



REPUBLIC OF TURKEY

ANKARA UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS STUDIES

**RAMIFICATIONS OF THE ONLINE MEDIA INDUSTRY ON GAMBIA'S
RURAL AUDIENCE: DIGITAL DIVIDE IN CONTEXT**

Master's Thesis

Famara Fofana

Ankara, 2022

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Thesis Acceptance Page

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Date of Thesis Defense

16-06-2022

Ethics Statement

I hereby declare that; all the information in the master's thesis I prepared under the advisory of Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Ergin Şafak Dikmen with the title “Ramifications of the Online Media Industry on the Gambia's Rural Audience: Digital divide in context (Ankara. 2022)” was collected and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct; that all materials in this thesis which I obtained from other sources have been fully cited and referenced; that I acted in accordance with the rules of scientific research and ethical conduct during the course of the study; and in any contrary case of above statements, I will accept any form of legal consequences.

Date: 01-07-2022

Famara Fofana

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Abstract

This study examines the ramifications of the significant growth of online news media in the Gambia on access to news and other information for persons living in rural areas of the Gambia within the context of digital divide. The research employs a qualitative approach using a questionnaire as an instrument to collect data from rural respondents in the Gambia's four provincial regions. In-depth interviews were also held with certain online media executives as a way of gaining insight into the relevance of their news and other programming content for rural residents. The research, premised on the agenda setting theory of mass communication, identified poor internet services and unaffordable cost of internet as the major factors hindering rural people's access to online media platforms. Absence in the digital ecosystem, coupled with a feeling that their voices aren't adequately captured, digital illiteracy as well as concerns over the publication/broadcasting of fake news came out strongly as issues confronting rural audiences in regards to Gambia's online media industry. The lack of a recent study on the state of digital divide and in particular a report on internet coverage/penetration in the Gambia which could have further enriched this thesis comes as a huge limitation.

Keywords: Internet access, Online media, Digital divide, Digital revolution, New media ecosystem, Rural audiences, Ramifications, Web 2.0

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACE	Africa Coast to Europe
AFPRC	Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council
CRR	Central River Region
GAMTEL	Gambia Telecommunications Company
GBOs	Gambia Bureau of Statistics
GPU	Gambia Press Union
GRTS	Gambia Radio and Television Services
GSM	Global System for Mobile Communications
ICTs	Information Communication Technologies
LRR	Lower River Region
NBR	North Bank Region
PDOIS	People's Organization for Independence and Socialism
PPP	People's Progressive Party
PURA	Public Utilities Regulatory Authority
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
URR	Upper River Region

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Introduction

The advent of web 2.0 has brought with it an unprecedented change in the communicative process. Today, the use of the internet and wireless platforms of digital communication does not only trigger an ongoing conversation as to who in fact is a journalist, but has more crucially changed the way journalism is even practiced as well as the manner in which the news media itself operates.

Whereas the news media and the communicative process in general used to function in a unidirectional way decades ago, the digital era has revolutionized the industry with life-changing transformative effects. Across the world, media content production, distribution, and consumption are constantly taking a different dimension with audiences no longer as passive as they once were. Audiences have become an indispensable cog in the online news business not by way of user generated contents but the horizontal nature of networks of interactive communication have placed the news consumer at the very epicenter of online media platforms as ‘pro-users’ (producers and users of news and other content in addition to their traditional status as merely recipients of journalistic or media messages).

Like other parts of the world, Gambian media is now very much dominated by digital or online news outlets whose proliferation tended to coincide with the advent of a new democratic dispensation in 2017. The heavy reliance on this online media outlet seems to have left the country’s mainstream media trailing behind when it comes to the broadcasting or publication of stories, especially breaking news at a time when Gambians and the Gambian polity began to enjoy democratic pluralism, civic engagement and freedom of expression never before experienced in the country’s second republic (1996 -2016). It is imperative to note that the bulk if not all of these

online media as well as internet service providers are stationed in the urban areas, a reality which underlines the contrasting fortunes in terms of the Gambia's ICTs infrastructure.

This study explores how the people in rural Gambia access, receive and consume news and other information from online/digital news platforms in the face of an increased emergence of a plethora of online news media outlets in the West African country in the context of the digital divide between the provincial regions and the urban settings (Banjul, Kanifing Municipality and West Coast Region). It is also important to highlight that in the Gambia, all the existing online media use social media platforms mainly Facebook and YouTube to relay/broadcast news and other contents either live or by way of recorded content.

The study's significance lies in its power to trigger further academic discourse and investigations amongst scholars with interest in digital divide and the implications of the online media landscape in the Gambia by both Gambians and non-Gambians. In the end too, this study might contribute to efforts towards rural people's access to new media forms by bringing out the challenges militating against them as well as proffer recommendations for the attention of actors within the sector. It takes cognizance of the inequalities presented by the digital divide between people in urban and rural settings of the Gambia. It could spur government, internet service providers and the local media to consider widening their interventions to less privileged rural communities for them to be well-informed citizens who would not only access news on real-time basis but equally make their voices heard and informed decisions on issues affecting them. By making their voices heard, they can take their leaders to task as well as communicate to and from them the myriad of developmental issues confronting them.

In all, this thesis is made up of five parts. Chapter one deals with the definition of online media and digital divide as well as the relationship between digital revolution and the rise of the online

media industry. The second chapter provides an overview of the Gambian media taking into account the historical background and evolutions of the industry, media ownership and regulation and media consumption as well as access to Information Communication Technologies in the country. The third chapter presents the theoretical framework and review of relevant literature in respect of the research topic. Chapter four talks about the methodology employed to carry out the study. Finally, chapter five of the thesis highlights the central part of the study which scrutinizes and discusses the findings of the study based on an empirical approach.

The fundamental research question that is of interest to this study is: what are the implications of the emergence of several online news media outlets in terms of access to news and other information for people in areas of the Gambia? Additionally, the following sub-questions will help address bring out the problems being investigated by this study.

- How is the dominance of these new media platforms impacting on rural people in terms of the way they access, receive, process and consume news and information in the public domain?
- In the face of digital divide (chasm in internet penetration/coverage) between rural and urban settlements in Gambia, how do people in the country's rural areas access digital media platforms for news, current affairs and other information?
- What sort of challenges do people in Gambia's rural communities face in accessing digital media platforms for news and their other information?

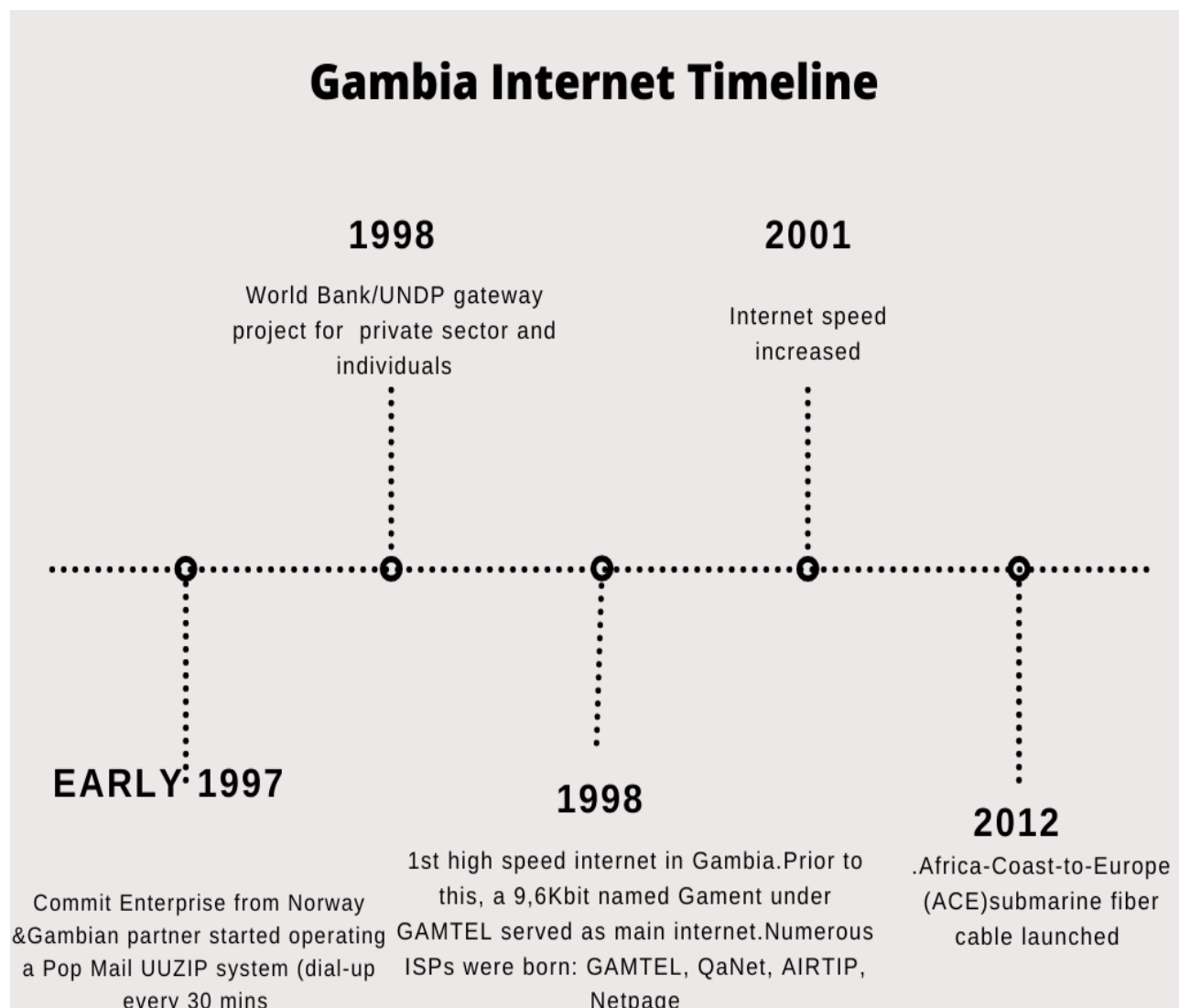


Figure 1. Timeline of Internet connectivity in Gambia. Adapted from the presentation on internet history by to the International Telecoms Union by Abraham, S.P(2003) and recent developments in Gambia's ICT industry

Chapter One: Online Media and Digital Divide

This section provides a panoramic understanding of the three main facets of the study by first defining what constitutes online media being the main focus of this study, the conceptual definition of digital divide and the key ingredients underpinning the phenomenon, as well as the relations between digital revolution and the proliferation of online media, especially as it pertains to online journalism.

