



E-ISSN: 2664-603X  
P-ISSN: 2664-6021  
IJPSG 2022; 4(1): 87-94  
[www.journalofpoliticalscience.com](http://www.journalofpoliticalscience.com)  
Received: 06-10-2021  
Accepted: 13-11-2021

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## Social media, democracy, and freedom of expression: Some evidence from Ghana

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2022.v4.i1b.140>

### Abstract

A qualitative condensed thematic research design was adopted to examine the effects of social media utilization and its likely effects on democracy and the freedom of expression among the citizens in Ghana. An in-depth interview was conducted to solicit data from thirty (N=30) respondents. Twenty-five (n=25) out of the 30 respondents are journalists and media professionals from key private media organizations, while the remaining five (n=5) are democracy and governance scholars from two major universities in Ghana. A key finding from this study suggest that, social media platforms have strongly safeguarded and consolidated the democratic dispensation within Ghana. The application of social media in Ghana have also resulted in hindrances such as hate speech, political harassment as well an increase in fake news in the form of misinformation and disinformation. This study recommends a well-coordinated national policy on effective social media use in Ghana to further enhance democracy and freedom of expression.

**Keywords:** Social media, freedom of expression, democracy, fake news, hate speech

### 1. Introduction

Social media platforms have undoubtedly transformed human capability to interact across geographical and political divides with speed and ease. While in the past gatekeepers controlled and negotiated peoples' access to the various mass media platforms, presently possibly anybody, as well as any digital content, can be instantly accessed by millions of individuals across the globe (Appel *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[1]</sup>. Kapoor, *et al.* (2018) <sup>[2]</sup>; Kahne and Bowyer (2018) <sup>[3]</sup>, have highlighted that this particular development does not only enhances opportunities for the democratization of citizens' freedom of expression and diversification but has also increased the impact and damage associated with misinformation related to hate speech. Consequently, Prapawong (2018) <sup>[4]</sup> notes that as regulators throughout the world consider effective solutions to these legal novelties as well as the challenges that social media presents, the key task will be to not only frame but also advance the discourse on key issues.

In the post-truth period, democratic societies have always perceived social media as the fourth state (Dzisah, 2018; Chilwa and Samoilenko, 2019) <sup>[5, 6]</sup>. Consequently, social media technologies are deemed to be not just the essence but also the backbone of 21<sup>st</sup>-century democracy. Pennington (2014) <sup>[4]</sup>; Chilwa *et al.* (2020) <sup>[6]</sup>, indicated that social media has been accountable in as far as reflecting on the happenings around the globe are concerned, starting from individuals to the entire community. Thistlethwaite *et al.* (2019) <sup>[7]</sup> note that, if effectively monitored, the social media platforms could be helpful in terms of not only seeking or pursuing the truth but also reporting stories as they are, and therefore not changing facts or coming up with a story to suit the interest of one particular group. In summary, social media ought to report true information, desist from any forms of hate speech; offer a voice or help to the voiceless; reflect diversity as well as improve critical judgment. At an individual level, social media is argued to gratify users' self-fulfillment as it reflects what the users stand for as well as what they believe in.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, free expression has not only become the core and essence of Ghana's democracy but is also growing into a global norm. According to the United Nations (1948) <sup>[8]</sup>, an article has a right of opinion as well as expression, which means the right to hold one's opinions without any interference, in

addition to seeking, obtaining as well as imparting information or ideas through any form of media notwithstanding of the boundary. Both social media and the right of expression are considered to be very important in enhancing democracy, hence they need to co-exist. United Nations (2018)<sup>[8]</sup>; Macedo-Junior (2017)<sup>[9]</sup>, noted that throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most popular method of safeguarding one's freedom or right of expression was utilizing judicial formation and protection of one's legal as well as constitutional rights. Because the freedom of expression or speech was instituted in Chapter 12 of the 1992 Ghanaian constitution, it has always been safeguarded by the country's law, with which both the traditional and the social media are significantly subjected. Indeed, according to the constitution of Ghana 1992, p.101, the article provided an important assurance that individuals' fundamental rights, such as one's freedom of speech right of expression would be safeguarded legally.

