely on the ministers and ministries and other people to provide them with news through news releases and press conferences. It tells you that, there was no agenda set. So, they only report as and when the news comes.

But the agenda setting role of the media is not is dying out. We can say that the potential of the media to set agenda is decreasing. You see 20 years ago we did not have a lot of media houses in the country. In Ghana, we had only one state owned television channel. So, it was easy for the media to set agenda. And the agenda is not even coming from the media itself. It came from government because the media was under the control of the government on the basis of ownership. But from 1992 when Ghana adopted the 4th Republican Constitution, a lot of media houses emerged and definitely one cannot say that they are not setting agenda. They would set agenda but most of the agenda that is set by the media is not coming from them media itself.

**Respondent 2:** It is quite difficult to put a measure on that, but in the days when we had only Ghana Broadcasting Corporation as the main news outlet, the agenda setting was effective because they could cover the entire country exclusively. Today, the media house we work in for example is a very major one in the country. But you can go to a place like Wa and the people will be listening to a community radio station or district radio station. So, they will set their own agenda according the issues that affect them, which will be different from the agenda we set. So, agenda setting is still very strong and powerful, and it has become more of community-based agenda. Compared to what it was in the past when we had a limited number of news sources, they could set agenda on a national basis and whip up nationwide public enthusiasm.

**Respondent 3**

We think that the agenda setting role has virtually been eroded from the traditional media. But then again, the media is setting the agenda. Now the media includes people who work as journalists.

**Respondent 5:** Social media whether we like it or not, has triggered an impetus or a push regarding agenda setting. It has provided a very critical impetus for which we cannot run away

from even though there are very dangerous disadvantages inherent in social media. But we think the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages regarding agenda setting and so on and so forth. You can set a negative or positive agenda. For instance, the Montie Three set a very dangerous agenda which was pushing the country to a precipice.

**Respondent 6:** The effect of these theories has seriously changed. Twenty years ago, the media was not as vibrant as we have it now. Circulation of information was not as strong as we have it now and maybe you can attribute that to the fact that communication technologies were not as advanced as we have it today. Today because citizen journalists are all over the place, important issues can be highlighted by anyone and because of the seriousness of the issue, it would be difficult for the traditional media to ignore it.

### Analysis

**Social media plays a key role:** All respondents agree that social media plays a key role in the agenda setting function of the media in totality. In order the is the recognition of the agenda setting function of the media as being more diffused with bloggers and journalists contributing to the agenda setting function. A new era of media pluralism has also resulted in what Respondent Two refers to as 'Community Based Agenda'; "Today, the media house I work in for example is a very major one in the country. But you can go to a place like Wa and the people will be listening to a community radio station or district radio station. So, they will set their own agenda according the issues that affect them, which will be different from the agenda we set. So, agenda setting is still very strong and powerful, and it has become more of community-based agenda".

Respondents also note the increased role of new media and the diminished role of traditional media in setting the agenda and argue that media plurality and social media have transformed the media landscape tremendously and the agenda setting function is no longer the preserve of the traditional media. Respondent Five states that "Social media whether we like it or not, has triggered an impetus or a push regarding agenda setting. It has provided a very critical impetus for which we cannot run away from even though there are very dangerous disadvantages inherent in social media".

There is also an observation by Respondent One that the media generally has evolved to be 'Agenda Followers' rather than 'Agenda Setters' because of their reduced financial wherewithal; "The media now must survive first and everything they do is about money. If the agenda is set by someone who is a powerful person and has financial resources to continue to hold that agenda over a certain period of time, it works. Otherwise, ordinarily, hefty chunk of the media we can say do not set their own agenda".

**Q3. The media is known to be gatekeepers who filter political information especially, before disseminating the news to the general public. What is your view on this assertion?**

**Respondent 1:** There are a lot of leakages or let us say some

hijacking of crucial information which under normal circumstances should not get into the public domain. But certainly, social media and the new media have come to break that monotony that the traditional media used to wield in the previous time where social media was not that common. Today with social media, even if you ask somebody to keep a document, the person can easily snapshot that document and send it *via* WhatsApp, so very sensitive information is leaking into the public domain and this is all possible because of the new media and social media. Personally, we don't think the gatekeeping role today of the traditional media still holds effectively.