1.1 Definition of Online Media

As far as online media is concerned, there appears to be no consensus or definitive definition of the term. In the simplest of ways, online media has been defined in some quarters as online communication that uses internet technologies for information exchange. However, for the purpose of this study, the one contained in the government of Nepal's Online Media Operation Directives, 2073 would be apt.

Online media means the method, process or medium that produces, publishes, transmits or disseminates message-oriented or thematic opinion, photo, audio visual by using sign, symbol, text, voice, graphics, song, music, video, animation and various multi-media through the internet, after having been established or registered pursuant to the prevalent law and adopting the journalism and editorial principles (Government of Nepal, 2017, p. 1).

From a generic perspective, Lewis (2004) says that the word ‘media’ itself has come to signify both the machinery of communication and the public and private establishments that utilize them. He indicates that these two points of view the media definition given Leitner communication domains with specific communicative constructions that justify content to be public.

In these contemporary times, the way in which content goes public is also taking a different dimension, giving the direct format it now takes. The linear model delivery of news from source to recipient is in sharp contrast to the days gone by when it was dependent on corporations that publish or broadcast (Lewis, 2004).

With sources of news going through change, so are audiences also and what even is deemed as news itself is seen in a different light (Lewis, 2004). His assertion underlines the existence of a one-stop shop version in the information and communication sector where a range of content, news, services, etc. are all obtainable at a go.

Online media practice and online journalistic practice are often used interchangeably. However, the latter could be seen as a subset of online media as the latter in media transcends the news business. This following definition while almost the same as that of online media is distinguished by two words: ‘technical work’.

Online journalism means the technical work of news writing, information and visual collection, and editing for the purpose of production, publishing, transmission and distribution of news-oriented or informative materials including news, information, opinion, photo or audio visual by using the technology based on the internet (Government of Nepal, 2017, p. 1).

In the face the burgeoning online and digital media landscape, it is interesting to note that most of the world's renowned news media have since been taking advantage of the situation. Herbert (2000) recalls that the broadsheet newspapers have been on-line for several years. He mentions Britain's Sun and Mirror as two the two largest selling newspapers in the world that morphed online in 1999.

Herbert (2000) attributes the decision by The Sun Newspaper to go online was anchored on the realization that the internet was no longer the preserve of experts and enthusiasts, but rather ordinary people who have a point to prove that the information superhighway is fun, mischievous and user-friendly. He reveals that the Mirror has a site called ic24.co.uk, which stands for I see 24 hours daily.

Thanks to the tidal wave of online media that have been blowing across the world these days, several news organizations- be they print or broadcast- are now capable of working in sync where their journalist from both the traditional medium and the new media division to ensure that their mainstream content accessible to their online consumers. Kawamoto (2003) reveals that CNN interactive has a web page that enlightens its audience as to how stories end up on the Website, a process that requires the collaboration between news people from the cable television side of the operation and their contemporaries from the online.

At a time when some people are losing faith in the mainstream media, the new media is proving to be source of news diet for many. Fletcher and Sora (2017) say persons harboring misgivings about traditional or conventional media are likely to opt for non-mainstream avenues such as social media, individual blogs, whilst the so-called digital natives tended to indulge in different types of digital news participation. Their conclusion was informed by a study which examines the effects

of personal trust in the news media regarding source likings and behavior towards online content, especially sharing and commenting across close to a dozen countries.

1.2 Definition of Digital Divide

According to Furuholt and Kristiansen (2007), digital divide is the gap that exists between people with steady and strong access to digital technologies, notably internet and persons lacking them.

On the global scale however, the duo explain that the term is widely used to refer to countries that are economically advanced and those that are less advanced economically while at the national level, it often boils down to the differences people in the countryside and those in the metropolis experience in the sphere of digital technologies of information communication services.

Of all the definitions of the term, the joint declaration on freedom of expression on the internet submitted to the United Nations in 2011 seems to have offered a broader understanding of the term with this definition:

Digital divide is a term that refers to the gap between people with effective access to digital and information technology, in particular the Internet, and those with very limited or no access at all...without Internet access, which facilitates economic development and the enjoyment of a range of human rights, marginalized groups and developing States remain trapped in a disadvantaged situation, thereby perpetrating the existing socio-economic disparities both within and between States (Freedom Forum, 2016, pp39-40).

As recognized by the United Nations in 2006, the worldwide gaps in access to the internet and other communication technologies have created a chasm between the rich and the poor in the realm of technology (Furuholt and Kristiansen 2007). Further, in dealing with digital divide, the researchers factored three categories into the equation. These are global, regional and national. At

the national level, there prevails and urban-rural divide (Rao, 2005, as cited in Furuholt and Kristiansen ,2007).

1.3 Background of digital divide research

According to Van Dijk (2006), the subject regarding the inequalities in terms of access to and the usage of new media attracted international attention in the second part of the 1990s at a time when new media use began to shift on to the concept of what is otherwise called digital divide. Until that period, he contends that more basic terms such as information disparity, information breach or knowledge gap and computer or media literacy were the ones in existence.

In most cases, digital divide as a concept is often used to qualify the disproportion that separates persons that have access to information communication systems, tools and knowledge and those that are without access to them. The term is incapable of being comprehended if issues such as digital skills and social factors, people's ways of life and daily usage behavior fail to be tackled (Van Dijk, 2006, 2017).

The internet and computers stand out prominently in the explanation he offered regarding these systems of information. Alternatively, portable phones, especially those with internet capabilities and other digital gadgets and tools are also catered for when dealing with the definition of digital divide. Both the discourses and concept of digital divide itself recognize inequalities in not just the aspect of information but the social strata too. He underscores that inclusion and the lack of it in certain social settings are familiar phenomena in this context.

Van Dijk (2017) traces the origin of the term digital divide to the mid-1990s in the United States of America where for the first time the term surfaced in an official publication by the US

Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (1999).

Regrettably though, the phrase digital divide, as noted by the communications scientist, has triggered much misinterpretation given that it is an allegory that has given rise to nothing less than four interpretations. To begin with, it points to a simple difference between two separated groups with a harrowing disparity between them. Also, it is indicative of the huge challenge in bridging the gap. Thirdly, it can mean widespread gaps between those who are catered for and those who are neglected, even if inequalities are subject to different translations. Lastly, the other characteristic of digital divide is that it is not fixed, meaning it is a temporary.

In their quest to expand internet connectivity, public and private policies have consequently intensified the availability of internet services in developing countries (Freedom Forum, 2016). Regardless of these gains, there was a recognition that gaps still exist in internet use, thereby exacerbating the digital divide.

The need to close the digital divide as per the position of the United Nations was not only limited to freedom of expression, but more importantly as a means of empowerment and also matter of equal social and economic rights. For those communities that are stuck in disadvantaged position, access to internet is considered an indispensable means of alleviating their economic and social gaps.

Digital divide also has serious ramifications for online journalism. Despite the abundance of new innovations associated with internet-based journalism activities ranging from crowdsourcing, alternative media sites run by citizens, personal blogs, among others, and their many benefits to

participatory democratic processes, Jones and Salter (2012) concede that there still are fundamental flaws.

On a rather positive note, the communication scholars view the open and unrestricted nature of digital media space owes credit to a sharp rise in social media usage which has culminated in a widespread access to online communications platforms such as Facebook, Skype, Twitter, among others. These tools have come handy for citizens to be part and parcel of the way their countries are being run irrespective of where on earth they may be.

Journell (2007) singles out access as the one major thing that many view as constituting digital divide when the subject is being looked at by people in charge of policy. According to his assertion, such an understanding of the concept paints a crooked portrayal of the reality of the phenomenon. Whilst the mentioning of policy people's consideration of access in the spectrum of digital divide offers an extra perspective on the position of Van Dijk, who placed a huge emphasis on the modes of access and how they facilitate participation in society. In agreement with Journell (2007), Van Dijk (2017) also underscores the multidisciplinary approach to digital divide study that commenced around the new millennium, primarily featuring communication science, sociology, psychology, economics, and education science. The above positions imply that digital divide has more to it than a superficial confinement to merely enjoying access.

Between 1999 and 2002 when digital divide research was in its infant stage, Van Dijk (2017) recalls that enquiry into the concept was premised on a small question of access. This form of access was in fact the physical aspect which translates into the acquisition of a computer and internet connection. And as a matter of fact, access through physical means was linked with categorizations bordering on one's earning, status of education, age, sex, and color. By and large, the yardsticks for this hinge on a person's resources, market penetration of the technology and how consumers adjust to the choices.

Based on the rationalization offered by Van Dijk (2017), digital divide classification is rooted on several fields. The communication science aspect of digital divide touches on digital media access and usage while on the other hand, the sociological perspective pertains to the social differences when it comes to resources, wealth in all its shapes and involvement in societal matters. Meanwhile, the psychology part borders on the behaviors and incentives to use digital media. He cross examines factors such as apprehension over computers and fears over technology. From an economic vantage point, he points out that the distribution of the inventions concerned with digital literacy and information are situated within his views on the education science he proffers.

Van Dijk (2005) later came up with the term 'deepening divide' to underscore that the problem of digital inequality does not cease after physical access has been realized but in fact starts when the use of digital media is integrated into daily life. As such, in the ten years between 2005 and 2015, what is seen as the second-level divide attracted the attention of most scholarly work dealing with digital divide. However, until about 2005, the nature of digital divide research was profoundly a question of description. Until then, it had lacked theory (Van Dijk, 2006, 2017).