Unlike social media, traditional media within Ghana is regulated by media laws. They are usually granted the freedom to make important editorial decisions but with utmost accountability that ensures objectivity, unbiased information as well as no political propaganda. If any media fail in their responsibility, they are usually held responsible, an act that is, however, not applied to the social media platforms. The objective of this study is to therefore examine the effects of social media use within Ghana and its likely effects on democracy and freedom of expression of citizens.

## 2. Review of Related Literature

### 2.1 Social media and Democracy

Over the last few years, governments across the globe have significantly enhanced their efforts aimed at regulating information follow on social media. More than a decade ago, for instance, the Russian government initiated the utilization of surreptitious techniques to not only interfere with online discussions but also suppress the rebellion. The practice has, however, since then gone global. Sanja *et al.* (2017)<sup>[10]</sup>; Siegel (2020)<sup>[11]</sup>; Freedom House (2017)<sup>[12]</sup>, noted that such types of state-led interventions pose a significant threat to the important perception of the internet and social media as artificial intelligence resources that promote citizens' involvement in the day-to-day affairs of their respective countries.

Sanja *et al.* (2017)<sup>[10]</sup> cite that the manipulation of social media and other forms of online content has in recent years contributed to an overall drop in internet freedom for seven consecutive years, resulting in an increase in the interferences to mobile internet services as well as a rise in both physical and technical attacks targeted at the independent media and human rights protectors. Sanja *et al.* (2017)<sup>[10]</sup>, further reported that approximately 50 percent of the 65 countries surveyed during the Freedom on the Net survey 2017 faced fall-offs during the survey coverage period, whereas only 13 reported gains. Other studies by School (2020)<sup>[13]</sup>; Sanja *et al.* (2017)<sup>[10]</sup>, observed that less than 25 percent of the internet users live in countries where the internet is free, implying that they do not experience major challenges to internet access, including heavy restrictions on online content, serious infringement of the user rights or even unfair ramifications for legitimate speech.

The idea of using "fake news", the use of automated "bot"

social media, as well as other manipulation techniques acquired significant attention within America. Indeed, whereas, the nation's online scene remained moderately free, it significantly experienced an increase in fabricated or false news articles, disruptive and partisan vitriol, as well as violent harassment of journalists, especially during as well as after the American presidential election campaigns (Rochefort, 2020; Guess & Lyons, 2020)<sup>[14, 15]</sup>.

Guess and Lyons (2020)<sup>[15]</sup>; Helmus *et al.* (2018)<sup>[16]</sup>; Persily and Tucker (2020)<sup>[17]</sup> contend that the manipulation techniques, as well as the disinformation tactics, used played a significant role in the elections of more than 17 other nations over the last year, consequently interfering with the citizens' right to elect their political leaders based on not only accurate news but also authentic debate. Helmus *et al.* (2018)<sup>[16]</sup>; Klos (2020)<sup>[18]</sup> added that, although some regimes intended to support their interests in addition to expanding their influence overseas as witnessed with Russia's disinformation election campaigns within the United States of America as well as in some countries in Europe, in many cases, these particular techniques are also employed within their borders to help them retain their hold on to power. Turkey, Venezuela, and the Philippines form three of the 30 countries where regimes were discovered to have employed opinion influencers to not only drive specific government agendas as well as spread various government views but also to counter various government critics on social media. Certainly, the number of such governments or regimes that control online discourses has grown since 2009 when Freedom House started systematically tracking this particular phenomenon. Sanja *et al.* (2017)<sup>[10]</sup> noted that over the past few years, this practice has turned out to be greatly more widespread and sophisticated, with bots, fake news media, and propaganda producers utilizing various search algorithms and social media to ensure high-level visibility and seamless integration with the trusted content.

Different from the more direct censorship methods, for instance, website blocking or arrests targeting internet activities, Morgan (2018)<sup>[19]</sup> argues that the manipulation of online content is not only difficult to discover but it is also not easy to combat bearing in mind its greatly dispersed nature as well as the number of individuals and bots used for this particular purpose. Morgan (2018)<sup>[19]</sup>; Nielsen and Fletcher (2020)<sup>[20]</sup> reported that the implications of these rapidly growing techniques on democracy and civic activism are conceivably devastating.