**Respondent 2:** The media is a gatekeeper. As an editor, one of the things we tell our reporters is that we are not there just push everything that comes to us especially as persons who publish online. Our process is different from those who do radio and TV for example. Our process is fluid so news comes in as and when they arise. Apart from news items that we generate internally, we also aggregate items from other sites and credit the sources accordingly. But it does not also mean that, once you see the news and there is a temptation to pick just any story you go ahead and do so. And that is what gatekeeping is. So, gatekeeping works in two ways, and that is what comes to you, and what you publish. So, gatekeeping is very relevant in our practice.

The divorce story does not border on legality because it is a statement of fact that the person involved has actually filed for divorce but the decision to drop the story and not go head to publish is purely on the grounds of respect for privacy of the persons involved.

**Respondent 3:** Unfortunately, we have found ourselves in a situation where it looks like most media houses these days, although are supposed to act professionally and try to give facts and be as accurate as possible, are seeing to take certain lines with regards to their beliefs, what they stand for and sometimes depending on the ownership structure of that particular media house. It appears that they may be towing a particular political line. For example, a media house like as much as we say that we are being very neutral in what we do, contents clearly give them away. So, one can say that a reasonable number try very hard to play the role. But quite a number of them due to their political leanings do not appear to be playing that role very well.

**Respondent 4:** Gate keeping is important. Some information may not be in the interest of the public so must be filtered out. The media is there to ensure the peace, stability, progress and development of the country. So, if you have information which can tear the country apart and you bring it out, what would you have done? You have acted irresponsibly as it happened in Rwanda.

Our gatekeeping role for me is not being done properly because there are many shortcomings and this we think is as a result of people not getting the proper training before jumping into the media especially radio and calling themselves journalists.

**Respondent 5:** It is true that the media plays a gatekeeper role, and they are supposed to watch what information they bring out.

The traditional media for example when they get information that is newsworthy, they get to the source and try to authenticate the information unlike what we see in the new media today. There have been instances in my experience working in the print media when we deliberately delay the publication of certain news items just because we wanted to verify the information and make sure it is the truth before we publish it to the public.

### Analysis

Generally, all respondents believe that the traditional media has an important gate keeping function although Respondent One is quick to add that new media particularly, social media is eroding this gate keeping function of the traditional media as information supposed to be kept out of the public domain is sometimes leaked and published on social media. The respondents unanimously share the view that the gate keeping function is very important as it seeks to safeguard both public and private good by helping to ensure peace and security in society. There is also the recognition a media organisation's ideology or orientation can influence the gate keeping function of the media organisation. Generally, respondents believe that the quality of the gate keeping role performed by the Ghanaian media is generally poor and that primarily can be attributed to new media excesses or ethical breaches. Thus, while Respondent Six notes that traditional media performs a better role keeping the gate, Respondent Two citing a case involving the divorce of two public figures is of the opinion that new media is festering a culture of poor gate keeping in the Ghanaian media landscape.

#### Q4. Can you please talk about your views on new media and their audiences?

**Respondent 1:** New media has come at an opportune time and it has provided opportunity for a lot of people to participate in the mainstream media. Today we have what you call citizen journalists. The mainstream media sometime pick themes from citizen journalists and develop the stories. So, the new media has actually made people more active and interested in news.

The news media has had a very positive impact on audience and has aroused a lot of public interest in news. And we can say that, today, the kind of control the traditional media used to have over news has been broken because of the new media.

**Respondent 2:** For us at our media establishment a lot of people see us to be a very traditional media house because of the number of radio and TV stations that we have. But a lot of people don't know that we have social media as a unit. We all come under the umbrella of a digital media unit but with different sections that span both the traditional media and the new media. We have a number of people who handle the new media for us with over 40 social media handles across the major social media platforms to manage our presence there and to pitch information for us. So, in fact social media is even faster than our online portal because when news break right now, all that is required on social media is just a one line tweet and then it is already out there.

However, traditional media has the capacity and diligence to go

through various stages of verification to report with details and accuracy having spoken to all the actors involved in a developing a news story.