The categorizations dealing with earning, schooling, oldness, sex, and ethnic background were reinforced and linked to access by physical means. Relationships with access, says Van Dijk, were not in fact adequate to identify the factors responsible of it, talk less of impacts, which were overlooked. By equal measure, it was simply presumed that lacking access would lead to social hinderances or segregation, hence the absence of a culture of communication effects in studies dealing with digital divide. He reveals that it was in the aftermath of 2005 when the linkages between the results of access, usage on behavioral patterns and impacts on society were examined by academicians.

Van Dijk has formulated an agenda for studying access that is supported by a particular theory, but one that is also ideal to serve as a launching pad for an unbiased explanation of highpoints of studying digital divide in its entirety because of its wide nature. He describes this as resources and appropriation theory wherein the structuration theory implies the resources whilst appropriation denotes technology acceptance or adoption. The premise of the appropriation theory is that individuals are not likely not going to use the technology when they do not embrace it in the first place.

The core argument in this theory as encapsulated in his work Digital Divide: Impact of Access can be summed up in the conclusions below:

1. Uneven allocation of resources are caused by disparities in social categories.
2. The imbalance in the allocation of resources makes access to digital technologies uneven.
3. Lack of access to digital technologies is also determined by the features of technologies.
4. Lack of access to digital technologies leads to uneven societal participation.

5. Unequal social participation reinforces categorical differences and unfair distribution of resources.

1.4 Forms of access in digital divide

More importantly, when it comes to digital divide, Van Dijk has come up three issues that he believes lie at the heart of the access question itself: These forms of access are divided between access by physical means, access in terms of skill, and access by usage:

Physical access

According to Van Dijk (2017), the bulk of surveys on digital inequalities place emphasis on the examination of disparities relating to in-person access to individual computers, the cyber-space amongst other classifications by demography. The obvious variables mentioned in this respect are: income, education, age, gender, and ethnicity.

He reveals that the early countrywide studies in the advanced world at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the millennium all revealed increasing access gaps between the rich and poor, people of different education levels and between ethnic majorities and ethnic minorities. However, by that period, physical access divide based on sex is said to have by and large grown less wide. It is in North Africa and northwestern European countries where a total bridging of these disparities only took place. Meanwhile, physical access by age-based relationship curved for persons between the ages of 25 and 40 before it eventually dropped.

Skills access

Having acquired in-person access, Van Dijk states that individuals require skills to grasp and utilize digital media. These capabilities are known to some as digital or media literacy while others refer to them digital skills.

He has differentiated between functional or helpful skills needed to grasp digital media (medium-related skills) and significant skills geared toward getting information, communicating, acting, and creating (content-related skills). Based on popular belief and in many academic notions, medium-related skills are more overriding.

The theory, according to Van Dijk, is that being able to operate the medium and surf the internet means access has been achieved. However, he equally notes that all modern-day scholars of media literacy skills have established that competencies such as information recovery, communication and creating content are in fact more imperative in using electronic media. For him, having medium-related skills is only the requisite condition to put this content related skills into practice.

Usage access

Of the three phases of access, Van Dijk (2005) pinpoints usage as the last step but one that serves as the fundamental intent of access itself. He notes that usage can be measured as utilization, time and frequency, number and multiplicity of the applications being used as in broadband or narrowband and to some extent how heavily or creatively or creative use. Accordingly, it is his postulation that utilization time and number of applications grow with societal status and digital media incorporation into everyday routine. He suggests that highly educated people were much more likely to apply these between the 80s and 90s.

In 2006, another form of access called motivational access coined by Van Dijk through his work *Digital divide research, achievements and shortcomings*. This is informed by his argument fact for someone to the physical version of access physically, they must first and foremost have that want or urge in them to possess a computer and gain connectivity to the internet. Cognizant of

that viewpoint, the paper argues that most people of those who are digitally disadvantaged experience motivational complications which is linked to their socio-economic background.

With regard to digital technology, it appears that aside from those who are without access, there also exists persons who are not keen to embrace it. And in amidst the hype surrounding the internet era, that aspect was considered a highly overlooked consideration, according to Van Dijk. At the dawn of the century, he contends that studies looking at those that were not enjoying usage and those that were off the grid were few and far between. Studies in Germany and the United States (ARD-ZDF, 1999a and NTIA, 2000) showed that the main reasons for the refusal to use computers and get connected to the Internet were due to the lack of a need or substantial opportunities in usage, lack of time or preference, refusal of the medium as some consider the internet and computer games as dangerous communications devices, in addition to unavailability of funds and skills (Van Dijk, 2006).

Despite the shortcomings in digital divide research, Van Dijk (2006) recognizes that the big plus of the unexpected rise of the term digital divide at the turn of the century is that it has brought to the fore the crucial issue of disparity in the information age to the attention of the academia and political actors. Policy and scientific seminars from 2000 and 2004 alone were counted in the hundreds in addition to the thousands of ordinary meetings that were convened to look into the digital divide subject. Contrastingly in 2004 and 2005, he notes that attention started to dwindle as many observers in the contours of policy and politics, particularly in the wealthy and advanced countries, arrived at the conclusion that the problem was almost solved as a fast-increasing majority of their people obtained access to computers the Internet and other digital technologies.

DIGITAL DIVIDE: IMPACT OF ACCESS

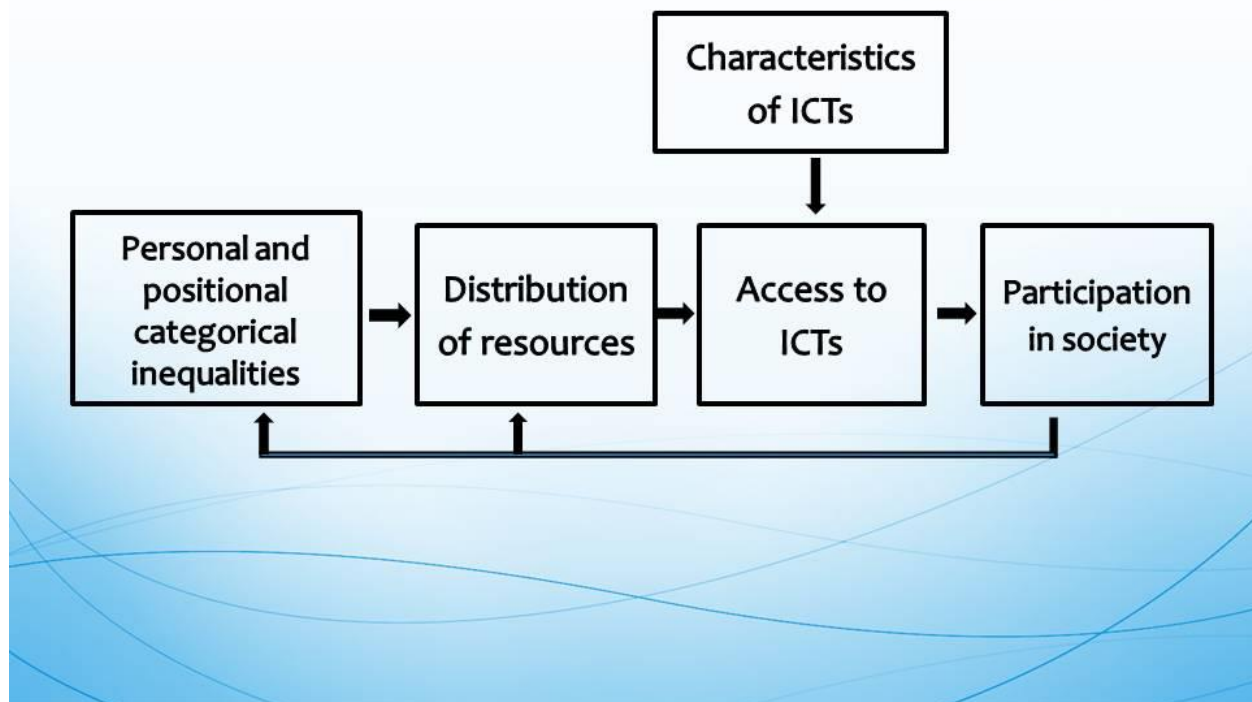


Figure (2) A casual model of the resources and appropriation theory

Adapted from “Digital divide: Impact of access.” In: *The international encyclopedia of media effects* (p4) by A.G.M Van Dijk, (2017)

1.5 The benefit of access: Participation in all societal domains

Digital divide research so far has wholly focused on the causes of the different types of access, mainly looking at the symbiosis between demographics. But the strongest thinkable media effect

would be looking for consequences of having more or less access. This would mean paying attention to the benefits of unequal access (Van Dijk, 2017).

One of the first moves in this direction was a study in Holland, where the scholars sought a huge number of polar questions surrounding the real gains of different sorts of participation in society. The end game was to test the underlying interdependence between access to information and communication technologies and participation (Van Deursen et al, 2014, as cited by Van Dijk, 2017).

With regards to economic participation, people enjoying access disclosed picking a work online as well as getting cheaper prices in purchasing and vending goods. Socially, they had come across one or more friends whom they only chanced in the flesh after, and some became members of a group. On the political front, they got a party to support and avenues for political views that were missing in conventional media. In the realm of cultural participation, they benefitted from more enlightening and fun ventures. They profited more from public amenities and even from essential health care such as figuring out their own illness and the finest medical facility when it came to participating through institutional means (Van Dijk, 2017).

When all these gains of participation are factored together, it became apparent that young and highly trained members of the populace gained more from the internet than their old and less enlightened compatriots. Benefits in terms of one's sex were found to be at par with the exception of political participation, where males were reported to have enjoyed more chances (VanDeursen, et al, 2014 as cited in Van Dijk, 2017).

When talking about the broader explanation of the digital divide, it is imperative to include the cultural aspect (Furuholt & Kristiansen, 2007). From a global perspective, they maintain that the

gap between rural and urban settlements is more pronounced in Sub-Saharan nations than elsewhere in the world as per the United Nations 2002 Task Team on Information and Communications Technologies. Just as in the case of other parts of Africa, it is observed that most of the services and consumers of ICTs are based in large settlements at the mercy of the majority of the people that are spread in small villages across huge rural settings.