The creation of fabricated grassroots support by a government through the use of social media simply results in a closed-loop where the government appears to be endorsing itself and consequently disregarding ordinary citizens and independent groups (Rochefort 2020)<sup>[14]</sup>. By reinforcing the false notion that a large part of the population backs them, such authorities may not only justify crackdowns on their political opponents but also advance unconstitutional changes to the existing laws without lawful debate. Sanja *et al.* (2017)<sup>[10]</sup>; Guess and Lyons, (2020)<sup>[15]</sup>; Morgan (2018)<sup>[19]</sup> argue that state-sponsored social media manipulations are usually coupled with stricter controls on news media, an act aimed at preventing access to independent and objective reporting, rendering societies significantly vulnerable to misinformation.

Effectively dealing with online content manipulation as well as restoring faith in social media use without destabilizing

the internet and media freedom will not only take time and resources but also will require a lot of creativity (Gorwa and Ash, 2020) <sup>[21]</sup>. The initial step in dealing with this issue ought to include engaging individuals in public education targeted at teaching them how to discover fake and misleading news or commentary. Besides, democratic societies ought to strengthen their regulations to make certain that any form of political advertising is transparent both online and offline. Nielsen and Fletcher (2020) <sup>[20]</sup>; Gorwa and Ash (2020) <sup>[21]</sup> further state that social media firms ought to play an important part in re-examining the processes behind any kind of news creation, also, to proactively disabling fake accounts and bots that are utilized for anti-democratic purposes.

## 2.2 Social media for Freedom of Expression

Social media platforms have become an essential tool for communication. The strength of any democracy in any given country can be measured by the extent to which the citizenry enjoys its freedom of expression. Indeed, it is through them that individuals can exercise their fundamental freedom or right of expression in addition to exchanging information and even ideas. According to Pennington, (2014) <sup>[22]</sup>; Barnidge *et al.* (2018) <sup>[23]</sup>, there has been an increased number of Think Tanks advocating for the increase in freedoms of expression in many countries. The Think Tanks also advocate for justice, and accountability from powerful authorities, and also recognition of human rights of freedom of expression.

The 2020 Black Lives Matter Protest in the US and the Arab Spring Revolution 2011 is an example of the formidable role of social media platforms in the fight for fundamental human rights and freedom of expression (Ricknell, 2020) <sup>[24]</sup>. The freedom of expression or speech does not, however, give the citizens of any country the right to either speak or even publish without utmost responsibility. Given this, the legislature usually passes laws that impose restrictions on the right of expression or speech. Social media technology is, nonetheless, predisposed to misuse as several cybercrimes may be easily carried out through the use of social media. Rochefort (2020) <sup>[14]</sup>; Irum and Laila (2015) <sup>[24]</sup> notes that his practice justifies the government of a nation to control online content as a means of safeguarding the interests of the general public as a whole, a necessity that a government cannot deny its citizens.

Prapawong (2018) <sup>[4]</sup>; Nyarko *et al.* (2018) <sup>[25]</sup> mentioned that, provided the peoples' interests are well sorted out, the people have no other option but to obey. The problem, however, arises when, the authorities begin censoring the people by using regulation as a defense and therefore start infringing the fundamental rights of its people, including the freedom of speech or expression. Prapawong (2018) <sup>[4]</sup>; Nyarko *et al.* (2018) <sup>[25]</sup> reiterate that social media enhances democracy, freedom as well as equality.

Constitutional values on social media are usually under immense pressure and the issue of democracy is not left behind. Online media firms admit that not only extremists, terrorists, and other undemocratic groups use social media to advance their message. Various nations across the world, including some from the African continent, have contacted social media firms to urgently do something regarding such messages. Scholars have proposed that governments in many countries of the world intervene regarding the issue of expression on social media. Even so, non-state bodies and

movements are also known to influence online media firms (Dzisah, 2018; Klos, 2020; Nyarko *et al.* 2018; Ganesh and Bright, 2020) <sup>[5, 18, 25, 26]</sup>.