New media has created two situations for us as journalists and editors. What it does for you is that you may be in your office, but you have your eyes everywhere. Just a few hours ago, we saw a tweet from the Former president, John Dramani Mahama trolling the current vice president Dr. Bamumia on the cedi's depreciation against the dollar. We did not have to go to or send someone to the former president's house to get that story, but social media brought it to us. We just saw the tweet and we said

to ourself that this is newsworthy because these two have had this argument about the cedi depreciation when the former was in office.

**Respondent 3:** The new media has come to completely change how audience consume information. Even if you are a traditional media house and you don't adapt to this new system, then you are bound to fail. Because anybody who works in the print media can tell you that, single copy sales have gone down drastically. Why? We don't have a reading culture, and also because newspapers are not interactive. If we publish something through the newspaper and you want a response, you have to wait till the next day because of the 24-hour cycle of the newspaper and that is even the very least. But now we can tweet some of the news items that go out there and you can demand an immediate feedback.

**Respondent 4:** New media have pros and cons. We can monitor what is trending and to pick a few details to support our main stories, but then it also has the potential of reducing the importance of our stories. For instance, if the lead story for tomorrow's paper is already on social media the attraction that the lead story will make would have been reduced. And then on the other hand because it is perpetrated by people who are not trained, anybody can just put out anything in the media.

### Analysis

All respondents agree that new media has impacted traditional media and the practice of journalism in various ways. There is the recognition that enhanced opportunities for audience interaction and feedback have generated greater interest in new media channels. Respondent Six notes that "now you can see that even though a news item may not be that popular on the traditional media, that same news when published on new media gets a lot of interest. And this is because new media allows for interactivity and instant feedback". Respondents state that new media have influenced how news stories are produced and disseminated and identify weaknesses such as the challenge with accuracy of information published on new media platforms. Nevertheless, there is general acceptance that traditional media houses must respond to the demands placed by the growth of new media to be competitive a view shared by Respondent Three: "The new media has come to completely change how audience consume information. Even if you are a traditional media house and you don't adapt to this new system, then you are bound to fail".

### Q5. Do you believe the traditional media houses with online presence dominate the dissemination of news online?

**Respondent 1:** Traditional media will still continue to exert that relevance with respect to news. Because the news from the new media and social media comes with its disadvantages as people sometimes come up with fake news. So, when audience pick up issues that come up on social media, they look for ways to authenticate the news. And that is when the traditional media comes in. Most people or media consumers look up to the traditional media for authentication of news on social media. So, the traditional media serve as a source of verification for both online audience and the traditional media audience.

**Respondent 2:** Traditional media houses with online presence have the pedigree and the credibility. So, in actual fact, when we set up some online platforms, the idea was not to operate as an independent news sources, but they were set up to amplify what stories we cover in the traditional media and give them coverage in the new media. But sometimes also as journalists, we only don't just want to amplify what someone is saying, so once in a while we gather the news ourselves and come up with exclusive stories that we have developed in-house. So, with the question of dominance, what we can say is that to some extent the traditional media houses are beginning to have that level of control online as well because radio and TV for example are fleeting but with the online.

**Respondent 3:** There are quite a number of electronic media outlets that started the online thing and these media houses are electronic and have the advantage of immediacy over us. The only reason we are surviving now is that our online news portal is catching up. They were far ahead but the only advantage we have at here is that we have a very credible newspaper that gives us a certain niche. We want to establish the same credibility online.

**Respondent 4:** Our organisation is doing well but then that does not also mean that the online is not taking something away from us because if our online version will come out with a story today and then the traditional outlet is coming out with that story tomorrow, obviously there will be a reduction in the impact. But the only good thing is that the social media traffic is still not as high as it is in the other hemisphere or in the other part of the world the developed world. The illiteracy rate is still very high. So that is the advantage we still have.

**Respondent 5:** For the two big multimedia organisations in the country with huge patronage of their traditional media channels, such following, or patronage can be extended online. However, as to whether they set agenda with the issues that dominate the headlines is quite doubtful. So, we can say that these two giants have huge online presence but whether that translate into dominance is quite difficult to tell.

### Analysis

Respondents share the view that traditional media outlets are increasing their presence online to respond to contemporary news production trends as well as the needs of audiences.