In Mozambique for example, Furuholt and Kristiansen (2007) note that telecommunications infrastructure is largely based in the metropolis with the city boasting of close to 80 per cent of the nation's telephone lines. Meanwhile, the rural areas are characterized by unreliable and at times a total absence of electricity supply which in itself is a huge impediment to ICT usage.

The Mozambique situation may be the one studied by the researchers but in reality, the picture there represents the true reality of the entire African continent where harrowing gaps prevail between the major cities and the rural communities, some of whom still dream of a consistent electricity. Elsewhere in Uganda, another East African country, the state of the digital divide and its attendant challenge of access to the internet are no less different. Despite the decrease in communication problems, the well-to-do class of the capital Kampala are found to be affording the cost of internet whilst that is the opposite for the majority of Ugandans who are staying far away from the city (Kasusse, 2005, as cited in Furuholt and Kristiansen, 2007).

From the foregoing, Furuholt and Kristiansen (2007) admit that the term digital divide goes beyond the gap in hardware such as computers and telephone services, for they believe that there also is another side to the issue which has to do with English language comprehension, education level, comfort and understanding of these technologies. Mozambique as a country symbolizes this theory because efforts to install ICT instruments there were met with serious challenges amidst problems relating to insufficient infrastructure, to limited human resources as well as a lack of

cultural recognition of effective use of information (Mosse and Sahay, 2003, as cited in Furuholt and Kristiansen, 2007).

1.6 Understanding the relationship between digital revolution and online media proliferation

For an information and any revolution in mass media to become a reality, media historian and author Fang (1997) believes innovations in technology and content must allow for modern methods of communication with societies that are already ready to go through transformation. In hindsight for instance, the famed goldsmith and printer from Germany Johannes Gutenberg (1398-1468) is credited for unleashing the new media of his own generation through the invention of the wooden printing press, delivering the biblical scripture to a larger, more socially diverse background than ever before and contributing in the process to a revolution in the cultures, religions and social fabrics of fifteen century Europe (Sterin & Winston, 2017).

The impact of the internet and other new information and communication technologies on the journalism profession should not be discounted (Bardoel & Deuze, 2001). Convergence, interactivity, and hypertextuality are considered key traits of internet-based journalism - which coupled with the large-scale use and availability of new technological working devices - are putting all forms of journalism to a trial. The end result is what Bardoel, J., & Deuze, M (2001) refer to as call Network Journalism, a journalism rooted on a second or post-modernism redefinition of its norms and values, an independence from within specific media modalities, and on considerable re-evaluation of its relationships with publics.

Kröll et al., (1999) explain that the world's media, telecommunications and information technology industries are undergoing a period of unprecedented and profound change. In their

publication *Impact of the Digital Revolution on the Media and Communications Industries*, the authors underline that those sudden technological breakthroughs alongside market freedom and globalization have combinedly provoked the digital revolution. A transformative consequence of this is “convergence,” a pervasive but lightly defined word which generally explains the fusion of borders separating the media, telecommunications and the information technology sectors. The general agreement shared by both scholars and professionals is that these technological developments are creating a merger of these different fields and as such are capable transforming them altogether.

What is even more prominent and significant today is that the digital era, with its rapid amalgamation of media and content production avenues, offers the ordinary communications consumer more opportunities to become an active digital content contributor. Internet web pages, personal blogs, broadcast news and entertainment shows, electronic books, tunes, file sharing sites and several other platforms are increasingly according consumers varying options and opportunities to not just involve in choosing but even the production of their desirable media content (Sterin & Winston, 2017).

The digital revolution has also brought with it an unprecedented rise in both the forms and number of media tools. Bob Franklin (2014) cites that mobile gadgets are without a doubt having a revolutionary effect, allowing journalists the freedom to work from the office in a way that Pavlik (2001) envisioned over ten years ago. With smartphones and tablets, media practitioners are now privileged to be on social media channels where they can create stories, respond and create comments posts. ‘News on the move’ is now a reality thanks to mobile devices enhanced by the help of technology (Franklin, 2014).

As far as the news media is concerned, particularly journalism, John Pavlik (2000) affirms that the evolving technology shapes the journalistic work in at least four major areas: Firstly, how journalists conduct their work; second, news content; third, the set-up or organization of the newsroom; and lastly, the relationships between or among news organizations, journalists and their many publics. Although new media such as the Internet, World Wide Web and digital video are perhaps the most visible examples of technologies that are transforming journalism, he says the history of journalism is in various ways defined by technological change.

The internet, according to Steven Miller, New York Times' assistant technology editor, has basically transformed the news industry. He suggests that online technologies have offered reporters and readers a new way of operating. Thanks also the digital revolution, concepts such as alternative journalism has been taking a profound position in the news media industry. Alternative journalism, at least, in its ideal form, is produced out of the contours of mainstream institutions and networks. Protests groups, dissenters, peripheral political establishments, as well as supporters and lobbyists best represent this type of media practice (Atton, 2004).

Essentially, what is today called alternative journalism do only emanate from discontent surrounding the manner in which traditional media covers and reports on certain subjects and topics but even the philosophy of what constitutes news itself. epistemology of news. This new form of journalism, as explained by Atton (2004), is not the ways of experts, but no-professionals without any journalistic credentials or grounding. They produce and author stories purely from their vantage point as ordinary people, rights advocates, and enthusiasts.

In our super-digitalized world today, alternative journalism seems to be taking over the conventional sector even though the former has been in existence centuries before. The proliferation of the digital tools, internet coverage and the ease at which technology is been availed

to people across the world as well the lack of faith in the traditional news media industry has given credence to alternative journalism practice, especially among the so-called digital natives.



Chapter Two: General Overview of The Gambia's Mass Media

This part of the paper gives a backdrop to the Gambia's mass media landscape by way of a historical evolution of the press from the first mode of broadcasting to the contemporary digital media industry in the country. It also delves into media ownership and the media consumption behavior in the Gambia. This is to give the reader a comprehensive understanding of the media environment beginning with British colonial era to the emergence and exponential growth of online news media, and more crucially access to ICTs in the Gambia, particularly the level of internet usage.

2.1 Historical Evolution of Gambia's Mass Media

The Newspaper Industry

In terms of the history of media practice in the Gambia, the first form of journalism in the country was by way of newspapers. They served as instruments of the fight against colonial rule thus playing an important role in the fight for independence from Britain. The first of them known as the *Bathurst Times* was set up in 1871 by local merchants in their quest to fend off British and European monopoly of the economy.

As indicated by Jahateh (2018) other newspapers that came after *The Bathurst Times* such as *The West African Gazette* (1883) and *The Gambian Intelligencer* (1893) were largely run by persons with business concerns as they felt the need that they needed a medium to protect their mercantile interest against colonial highhandedness and imperial desires.

Further, the most important and watershed event as regards the contribution of newspapers to the independence of the Gambia is reputed to have come in 1922 when Edward Francis Small, a former clerk in one European firm, set up *The Gambia Outlook* and *Senegambia Reporter*. From the

outset, the newspaper's credo was 'to liberate Gambians from British rule' with its editorials, news coverage and commentaries also described as vitriolic anti-colonial. Gambian historian, researcher and author Hassoum Ceesay is on record to have said that all those who were opposed to colonial rule, in one way or the other, be they economic exploitation, maladministration or political subjugation all were to vent their feelings in the pages of *The Gambia Outlook*.

As a result of Mr. Small's anti-colonial stance Jahateh (2018) states that the colonial administration became so hostile to his paper, leading to the banning of civil servants from subscribing to the newspaper and prevented their loyalists from advertising in the paper. Consequently, Small himself, was sent into exile in the neighboring Senegal.

While in Senegal, Edward Francis Small reportedly continued publishing *The Gambia Outlook*, smuggling some copies into Bathurst (now Banjul). He, according to (Jahateh,2018), even used to send copies to London, Gold Coast (now Ghana), Nigeria and Sierra Leone in an effort to share with the people in those countries events that were unfolding in the Gambia in relation to the struggle for independence.

In 1934, another paper called *The Gambia Echo* came into being with John Finden Daily as its first editor. Its editorial policy wasn't as uncompromising in nature as *The Gambia Outlook*, Jahateh (2018) maintains that it used to carry articles in which views critical to the colonial dispensation were expressed. The newspaper is credited for launching a probe on the colonial government and monitoring behaviour and code of conduct of the expatriate staff in the ranks of the civil service.

Then towards the mid and latter part of the 1930s, *The Gambia weekly* and *The Gambia Public Opinion* came into existence. Both papers were also highly deemed anti-colonial. In the 1950s,

another paper called *The Vanguard* which was expressly anti-colonial and pan-African came into being. Jahateh (2019) quoting historian Hassoum Ceesay said all the nationalist parties had their own newspapers. For example, the People's Progressive Party (PPP) of Gambia's first president Sir Dawda Jawara had the *New Gambia* edited by the late Ba Trawally whilst the Democratic Congress Alliance of Garba Jahumpa had their own paper called *African Unity* edited by Pierre Sonko.

Gambian Journalist Lamin Jahateh explains that the political parties' ownership of newspapers underlines the fact that they were not oblivious of the reality that the media was indeed an important pillar in the fight for independence. All the newspapers were said to have been carrying serious articles enlightening Gambians about everything that was wrong about colonialism. Even of greater interest is the newspapers' publication of articles from British West Africa to show Gambians that other countries are in a similar bandwagon against colonial rule. A case in point is that on the occasion of Ghana's independence, Gambian newspapers were at the fore in reporting the news. In the same vein, Guinea Conakry's independence in 1958 under Saikou Ture enjoyed the same publicity from the press in Banjul.

Following the attainment of independence in the aforementioned countries, local newspapers in Gambia, according to (Jahateh, 2018) were telling the people that 'Ghana has done it: Guinea has done it: Senegal has done it. We have to do it as well.' This, apparently, inspired the people, the politicians, unionists, activists and ordinary citizens alike thus galvanizing the clamour for independence. As such, the newspapers, going by the account of historian Hassoum Ceesay as referenced by (Jahateh, 2018) succeeded in building and raising the consciousness and inspiring Gambians against colonial rule.