As a nation, Ghana has accorded its people some space that enables them to effectively express themselves. Radio media outlets, in particular, form the major platform where individuals may speak their minds without restrictions. Lately, the use of social media platforms has taken over, consequently expanding the path for freedom of expression (Nyarko *et al.*, 2018) <sup>[18]</sup>. On the other hand, there are various restrictions to this particular freedom, with most of them arising from cultural practices and the politics of a nation. With regards to the latter family and social pressures may occasionally act as major obstacles to free expression or speech. In particular, women are discouraged from speaking out, with a great number of them, especially those residing in the rural and sub-urban areas receding from speaking out. Of great interest as well is the exceeding respect for the traditional authority, with many individuals afraid of criticizing their traditional leaders. Blackwood (2020) <sup>[27]</sup> notes that within the political arena, the reluctance to speak out due to fear is also becoming more common among the citizens.

An increasing number of journalists are facing intimidation, especially from politicians and the police, simply because they have expressed themselves (Barberá, 2020) <sup>[28]</sup>. Bureaucrats, government workers, and business people are also finding it difficult to speak out as they are afraid of losing their jobs or contracts (Rochefort, 2020) <sup>[14]</sup>. The right of expression or speech guaranteed within the constitution as well as the relative freedom to address citizens are being challenged due to lack of easy access to legislation information. Indeed, even though the constitution contends that every person has a right to obtain information, the lack of policy as well as legislation has made it difficult for both ordinary citizens and journalists to easily access it (Rochefort, 2020) <sup>[14]</sup>. This challenge is further complicated by poor record-keeping as well as poor knowledge management. Nyarko and Akpojivi (2017) <sup>[29]</sup> noted that efforts by various lobby groups in recent years have managed to advocate for the establishment of a law that guarantees everyone a right to information.

## 2.3 Social media undermines democracy and Freedom of Expression

Democracies across the globe have for a long time argued to experience numerous advantages over authoritarian governments, including sound governance and freedom of speech or expression (Kapoor *et al.*, 2018; Dzisah, 2018; Mahmoud, 2017) <sup>[2, 14, 30]</sup>.

A study conducted by Blackwood (2020) <sup>[27]</sup> confirmed that increasing the use of social media platforms is not only challenging democratic regimes but also providing authoritarian regimes or governments with a significant advantage. When individuals within a democratic environment are exposed to an environment full of information, they tend to increasingly encounter misinformation. This tactic is often strategically used by foreign actors who seek to exploit social media as a means of not only polarizing the political landscape but also undermining trust within the domestic institutions (Kahne, & Bowyer, 2018; Sanja *et al.*, 2017) <sup>[3, 10]</sup>. Indeed, as the US went into the 2020 U.S elections, the alleged interference by Russia in the 2016 US elections is still fresh in the minds of

many Americans.

Bradshaw and Howard (2019) [31] noted that nations such as Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, India, Pakistan, and Iran, have allegedly engaged in significant disinformation campaigns outside their countries. Bradshaw and Howard (2019) [31] also disclosed the total number of nations engaging in disinformation campaigns, most of them doing it locally, has risen to 70, a figure that has doubled over the past two years.

Social media being an important factor in terms of international relations has a significant global influence (Dzisah, 2018) [14]. Cross-border sabotage of the media, for instance, is not a new phenomenon, however, several characteristics of social media technology make it easier to be manipulated as compared to the traditional forms of media. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook as well as fact-checking sites, for instance, Snopes, have been able to develop various ways of counteracting propaganda, especially on a human scale. The social media platforms, however, still face a challenge dealing with machine-generated propaganda (Guess and Lyons, 2020) [15]. Wittenberg and Berinsky (2020) [32]; Leber and Abrahams (2019) [33] contend that conducting an overseas misinformation campaign is not only easy but also cheaper. Instead of opening up borders, the internet enhances the power of a state. Countries such as Russia and Iran, for instance, all have laws that are constituted specifically to guarantee state sovereignty over the use of the internet (Joyce, 2015) [34]. Furthermore, social media platforms may be weaponized across various borders. Virtual interference, for instance, may capture physical systems, affecting infrastructure and military intelligence. More common, however, is the misuse of social media technology as an important form of information operations (Morgan, 2018; Bradshaw and Howard, 2019) [19, 31].