This is inspired by the growing competition in the industry and the challenge of news credibility faced by strictly new media sources. There is a consensus from respondents that while news on new media platforms attract a lot attention, there is always a credibility deficit that traditional media organization with long standing reputation of credible news helps to address. This view is well amplified by Respondent One who notes that; “Most people or media consumers look up to the traditional media for authentication of news on social media. So, the traditional media serve as a source of verification for both online audience and the traditional media audience”.

#### **Q6. Do think online audiences care about verifying news online?**

**Respondent 1:** Online audience care about the credibility of news. Every now and then you hear people ask questions about how authentic news they get from social media is. For example, recently when a particular journalist died in one of the media houses, another journalist who works in the same company said he saw the story on social media but was unsure of the authenticity of it. So he had to check the news website of his media house and the two other news websites that belong to other traditional media houses to verify the news.

**Respondent 2:** When news breaks on social media people will not necessarily believe until they hear it from the traditional media houses like ours. So, our authenticity and credibility is key in that respect and because of that, people rely on us for verification always.

**Respondent 3:** Traditional media is very important for the verification of online news. My organisation is experienced and verification is one of our hallmarks. We verify news before we put it out so it is not the case that our online people are not fast enough, but we want to make sure that, we publish, and we publish only what we can verify.

**Respondent 4:** If you are the type who fishes out for information, naturally you will keep your ears on the ground and eyes wide open. When we talk of verification of news what are we talking about? Essentially, we are just trying to cross check and to know whether the information that we have at any given point in time is nothing but the truth. We do not want a situation where we have information with a lot of discrepancies in it.

**Respondent 5:** Well, there is a certain initial excitement and sometimes hysteria when there is a fake item posted. It is after a while that they come down and try to seek the truth by going to the traditional media to establish the veracity of what they have been fed by the new media.

**Respondent 6:** Online audience usually tend to traditional media to verify the news. This is because the sheer volume of information available on social media can get you overloaded and not know what to believe. However, you always know that when the news is authentic, you will see it in the bulletin of the big media houses. So, for the issue of news verification, traditional media is the place to go for authentic and credible news always.

## **Analysis**

The importance of traditional media in news verification is affirmed by all the respondents who believe that social media cannot be trusted as a reliable and credible source of news. Respondents believe that the credibility of traditional media organisations is also conferred on their new media channels and pages. This view is shared by Respondent Three who notes that; “We verify news before we put it out so it is not the case that our online people are not fast enough, but we want to make sure that, we publish, and we publish only what we can verify”. This view is well noted by Respondent Two who states that; “When news breaks on social media people will not necessarily believe until they hear it from the traditional media houses like ours. So, our authenticity and credibility is key in that respect and because of that, people rely on us for verification always”.

#### **Q7. What effect do you think the new media has on agenda setting and gatekeeping of the traditional media today?**

**Respondent 1:** Even though the social media users are always scanning through various platforms for information, they still always want to fall back on the traditional media for verification. However, with regards to agenda setting both the old and new media complement each other. Also while there will be pieces of certain information on social media, the audience don't have the capacity to pick the actual themes. So, they come back to the traditional media to get the rest of the stories. The information on social media is fragmented, scanty and unbelievable.

What we also foresee happening in the new media is that agenda setting is potentially going to be a dual role between the new media and the traditional media. There will come a time when the issues that the new media audience deem important would be what the traditional media will also hit on. The new media will not diminish the effect of agenda setting but maybe there should be a redefinition of the theory in alignment of the practice. Now we see that the people's agenda will be the media agenda.

At the personal level, we don't think there is too much of a problem setting the agenda and keeping gates. However, professionally we think there is a challenge in the practice of these theories because with gatekeeping for instance, people do not respect the principles of it.

**Respondent 2:** In this age of citizen journalism, it is not very easy and that is why sometimes people want to rely on the trusted sources of information. For instance, my media organization has high level of credibility. We have had instances where even journalists who work at other media houses write stories and bring it to us to publish just because they want to be published in our medium. So that is how the traditional media works, otherwise the gatekeeping will not be very effective. In a sense, the new media is also good because it makes people get information in real time. For instance, if there is accident, within five minutes the news will be everywhere, and the authorities will pick it up. Because of that, the real gatekeeping role of the traditional media is slowly being eroded.