The newspapers were labelled as uncompromising in their stance against the colonial administration and wayward colonial officials. Hence, they never hesitated to expose and condemn while colonial masters who abused their powers or were racist or inefficient. However, in view of the low literacy level at the time, the readership of the newspapers was very small; a very small fraction of the population had access to newspapers. Nonetheless, the few who had the access were very influential in society. Those few literates were usually surrounded in village and town squares by their uneducated fellows to explain to them the main articles in the newspapers (Jahateh, 2018). Even in the face of a repressive environment, the newspapers were able to sail through. For example, in 1943, the colonial government hatched a new tactic in the form of a government newspaper called the *Gambia News Bulletin* to counter the impact of the independent newspapers. The editor of the paper had extra powers under the law to censor articles of the independent newspapers. The editor, Captain Peters, had to see all the articles of the independent newspapers and he used to cut out a sentence, paragraph or sometimes a whole story which he did not like; stories that may not be to the good taste of the colonial authorities (Jahateh, 2018).

As if that was not enough, one year after the establishment of the *Gambia News Bulletin* in 1944, the colonial government enacted the Newspaper Ordinance Act. The Act made it extremely difficult for newspapers to continue in operation because it required a bond of £200 for newspaper operation. In addition to these tactics, the newspapers were beset with very serious economic challenges. At the time, civil servants constituted the bulk of the readership but since they were banned from subscribing to the critical independent newspapers took a massive hit on the papers. The problem was compounded by the fact that advertisement which was the leading source of newspaper revenue was also not forthcoming.

However, the papers were able to withstand the economic hardship. Despite the repressive media laws, the censorship and the economic challenges, the newspapers by dint of determination and commitment, most of the private newspapers were able to weather the storm and keep their heads above waters for the entire period of the struggle for independence (Jahateh, 2018.) The paper, he maintains, continued kicking with both hands and legs until after the Union Jack was lowered and the Gambia Flag hoisted. Historian and researcher Hassoum Ceesay is quoted to have said that:

“Without the newspapers, I can tell you that the struggle for independence would have been extremely difficult,” Mr. Ceesay said. “The struggle would have almost been impossible or the final coming of the independence would have been longer.”

The attainment of independence in the 1960s saw a rise in private media ownership. The majority of these papers during the initial ten years of self-rule were set up either by news editors as individuals or by political parties and were punctuated by the following:

While newspapers of the past were printed on conventional machines; the post independent ones were duplicated pages. Perhaps due to their inability to recruit their own personnel, the newspapers of this period were in most cases, run by a one-man establishment with the publisher playing the role of reporter, editor, proof reader, distributor, sales clerk, accountant as well as advertising salesman (Johnson, 2004 as cited in Senghore, 2018).

The Gambia’s first daily newspaper called the *Daily Observer* was founded in 1992 by Liberian national Kenneth Best, thereby opening the floodgates for other newspapers in the country. But seven years on, the paper in May 1999 was bought by a Gambian lawyer-cum-businessman Amadou Samba. It was after this that another paper called The *Independent* was founded by a fresh crop of journalists namely Baba Galleh Jallow and Alagi Yorro Jallow (Senghore, 2018).

Broadcast Media (Radio and Television)

The genesis of the broadcast media in the Gambia dates back to April of 1926 when a couple of personnel from the Gambia company of the West African Frontier Force, Sergeant Major Hepworth and Sergeant T.L Freeman were issued operational licenses for wireless transmitters in the Gambian colony (Johnson, 2004, as cited in Senghore, 2018).

Prior to 1926, that sort of license was accorded to commercial establishments requiring to communicate with ships that were supplying or receiving goods from the port of Bathurst (now Banjul) to promote local broadcasting via a Local Broadcasting System (LBS) with the support of a cable and radio transmissions (Johnson, 2004, as cited in Senghore, 2018).

During the war, the British government used the Gambia Broadcast station '*Radio Gambia*' for the purpose of publicity and war escalation. As such, when the conflict came to an end, the government in London ceased encouraging "Radio Gambia" and expressed its wish to focus on broadcasting from "Radio Accra" as the official transmission center. The representative of the colonial government (the governor) at the time was instructed to shut down "Radio Gambia" and keep it only for emergency news broadcasts. For over ten years, broadcasting was put on hold in the Gambia until May 1962 when '*Radio Gambia*' resumed broadcasting on 4.82 MHz, on the 60-meter band-short wave. Eight years later, a highly equipped new radio facility was commissioned at Mile 7, Bakau, by one-time Nigerian Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon (Johnson, 2004, as cited in Senghore, 2018).

In 1970, *Radio Syd* was birthed as the first commercial radio station in The Gambia. It was also reputed to be the first independent radio station in the West African subregion, airing 20 hours a

daily mainly providing entertainment content in English and local languages in addition to tourist information in Swedish (Europa World year book, 1990, as cited in Senghore, 2018).

In 1990, another independent commercial radio called *Radio 1 FM* was set up in Serekunda whilst 1995 saw a former BBC Banjul correspondent Baboucarr Gaye established *Citizen FM* (Senghore, 2018).

Today in the Gambia, there are close to some fifty radio stations including community radios in the country. Meanwhile, the Gambia's first television station now called *Gambia Radio and Television Services* (GRTS) was commissioned in December 1995, a little over one year after the July 22, 1994 military coup in the country. It still remains the only state-run television station whilst the first private television station was launched in November 2017 by businessman and mobile GSM operator Muhammed Jah.

Online News Media

As regards the genesis of online media in the Gambia, a paper called *Gambia-L* deserves to be mentioned as the mother of web-based news media in the country. It may not be in the form of your typical modern-day online news outlet, but *Gambia-L*, through the writings and contributions of Gambians both at and home abroad, was instrumental in exposing the horrors including the extrajudicial executions and other forms of human rights violations and corrupt practices committed by the Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council (AFPRC), the military junta that overthrew the government of President Sir Dawda Jawara on July 22, 1994. Since the military, even in those infant days of their coming to power, were hellbent on crushing dissenting views, Gambians through *Gambia-L* had to hide behind pseudo names to write articles that were critical

of the government and its shady deals. Their publications were accessed by readers at internet cafes under discreet circumstances for fears of falling afoul of the dictatorship and its agents, particularly the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) notoriously for their heavy-handedness and brutal persecution of the regime's opponents.

The birth of *Gambia-L* would in a few years later create the emergence of several other online news outlets albeit operating outside the borders of the country itself. The United States of America became the home of many of these online papers and subsequently their amalgamated radio platforms. This was due to two major reasons. The first and the most plausible explanation is almost all of the journalists running these online news sites were persons who resettled in the US primarily as asylum seekers after they had fled the Gambia to avoid the wrath of an autocratic regime. The other reason is much more obvious. Not only was internet at its lowest ebb by then, but it was practically impossible for Gambians to operate online media back home with the sole purpose of unearthing and publishing the gruesome atrocities that were being committed by the military regime and the subsequent 'civilian' dispensation that would last for over two decades under Yahya Jammeh's stewardship.

It is against this backdrop that a plethora of online news outfits dealing with Gambia and Gambian affairs emerged. These include *Mafanta Online Newspaper Gambia*, *Kairo News/Radio*, *The Gambia Echo/Tribune*, *Jolof News*, *Gainako Online Newspaper* and the most prominent of them all *Freedom Newspaper Online*. With most of these aforementioned diaspora-based online sites happened to be run and overseen by exiled journalists from the Gambia, they proved to be more than just reliable sources of news and other happenings unfolding in the Gambia as they went the extra mile to serve as advocates of human rights, justice and rule of law as well as voices of dissent against Yahya Jammeh's government. Beyond news reportage, they gave Gambians and the

international community an insight into the terrible human rights conditions in the Gambia perpetrated at the behest of a despot and the tyrannical state machinery he was presiding over.

In the latter years precisely 2012, the Gambia had its first home-based online media platform called *Eye Africa TV*. It must be noted that the online news media itself started initially with newsletter known as *Eye Magazine* before it had morphed into a digital content outlet. Run by a team of young tech computer savvy youth, they operate by producing and uploading on their platform contents in the form of videos from events/ functions they cover. In a matter of few years, *Eye Africa TV* became a formidable force in the Gambia's broadcasting industry. It had in the past provided technical backstopping to even the national TV during live coverage of special occasions.

Today, after several draconian media laws and harsh working environment for media practitioners between 1994 and 2016 which marked a period of dictatorship, there are countless media outlets in the Gambia, dominated largely by independent online news platforms. These outlets are mainly involved in the airing of news and current affairs, coupled with the production of programmes revolving around such issues like politics and governance, human rights and democracy, agriculture, fisheries, the environment, peace and national security, among other issues pertinent to the development of the Gambia and her people. The evolution and growth of Gambia's mass media industry are summed up the visualized chart below.