**3. Methodology**

This study employed the use of qualitative research design, with the Participatory Action Research (PAR) as the theoretical guide. According to Aspers and Corte (2019) [35], the qualitative method of research is usually concerned with not just the experiences and feelings, but also the attitudes of individuals who enable the person carrying out the study to understand better the issue being researched. As highlighted by Canlas & Karpudewan (2020) [36], Participatory Action Research (PAR) is simply a blending of two different approaches that include participatory and action researches. The PAR design was selected as the most appropriate for this particular study since the respondents, who are media experts, are considered as specialists owing to their longtime experiences regarding the issue under consideration. Besides, Keahey (2020) [37]; Bergold and Thomas (2012) [38] notes that they will enable the study of significant issues more effectively as they will be able to highlight issues that seem to challenge their respective professional practice. The respondents consisted of senior journalists, news editors, news presenters, social media content producers, key media personnel from private media organizations, as well as political science experts (scholars) whose take on how social media technology has influenced democracy, as well as the freedom or right of expression, was deemed to be important, especially as 2020 elections was due to come off on December 7<sup>th</sup>. Purposive sampling techniques were employed in choosing the respondents.

Having had all the respondents as well as the media firms that they represent consent to take part in this particular study. In all, there were (N=30) respondents for this study. Out of the N=30 participants, n=25 were from the broadcast media and (n=5) democracy and governance experts from two major universities in Ghana. The questions below were considered to seek their opinions:

**3.1 Research Questions**

**RQ 1:** To what extent has social media enhanced democracy and freedom of expression in Ghana?

**RQ 2:** To what extent has social media undermined democracy and freedom of expression in Ghana?

The research questions were designed as “semi-structured”, these particular questions offered the researchers ample flexibility to explore further responses, especially those that seemed to be inconclusive, a factor that is aimed at ensuring that the fundamentals of the issue under investigation were completely unearthed. Raw data that were gathered were well organized to ensure readability and electronic coding. To ensure data validity as well as readability, the services of an experienced transcriptionist were employed, with the transcriptionist playing the audiotaped responses together with the transcribed texts to verify the exactness. To authenticate the contributions of the respondents who were accessible, the “member-checking” technique was employed, with the discrepancies that were discovered sorted out (Aspers and Corte, 2019) [35]. The data was thereafter put through a process of identifying patterns, with the identified themes becoming important categories for the analysis through the act of coding (Baker *et al.*, 2020; Aspers and Corte, 2019) [35, 39]. Table 1 illustrates the Demographic characteristics of respondents.

**Table 1:** Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic characteristics	Frequency
<b>Sex</b>	
Male	17
Female	13
Total	30
<b>Educational Level</b>	
Ph.D.	5
Master’s Degree	19
Bachelors	11
Total	30

**4. Analysis and findings**

After analyzing the data obtained from the study on social media for enhancing democracy and the freedom of expression, the researchers obtained divergent responses from the media personnel and scholars in Ghana. The first conclusion found is that a great number of media experts and scholars within Ghana believe that social media platforms have positively contributed in terms of improving democratic credentials within Ghana. Also, from the two main research questions, the study found seven (7) major condensed themes. According to Nowell, *et al.* (2017) [40]; Saldaña (2009) [41] a researcher(s) after coding and analyzing data can summarize or condense the findings for reporting.

Four (4) condensed themes were found addressing the positive side of social media in enhancing democracy and freedom of expression within Ghana, while the remaining three (3) condensed themes addressed how social media is

destabilizing democracy and freedom of speech. Table 2 is the qualitative Condensed themes of the responses derived from the interviews conducted.

**Table 2:** Condensed themes, and sub-themes

Response category	Condensed themes
Positives of social media for democracy and freedom of expression	Democratic Debate
	Political participation
	Protection of muted groups
	Developed citizens' information literacy skills
Negatives of social media for democracy and freedom of expression	Political harassment
	Hate speech
	Misinformation

**4.1 Contribution of social media to democracy and freedom of expression**

Four major condensed themes were found under the important role played by social media in enhancing democracy as well as the freedom or right of expression. The identified themes include Positive for democratic debate, Political participation, Protection of muted groups, and developed citizens' information literacy skills.

**Theme 1: social media for positive for democratic debate**

Concerning the extent to which social media has contributed to the democracy and freedom of expression in Ghana, these were the responses and views from the participants:

"...To a large extent, social media platforms are the custodians of freedom of expression in modern societies including Ghana[...] those of us in Ghana over the past few years have benefited from social media, as it offered all parties in a political discussion on a level playing field..."