**Respondent 3:** When we talk of new media, we are talking about social media, Facebook, Instagram, and the online sources. If you take Facebook for example, a lot of times the media at this point, thrives on speed. People are very quick to post information. Sometimes some of the information is not even verified, but just because they want to draw traffic to their site, people churn out information and quickly place it there.

**Respondent 4:** The traditional media will be around for a long time especially since there is this assumption by many people including me that, the social media by and large is used as a vehicle for the propagation of fake news. So, people take what they gather from social media or new media with a pinch of salt.

**Respondent 5:** The effect is double edged. On one side, it is good, but on the other side, it also gives way to a lot of fake news to be propagated. Gatekeeping is a bit loose when it comes to the new media. There seem to be no control over how things are done compared to the traditional media where news has to go through some editorial processes before it is published.

## Analysis

All respondents agree that both the agenda setting and gate keeping roles of the traditional media are undergoing evolution although in different ways. With regards to the agenda setting function, there is the recognition of complementarity of both new media and traditional media in setting the agenda. There is a discerned diminished role of traditional media on the agenda setting role of new media while there is an amplification of the role of new media on the agenda setting role. Invariably, as suggested by Respondent One; "There will come a time when the issues that the new media audience deem important would be what the traditional media will also hit on. The new media will not diminish the effect of agenda setting but maybe there should be a redefinition of the theory in alignment of the practice. Now we see that the people's agenda will be the media agenda".

In the case of gate keeping, respondents generally agree that new media is gradually unlocking the gates and eliminating the gate keeping role of the traditional media. As observed by Respondent Three, news immediacy "the real gatekeeping role of the traditional media is slowly being eroded".

## Discussion

Agenda setting (both first and second level agenda setting) is still very central to news publication in Ghana yet in contemporary times the influence of social media cannot be discounted.

As recounted by the respondents, agenda setting has traditionally been a critical role of the traditional media. However, there is the argument that the responsibility of deciding what issues of society are the main topics for media discussion no longer solely lies with traditional or mainstream journalists as was the case some years back.

Agenda setting role of the media has gone through some evolution with the advent of new media. New media provides tremendous opportunities for media audiences to select and publish issues

they prefer to be highlighted, thus, issues highlighted by social media users have the potential to attract interest from traditional media in their performance of their agenda setting role.

The challenge, however, is that the traditional media may be compelled to tag along unethical social media agenda which may also invariably be considered as the 'people's agenda'.

Thus, the public agenda as expressed through social media and blogs can now also become the traditional media agenda. As affirmed by respondents, agenda setting in the Ghanaian media is significantly influenced by trending issues on social media. The growing popularity of social media in the Ghanaian media space makes it important platforms for setting media agenda. Internet penetration in Ghana as of December 2019 was estimated at 37.8 percent with a Facebook penetration rate of 19.3 percent. While these may fall well below 50 percent, those who make these percentages appear to be enlightened opinion leaders who influence discussions in the public sphere.

In the public-media relationship, two agendas are established: the media agenda and the public agenda. The two agenda almost have to coincide to generate the kind of buzz journalists and editors want for their news stories. McCombs and Shaw in the seminal piece on agenda setting ascribe to the media, power to influence issue salience but not necessarily the direction of audiences' thoughts. Flowing from this was the development of Second Level Agenda Setting Theory that sought to emphasise that the media may induce a particular direction of thought in respect to the issue engaging the mind by deliberately emphasising some attributes of the message or issue at hand.

The new expression of agenda setting role also puts some strain on the media's ability to frame stories as espoused under Second Level Agenda Setting. News framing in contemporary journalism practice must be sensitive to social media trends and discussions else the intended effect may be doused by social media buzz. The power of social media audiences in setting the news agenda is also expressed in the gradual erosion of the gate keeping role of the traditional media. Because social media does not preclude any issue from public discussion, this is gradually finding expression in traditional media albeit with a few exceptions. In other words, if new media deems an issue worthy of salience and public discussion, then traditional media may be inclined to adopt such expressions of issue salience.

## Conclusion

The narrative is changing; agenda setting role of the media requires contribution from both new media and traditional media with new media exerting greater influence with emergence of the people's agenda as the media's agenda. The gate keeping function of the media is almost eroded and issue salience is increasingly being determined by new media with traditionally media playing a more deemphasized role. This presents serious ethical challenges for contemporary journalism.p.



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