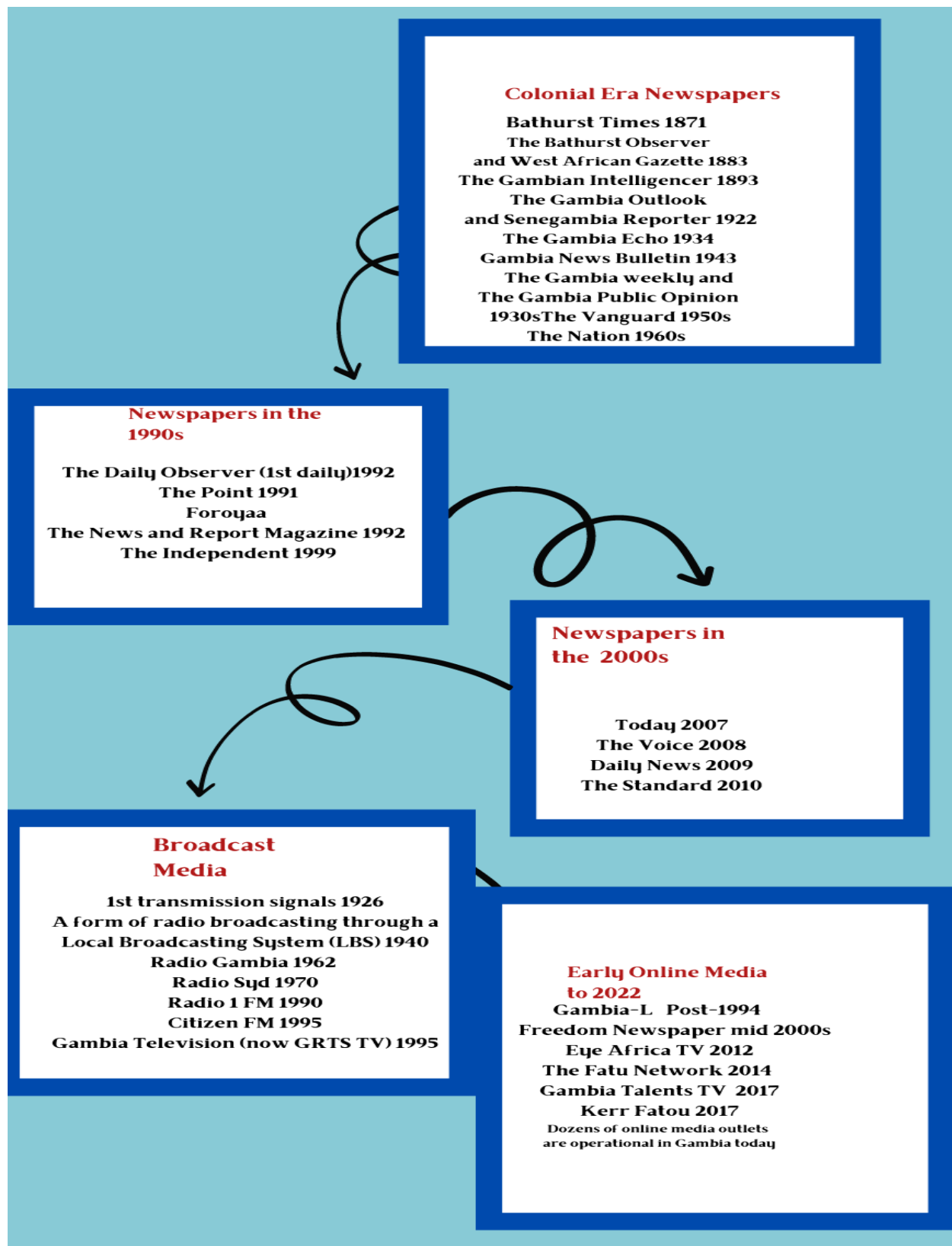


Figure 3. A visualized representation of mass media background and evolution in Gambia

2.2 Media Ownership and Regulation in the Gambia

In the Gambia, ownership of the media was and is still largely in the hands of individuals or private people. However, state radio which used to be referred to as *Radio Gambia* has since been amalgamated with the television division, making up the *Gambia Radio and Television Services (GRTS)*. The national broadcaster, comprising both the radio and television, is owned by the Gambia Government, meaning its operations and sustenance are come from tax payer money. Following its commissioning in December 1995, *GRTS TV* was initially placed under Gambia Telecommunications Company (GAMTEL) as one of the entities of the national telecommunications giant.

Currently in the Gambia, two media outfits constitute state media. These are Gambia Radio and Television Services which is the broadcasting arm and a newspaper called *The Gambia Today*, which is released on a weekly basis. It only comes out in print and with not so healthy production capacity despite being in existence for a long time and even after undergoing series of changes in name over the years. As far as state-run media in the Gambia are concerned, they do not require any licensing conditions under the prevailing legislations, specifically the Newspaper Registration Act and the Information and Communication Act (Jammeh, 2019).

The Gambia Today is run by the Department of Information Services, under the Ministry of Information and Communication Infrastructure (MoICI). Unavoidably, the paper's publications are furnished and edited by state information personnel, who by their very status are public servants albeit with some freelance roles. The GRTS, for its part, is the construction of a legislative Act, and the television building even to this day houses the Gambia's Ministry of Information and Communications. Such a scenario is all the more reason why its conversion into a public service media is necessary (Jammeh,2019).

According to Jammeh (2019), state media denotes media outfit that are under the control of the government. In particular, this could be manifested through appointments in not just strategic decision-making entities. He adds that, it also comes with the state bearing the financial and operational burden and moreover having a stake in editorial decision making of a media entity. He indicates that due to the thin line between state media and public service media, there is a tendency for them to be mixed up.

State media may carry out public service duties. Nonetheless, performing that role does not qualify them as a public service media. In contrast, state media lacks all the hallmarks of a public service media such as inclusiveness in terms of representation, variance in programming content as well independence when it comes to journalistic and financial obligations, and that the impartiality of a state-established media is not a matter of assurance (Jammeh, 2019).

As it is still the norm, and in line with legal backing, the Gambian president is the authority who decides appointments to major positions at the Gambia Radio and Television Services (GRTS). That remains a prerogative of the Gambian leader and is not subject to any scrutiny from either the populace or the National Assembly. Evidently, if Gambia's recent history is anything to go by, the state can poke its nose into matters regarding the funds and of the national broadcaster even if their source of income and sustenance hinge on charges levied on local GSM companies. It is also no secret that the past regime had meddled with the services of GRTS (Jammeh, 2019).

Aside from the Gambia Radio and Television Services and The Gambia Today that are state-owned, the majority of the Gambian media are owned and managed by veteran journalists, most of them having passed through the public broadcasting outfit and would go on to establish their own private media. These include Paradise FM/TV, West Coast Radio, Taxi FM, and two of the country's biggest online platforms Kerr Fatou, and The Fatu Network. The huge experiences and

high-profile status of the owners of the aforementioned media have helped earned them a large following both within and outside of the Gambia. Other media houses owned by long serving journalists are The Voice Newspaper, Daily News which belongs to a former president of Gambia Press Union, and The Point co-founded by veteran Pap Saine and slain journalist Deyda Hydara.

The one media with political or ideological ties in today's Gambia is the Foroyaa Newspaper founded by the leaders of a political party called People's Organization for Independence and Socialism (PDOIS). A leading online investigative paper in the Gambia Malagen in November 2021 revealed that Halifa Sallah, PDOIS' presidential candidate and secretary general owns a 10% share in Foroyaa Publishing Company, the publisher of Foroyaa newspaper. However, despite the party leadership's affinity with Foroyaa, the paper has tended to blend core traditions of journalism with the enlightenment of the citizenry on a raft of issues ranging from the concept of sovereignty, civic education, fundamental human rights, basic tenets of constitutionalism, social justice, the plights of the common man and woman, among others. Whilst Foroyaa does slant towards its affiliated party figures in the form of political content, particularly as they relate to the state of affairs in the Gambia, it has carved a niche for itself in terms of editorial impartiality and overall credibility.

In recent years also, media ownership in the Gambia has become a potent area for the business people. Of noteworthy mentioning is the Gambia's first major private television QTV which forms part of conglomerate owning a mobile GSM company, a water bottling company, a company training institute, among other products/services. The conglomerate, known as Q Group, now has a radio station too *Q Radio*, providing news and entertainment to its audience but more profoundly serving as an advertisement wing of different businesses and commercial interests of the owner. In fact, well before QTV's establishment of their own television and subsequently radio station, it

was their rival private GSM service operator Africell who first spread their tentacles in the Gambia's broadcast industry when they in launched their radio station. Like *QTV/QRadio*, AfriRadio, it would appear, was also borne out of the quest to exert greater control over the country's growing mobile industry and the cocktail of services and products they have an offer. The Gambia, despite its relatively small population, has about four mobile companies with all of them engaged in a very fierce competition to win over the hearts and minds of its mainly youthful population. The media by all intents and purposes is playing a catalyst role for these companies thus explaining the new found media ownership by two of the country's bitter telecoms operators. There also exists a number of community radio stations spread across the different regions of the Gambia. Most of these are community-owned and were built through projects funded by donors to empower the beneficiary communities with information. Among these are the North Bank Community Radio, Bwiam Community Radio, Farafenni Community Radio, Bansang Community Radio, Brikama-Ba Community Radio, Kuloro FM, Brikama-based FM B, among others.

Meanwhile, according to Jammeh (2009), media regulation in the Gambia can be a techy subject in view of media-state relationship in the recent past. The 1997 Constitution that ushered in the second republic had obligated The Gambia to establish a statutory regulatory body called National Media Commission.

The Gambia government sometime in 2002 enacted into law an Act establishing the Commission. The intent of the state was very evidently mirrored in what was seen as excessive power given to the Commission. Inter alia, the Commission was granted powers to register on a yearly basis to compel them to name sources of highly sensitive information (Jammeh, 2009).

The actions of the Commission were conclusive and were incapable of being contested even in a court of law. It therefore was not a surprise that the establishment of the Commission sparked widespread local and international uproar. The journalists cried foul but the then president Yahya Jammeh would not budge, responding that they ‘must comply or do not print or go to hell’. The Gambia Press Union resorted to the Supreme Court of The Gambia to challenge the constitutionality of the Commission (Jammeh, 2009).

Amidst growing calls and concerns, the National Assembly bowed down to pressure by abrogating the Act that gave birth to the National Media Commission as well as the constitutional provision which mandated the creation of the commission. In the end, victory was secured but at a cost. Celebrated Gambian journalist Deyda Hydara, who was fiercely championing the fight against the unpopular body was gunned down and killed (Jammeh, 2019).

In the Gambia, the licensing and registration of news and information media establishments fall under the ambit of two different pieces of legislations. There exists the Newspaper Registration Act of 1934 as subsequently amended in 2004. This law obligates news organizations to provide a bond of 500, 000 Gambian dalasi (\$9,293.68) for registration purposes. In addition, the Information and Communication Act provides for regulation of the broadcast media by a multi-sector regulator known as the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority (Jammeh, 2019).