".... Citizens in Ghana have touted that since the introduction of social media into the country, we can freely express ourselves on very important national issues without fear [...] social media platforms have broken the psychological barrier of fear by helping many (Ghanaians) to connect and share information..."

"...It has given most citizens and journalists in Ghana the knowledge to understand their civic responsibilities as citizens in safeguarding their fundamental human rights [...] Social networks for the first time provided Ghanaians with an opportunity to quickly disseminate information without any governmental restrictions if any...."

**Theme 2: Political participation**

One of the many characteristics of a democratic system of governance is the right to political inclusion and participation. Hence to find answers to the role of social media in democracy and freedom of speech, the following condensed comments were made by the participants:

".... Social media is making it easier for people to have a voice in government to discuss issues, organize around causes, and hold leaders accountable [...] these days' social media has enhanced political participation and participatory politics in Ghana. Due to its two-way dialogue, social media has offered citizens the freedom to express their opinions in support of a political candidate or against a candidate..."

"...Ghanaians trust social media platforms as the best and

reliable way of sharing their stories, links, pictures, and videos, on issues of national concern [...] In sum, political participation in the social media era is more interactive because it has enabled the Ghanaian youth to form new political party groups online, deliver opinions and thoughts on politics through blogs, share political videos via their social networks, or provide commentary on the messages [...] I have observed that the youth participatory character in national affairs has changed drastically in Ghana since the introduction of social media[...] This is a clear index that social media is promoting democracy and freedom of speech in Ghana..."

**Theme 3: Protection of muted groups**

Respondents also concerted to the fact social media have helped protect minority groups. The following are some comments:

"...Social media have helped to protect vulnerable groups in society; children, women, minority tribes, young people, and individuals who are the targets of violations (hate speech and harassment). Social media has provided the platform for those muted groups to express and enjoy their fundamental human rights [...] Social media has encouraged social representation and those in non-dominant groups such as women and other minorities to express their voices of national concerns..."

**Theme 4: Developed citizens' information literacy skills**

According to the respondent's social media has positively influenced democracy and freedom of speech. See comments:

"...Social media has developed Ghanaian citizens' media and information literacy skills. This positive role of social media has served as a vital tool for protecting and promoting freedom of expression in extension, our democracy..."

"...Through social media, most Ghanaian citizens have developed the ability to find, evaluate, organize, use, and communicate information in all its various formats, most notably in situations requiring decision making, problem-solving, or the acquisition of knowledge[...] Social media has enhanced our research skills, critical thinking skills, computer technology skills, and communication skills, which have assisted us to effectively function in our workplace, and participate in society as knowledgeable citizens..."

**4.2 Social media undermines democracy and the freedom of expression**

The study further wanted to solicit the views of participants if social media has undermined democracy and the freedom of expression in Ghana. All the participants indicated that social media to a greater extent have undermined democracy and freedom of expression. The following themes were identified: political fragmentation, hate speech, and misinformation.

**Theme 1: Political harassment**

"...While we want Facebook to be a safe place for people to express themselves politically, we need to make sure no one is bullied or threatened for their views[...] To make matters more complex, political parties and sometimes governments in power themselves sometimes engage in such harassment[...] In Ghana recently citizens reported that after

they had posted a video critical of the authorities, they received threats from some members of political parties to be careful what they post about[...] These kinds of posture could have a chilling effect on freedom of speech..."

"...Some government officials also sometimes openly write very harmful content and post them on social media to politically intimidate citizens [...] Such political hate speeches and content posted on social media do have consequences on the practice of democracy and free speech..."

### **Theme 2: Hate speech**

Some respondents believe that social media is to be blamed for the rise in hate speech in Ghana: see comments:

"...Social media is used as an avenue by individuals and interest groups (on religious and tribal movements) as a way of violating the human rights of others[...] They always used social media to spread their hate message [...] Social media has enabled interest and powerful groups to make utterances that inflict injury on individuals, groups, or society at large..."

### **Theme 3: Misinformation**

The following were the responses of respondents on the theme of how social media has promoted misinformation in Ghana. See comment:

"...Since social media in Ghana is open access, anyone can post," this results in a lot of misinformation which seriously undermines the security of the nation (Ghana) [...] Misinformation in Ghana spreads faster and further than accurate information because it is often more clever, counterintuitive, or provocative..."

"... In the absence of a comprehensive campaign to deal with this threat, manipulation and disinformation techniques could have a negative influence on the freedom of expression we in Ghana are currently enjoying [...] In my mind, I think if misinformation on social media is not regulated, it may permanently erode user confidence in online media and the internet as a whole..."

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

The emerging new media, especially social media has greatly transformed and diversified the democratic practices within many nations worldwide including Ghana. From this particular study's finding it is clear that despite some challenges reported by respondents, social media platforms continue to play a significant role in advancing the democracy of Ghana. Democracy currently demands that people collectively engage in a learning process through social media content that is effectively moderated in a way that is in line with national and global standards relating to the freedom of expression (McSherry, 2019) <sup>[42]</sup>. In this regard, the requirement of a mechanism that will ensure effective supervision of the social media content on the various social media platforms is acknowledged by all sides (Al-Hussein, 2020) <sup>[43]</sup>. This study also found out that there were various key issues regarding how social media has been employed to destabilize the freedom of speech as well as expression. These issues mainly relate to the fact that social media does not respect users' privacy. Approximately 45% of the participants of this particular study consider that social media consumers within Ghana have failed to acknowledge peoples' privacy, with some of them expressing doubts regarding impartiality or bias relating to

news reporting within the social media.

To guarantee that the emerging social media technology use will continue to respect democracy as well as the freedom of expression, governments, social media firms, and civil bodies ought to work together to ensure that organizations are not only responsible for the cleaning up of their sites, but also the expressive rights of users remain intact.

The findings recommend that a multi-stakeholder, transparent, as well as accountable fora, may weave the freedom or right of expression, from integrating global standards on decisions to either demote or even delete social media content, to enabling exposure to a diversity of ideas or information, a finding that is also in agreement with earlier research by (McSherry, 2019; Al-Hussein, 2020; Bail, 2018; Rodríguez, & Argüello Lemus, 2019) <sup>[42-45]</sup>.

In attaining an effective democratic as well as free speech within the global environment, a great number of organizations, as well as intellectuals, have recommended the establishment of the "Social Media Council (SMC)", which is an important multi-stakeholder accountability model that provides not just an open and transparent forum for addressing content moderation challenges but also provides an independent and accountable forum to deal with moderation challenges within the social media platforms based on global standards (McSherry 2019) <sup>[42]</sup>. The Social Media Council proposes a more voluntary approach to the idea of controlling content moderation.

The opinions expressed by the participants in this particular study undoubtedly reflect their perception of the important role played by social media platforms in promoting democratic governance. However, the issue of democracy is bigger, involving diverse actors. From the study, it is also clear that there is a need for a public consensus regarding the role of social media in enhancing democracy, and freedom of expression. Indeed, the goal should aim at ensuring that every voice is heard within public discourse, using whatever platform or media.

National policies, as well as legal frameworks, should be examined and amended to take care of digital realities without contravening the basic freedom or rights of expression. Furthermore, the study also highlighted the need for media firms to improve their systems to ensure self-regulation as well as safeguard journalism, which is undoubtedly an essential profession within society. Of great importance is also the need for civil society organizations to improve in terms of the important role of protecting human rights as well as the integrity of not just individuals, but also groups. There is also the need for citizens to clearly understand what freedom or right of expression exactly means. This lack of understanding has undoubtedly come out the major educational problem that should not be ignored. Certainly, the complexities of contemporary Ghanaian society imply that knowledgeable people who possess critical faculties play a vital role in not just safeguarding democracy, but also free speech. This notion is especially correct in a progressively digitized world where new perceptions of freedom or right of expression develop as well as new motives to constrain it. Indeed, managing the challenges brought about by the transformation of communication within the society will demand improved knowledge, especially in disciplines about not only how the society functions, history, languages, and natural sciences, as well as knowledge in social media platforms and digital literacy.

**6. Conflict of interest statement:** The authors has no conflict of interest to disclose.

**7. Funding:** This article received no funding from any individual(s) or institution(s).

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