Jammeh (2019) says that numerous researches and evaluations of media laws, including the one commissioned by the government in recent times, had indicated the broadcast licensing and newspaper registration conditions in the Gambia are at odds with internationally recommended norms when it came to media regulation. A couple of justifications have been advanced in light of these concerns:

First, a special registration arrangement for newspapers does not augur well with international law. Nonetheless getting registered under the Companies act should be enough a procedure. Moreover, signing up to a bond of 500, 000 Gambian dalasi, the equivalent of about \$10,000 is a mind-blowing amount for any journalist in a country where more than half the population per living below the poverty line. Evidently, the price of freedom of expression and of the press are too exorbitant a commodity in a country as small as the Gambia.

Second, serious question marks exist when it comes to the fairness and impartiality of the licensing and registration procedures. Putting the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Justice in charge of registration under the Newspaper Registration Act and having the Information and Communications Infrastructure Minister endorsing licenses for television and radio broadcasting under the Information and Communication Act, 2009 in themselves head scratching decisions.

By their very nature, the ministers are political appointees who owe their loyalty to the president and his ruling party not to lose sight of the fact that the process takes effect without any satisfactory public scrutiny. Questions hovering the institution of the regulatory authority in case of the broadcasting industry further adds to the problem. To make matters worse, the membership of the board is equally devoid of any civil society or media representation and adding to the concerns of many is the fact that all of its members were appointed by the president of the Republic. Ultimately, the rules and standards for media regulation in the Gambia are noticeably not in tandem with international standards (Jammeh, 2019).

2.3 Media Consumption in the Gambia

Despite the Gambia's relatively small population of 1,857,181 (GBoS, 2013 Housing and Population Census) there now exists a plethora of media at the disposal of both the citizens and

other inhabitants of the country. The main explanation for this would be the coming into being of a new democratic dispensation which has largely been media friendly in comparison the one it succeeded. However, it is imperative to note that most of the repressive media laws that were promulgated from 1994 to 2016, marking the period of autocratic rule, are still in existence owing to the fact that there have been no serious or genuine attempts to undertake reforms in the realms of policy, legal, civil and institutions.

Despite this reality, Gambians continue to enjoy the services of different media forms. For a majority of people in rural areas, particularly the elderly, radio constitutes the number source of news. Whilst audience and media/communications researches in general are a rarity in the Gambia, anecdotal evidence points to a heavy reliance on radio as the primary source of national and international news, current affairs and public notices such as obituaries, social and religious functions, for most rural people. This is also explained by the limited or a complete lack of electricity supply in most rural settings. Hence, radio as opposed to television becomes the natural channel or tool of media consumption for people in rural communities, especially those in far-flung regions.

With the advent of mobile telephony and other information communication technologies across the Gambia, WhatsApp platforms or news groups are today also proving to be an important source of the news diet of a lot of people in rural Gambia. Audio clips shared across WhatsApp groups and between individuals accord those Gambians that are present/active on social media sites to keep up to speed with developments and emerging trends in a blow-by-blow fashion. In other words, people residing in communities without electricity and/or strong online presence have WhatsApp news groups as alternative sources of news and current affairs.

In contrast, daily newspapers are overwhelmingly produced and accessed by people in the capital Banjul and the rest of the urban areas. However, their circulation today is mostly limited to government and non-governmental institutions that are supplied by newspaper companies on the basis of subscriptions. The appeal of traditional newspapers to government departments, parastatals and private sector entities transcends their trustworthiness in terms of the reporting of national and international news but also additional content in terms of advertisements, job vacancy notices, press releases, bids for tenders, investments and other corporate interests serve as major incentives for the consumption of newspapers at institutional level.

While the consumption of radio and television programming content, especially as regards news, current affairs, music and sports news remains somewhat popular, it is digital/social media that seems to be the go-to place for most young people in the Gambia. Today, there appears to be not only a huge followership of TikTok amongst young urban dwellers, but also a lot of them too are present on the popular social media app where these young digital natives derive their infotainment needs and as well enjoy content from their homebased celebrities such as comedians and musicians.

In the same vein, Facebook remains arguably the biggest social media site for people across different demographics and social strata. It has become the Gambian version of Jurgen Habermas' public sphere as both private citizens and public sector operatives use the social networking site to make their voices heard as they pertain to national issues as well as hold the government to account. The social networking site is also a source of news for many Gambians as most online news media operate live on the platform. In the Gambia, Facebook is not just a social networking site where gossips and lifestyle content abound, but these days it is a potent avenue for dissenting views for citizens in relation to the way the country is being governed. An alternative media platform that

has a huge Facebook presence is Whats_on Gambia. The page now transcends a celebrity news site, a place for the sharing of success stories of young Gambians or merely a source of gossip, but a voice for the voiceless, the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized. It is the one site where many Gambians nowadays rely on for stories exposing bad governance, corruption, state or corporate sanctioned exploitation, abuse of office and the extravagant lifestyles of politicians and other public officials at the expense of the ordinary tax payer.

2.4 Access to ICTs in the Gambia

Based on the findings of the 2013 Housing and Population Census conducted in the country by Gambia Bureau of Statistics, access to radio broadcasts and cellular telephony facilities in urban areas stands at a little close to 90 % and a little over 80 %, respectively. The study indicates that this is somewhat more than 84.6 % for radio and 76.1 % for cellular phone in rural areas. Thus, a person's area of residence has been viewed as a likely reason for access to television, newspaper/magazine and computer access variances in the order of 13.4 % for computer and 35.8 % in the case of television.

Radio, according to the census spearheaded by the Central Bureau of Statistics, is the most significant channel when it comes to acquiring information in the Gambia, accessible by eight out of ten persons. Further, as in the case of mobile phones, eight in ten persons which represents almost about 80 % of the population are said to have enjoyed access, with the provinces lagging a little behind with nearly 77 % compared to the more than 80 % for metropolitan Gambia. Also, more than half of the citizenry aged seven years and older reportedly possessed portable phones. Naturally, ownership of mobile phones is said to be more prevalent in the urban centers, constituting more than 2 % of what obtains upcountry where less than half of the people there own according to the GBoS figures.

When it comes to mobile phone ownership as per Local Government Area, Banjul, the capital city is ranked over 75 %, Kanifing Municipality coming second with close to 70 % and Brikama registering over 50 % whilst Kuntaur and Janjanbureh were found to be slightly more 30 % and 40 % respectively (GBoS, 2013).

General access to computers is dismal given that only one in 10 percent of the population that were interviewed have access to it. Over 13 % of men have more access than women who are below a paltry 9 %. The percentage in terms of computer access is highest in the capital city with more than 20 %. The younger generation between the ages of 20 and 24 which comprises 18.0 % enjoy the highest degree of access to computers whilst the lowest score was observed amongst those between the ages of seven and nine. Whilst access to computers is generally low, the proportions are significantly up for persons that can read and write with 15.7 % more than the 2 % of those who could not read and write. Once more, a large number of men who can read and write, making up of more than 17 %, was found to have access to computers in comparison to the womenfolk who comprise slightly more than 13 % (GBoS, 2013).

In terms of internet usage, slightly more than three-quarters which is almost 80 % of those who enjoy internet usage revealed that they usually surf it every day while at home, with almost 75 % in the metropolitan area whilst the provincial regions are almost 90 %. Daily internet usage at the formal work place was a little over 74 % signifying 76.1 % and 59.0 % in urban and rural areas respectively. GBoS (2013) indicates that least degree of everyday internet use was recorded at public centers with 25.1 % out of which 25.8 % represents urban and rural areas 22.3 %.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

In this, the researcher presents the theoretical frameworks that underpin and the relevant scholarly literature pertaining to the thesis topic. It is primarily premised on the Agenda Setting theory in mass communication and the Social Responsibility theory of the press in order to address the research question.

Agenda setting Theory

This is one of the mass communication theories in which this research is situated. It has been one of the oldest and most fundamental scholarly concepts that shapes both the study and operations of the media. The theory is as early as the 1970s. It is very profound in the sense that it is indicative of the manner in which the press can have a bearing on society that is an alternative to behavioral change. Furthermore, there are indications that the impact could be a significant one (Severin et al., 2014).

The Agenda Setting theory of mass communication is rooted on the supposition by Maxwell McCombs that mass media do not necessarily tell people what to think, but they in fact tell people what is there to think about. In other words, issues as well as entities that are thrown up for discussion in the public domain for discourse are influenced by the media (McCombs, 1977).

The media's agenda setting role is also linked to Walter Lippman's Public Opinion (1922) which kicks off with a chapter captioned: The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads. Lippman's contestation is that the press contributes to those images in our minds, people's mental imaginations of the bigger universe of public affairs. His coinage of the term agenda-setting at the time did not entirely point to the influence of the press and it took many ages before it stood the test of scientific examination. (McCombs & Shaw, 2005).

According to McCombs and Shaw (2005), during the United States' 1968 presidential campaign, an influential examination of the agenda-setting theory was conducted in Chapel Hill, in North Carolina factoring in several news media that were followed by the voters there as part of the election. Covering various local and elite national newspapers, network television news, and news magazines, agenda setting subsequently emerged as something that is regarded important by the voters. Having been able to draw an almost perfect parallel between the prioritization of top issues on the agendas of both the press and the public, the authors of the study came up with the phrase agenda setting to define this relationship.

As they select and showcase news, journalists and editors perform a crucial role in shaping political reality. People who read newspapers do not only learn a lot about a particular subject, but equally the amount of premium that is attached to that issue based on the volume of information in a news item and the slant of the story. The mass media is capable of influencing the pronouncements of candidates in the course of campaigns and even dictate the issues deemed significant. By that way, the media engages determines the campaign agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

To a considerable extent, McCombs & Shaw (2005) believe the agenda-setting influence of the press stems from the emphasis of the major issues in the news in a consistent manner. Consequently, the public picks up issues from the mass media without little if any troubles at all on their part. And due to the incidental nature of the process, issues tend to pass from the media to the public.

The news media's role in setting the agenda comes in different forms and shapes. The fundamental role of this theory is for the media to shift public attention on a number of matters and subjects. In spite of the fact that there are a raft of issues and other matters in the larger world begging for

coverage, the news media is only capable of beaming the light to an array of issues that are considered newsworthy (McCombs, 2005).

Interestingly, as gathered through scientific proof, the public too is equally said to consider the media's agenda as its own from the bulk of significant issues of the day. As earlier indicated by McCombs (2005), it doesn't take a well-orchestrated and calculated work by the media organizations to exert the viewpoints of the people, but instead an unintended consequence of the media's need to project attention to certain cardinal themes in their reportage.

Yet, as a reflection of the potency of the agenda setting theory, the news media plays an important influence on people's mental networks, particularly as regards public affairs (McCombs, 2005). Lippmann's 1922 thesis: "the news media, our windows to the vast world beyond direct experience, determine our cognitive maps of that world" reinforces the power of the theory on people's cognitive abilities (McCombs, 2004, 2005).

With regards to this particular theory, the mass media is considered to not having the capability to set the agenda for the populace as far as views and behaviors are concerned (Cohen, 1963, as cited in Zain 2014). Nonetheless, the press is credited for playing a part in shaping thoughts, attentions, beliefs and preferences of the people. Given that significant role of the mass media, audiences are likely to make their thoughts or concentrate on matters that are deemed necessary to be included in their cognitive agendas (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, as cited in Zain, 2014).

Over the past, scholarly investigations into agenda setting places emphasis on more critical matters like: who is tasked with setting the agenda of the press? b. What entails the mass media agenda, and c. What extent can the press shape or construct the public agenda?

Regarding whose function it is to set the mass media's agenda, (McCombs & Shaw, 1993, as cited in Zain, 2014) are of the view that agenda of the public has a degree of impact on that of the press. Considerably, it is their argument that the mass media need to adhere to the wishes of the people or what they described as the interests of audiences. This is manifested through ratings, audience surveys, market studies as well as the consumption behaviour of audiences (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, as cited in Zain, 2004). This is regarded as tolerable since mass media are still intertwined with the business and market environments. And as a result, the interests of the public and public agenda are informed by the environments. The press, after all, is expected to react to the audience needs and factors that will hook and appeal to its audiences (Krugman, 1963, as cited in Zain, 2014).

Zain (2014) asserts that based on the work of researchers Everett and Dearing (1988), mass communication's agenda setting theory is located in the linkages between three agendas namely: public agenda, media agenda and policy agenda. They explain that policy agenda is capable of being formulated through the issues the state and other policy experts formulate. At times also, Zain explains that the nature of the world plays a role in setting a new thing in mass media's agenda. Natural calamities like earthquakes, conflict and floods are examples that influences the aforementioned agenda either directly or indirectly. In line with their arguments, the agenda building theory was conceptualized. Such a theory by Rodger & Dearing (1988) is considered more suitable compared to the theory of agenda setting.

Fundamentally, the initial form of study aiming at assessing how much the mass media influence or shape the public agenda was conducted by Cohen (1963). His assertion is that mass media just determines what to think about as opposed to what to think. Thus, the mass media is charged with disseminating information and not to guide the audience opinions. However, in contrast to

Cohen's views, follow-up researches show that the mass media can shape the thinking of the audience by going as far as contributing to forming the opinions of the audiences (Wanta et al., 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 1997, as cited in Zain, 2014).

Based on such discourses, Zain (2014) says the parameter of agenda setting was expanded with a view to embracing the cognitive part of the agenda setting role including the formulation of the agenda by the press and the manner in which audiences perceive that agenda. Ways in which that is possibly come in the form of framing and priming. Framing or priming of a particular issue by the mass media allows the audience to When a given issue is framed and primed by the mass media, that issue gets to be instantly seen by audiences as significant and by so doing, the media determines how the audiences or the public relate to it (Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, as cited in 2014).

As regards this study, there also exists important facets of priming as part of the agenda setting theory, particularly from the point of view of politics. Political News Coverage and Priming Tests of political priming focus on the influence of media coverage of events on how people consider information when making judgments of politicians, particularly, the head of state (Bryant, J. & Oliver, 1994).

Historically, Bryant and Oliver (1994) scholars examining media effects have concentrated on universal judgments of presidential endorsement as the chief outcome variable. However, from a priming point of view, if the media have been primarily focused on local issues, they argue that judgments of the president's performance on the domestic front should take precedence on people's general assessment of the president, compared to the scenario where foreign news has been the principal focus of the media. According to them, political priming should focus on the

sort of information people use to arrive at conclusions and how much that information is depended upon or how much it matters in making a judgement.

Despite the widely vaunted power of the agenda setting, the agenda setting theory in mass media is not without shortcomings which continue to spark differences amongst academics and propagators of Cohen's views (1998). The argument revolves around the main question of media influence as in how directly and to what the extent the press influences the public agenda.

Based on certain contemporary researches, it is suggested that individual factors can contain the impacts of media agenda setting on a person or a public (Matsaganis & Payne, 2005; Gross & Aday, 2003; McCombs & Shaw, 1997, as cited in Zain, 2014). A significant contributing factor for these lies with one's education background and knowledge of media publics on the subject or the agenda itself that the mass media projects (Carter, 1996, as cited in Zain, 2014).

As a result of the aforementioned reasons, (Matsaganis & Payne: 2005; Littlejohn and Foss: 2009; Coleman: 1993) note that it is hard for their views to be shaped by mass media through the information they are exposed to from the press. Furthermore, that sort of effect from the press in determining opinion is not applicable to those persons residing far away from the message disseminated or to people who are not easily accessible with the information from the mass media (Lippmann, 1922, as cited in Zain, 2014)

For those in the news business, the agenda setting concept comes with a sense of responsibility on the grounds that issues that are given too much prominence by the media are likely going to attract public attention. The relevance of this theoretical framework on this study therefore cannot be overemphasized considering the fact the more online news media outlets in the Gambia talk and showcase the issues confronting the rural people, it is highly likely that policymakers will also not

pay much attention to their needs and aspirations. Chances are that rural people who are the main focus of this study will equally build more interests in shows/programs that talk about them. Also, unless and until the voices of rural people are adequately captured and represented on the plethora of online media platforms in the Gambia, they stand little or no chance in advancing their own development agendas which would naturally consign their felt needs and development priorities to the backburner.

Social Responsibility Theory

The study also carries elements of the social responsibility theory of the press. This recognizes the media's obligation to not just self-regulation but promote plurality and diversity of society. The relevance of this theory to this study is that as it stands, most of what and who appears on Gambia's online media outlets are elites who serve as pundits on current affairs, mostly political matters. The question of diversity seems to be absent in view of the minimal coverage and representation of other members of society, particularly farmers, the fisherfolk and other ordinary members that constitute the bulk of the populace.

According to Christians and Nordenstreg (2009), the social responsibility theory of the press surfaced in different democratic societies across the world since the second world war. They credited the Hutchins Commission in the United States of America to be the foundation of this paradigm in certain scenarios even though the authors also mentioned that a related concept on the need to serve the populace than the business or government emanated elsewhere in a corresponding manner without necessarily any link to the Hutchins.

Nerone (2002) said the Hutchins Commission grounded its call for a social responsibility theory as Libertarians frowned upon what they consider as an embellished power of the media. Out of their concern for the unchecked power of the press, they called for regulation.

Poignantly, the Social Responsibility theory is reputed to have emanated at a time when the US was contending with what analysts referred to as late capitalism. Before the second world war, most of the renowned news establishments in that country were said to have found themselves under the control of rich and powerful media owners. Among these powerful and successful media people who had then controlled big newspaper companies, radio stations, magazines among others were William Randolph Hearst and Henry Luce. By virtue of their status, they had an influence on politics using their privileged positions, they had what it takes to not only throw their weight behind politicians, but equally dictate the outcome of even elections (Nerone, 2002).

At a glance, the subject of media's social responsibility, according to Middleton (2009), touches on the question of what is right and what is not, acceptable or unacceptable, ethical or unethical, as regards the way the media go about executing its role primarily gathering information and sharing it with others. In a democratic society, trustworthiness and service must be part of the media's mission as well as stand for the people to ensure that they have justice and that their rights and freedoms are guaranteed in the spirit of credibility and resoluteness (Nayak, 2013).

Social responsibility is one of the most talked about theories of mass media in addition to the Libertarian, Authoritarian and Soviet. A cardinal principle of this theory is that the media has a responsibility to use its important position to make sure that there is an appropriate dissemination of information to audiences. Should the media fail to shoulder this responsibility, there should be need to have it enforced this duty through some form of regulation (Middleton, 2009)

The power and dominant position of the media has to bestow on them a duty to be socially responsible, to see that all sides of the equation are without bias catered for and that the public is provided adequate information to make a decision; and that if the media fails to uphold on

themselves a task as important as that, it would be imperative for some other regulator to make the media execute the task (Siebert et al., 1956, as cited in Middleton, 2009).

Middleton (2009) argues that essentially, when one talks about the social responsibility theory, it is public interest that lies at the very heart of the theory. It brings into sharp focus the all-important role of mass media in dictating activities in society, the construction of public opinion and building of social movements and engendering political processes such as campaigns and where they lead to.

Within the premise of the social responsibility theory the media owes an obligation to audiences by offering accurate news reportage, scrutiny and expounding on issues through editorial means. As per this theory, the media must also take on the government through fair and objective criticism as well as serve as a conduit of popular views and a generator of feedback from the masses. The media do also owe a duty to their proprietor by remaining economically viable and should serve as bastion of education, awareness creation and entertainment. More importantly however, the media must live up to its own by playing its core role without neglecting the very foundation of journalism which could jeopardize accountability (Owens-ibe 1994, as cited in Middleton, 2009).

In their fulfillment of the social responsibility theory, the media according to Braid, 1993, as cited in Bernate, 2003 must strive to promote and protect the societal good. McQuail (1994) outlines the principles of Social Responsibility as thus:

- The media have duties to society, and media ownership is the public trust.
- News media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant.
- The media should provide a forum for ideas.
- The media should be free but self-regulated.
- Media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional standards.

- Under some circumstances, society may need to intervene in the public interest.

In what is a further emphasis of the importance of the Social Responsibility theory of the press, the media should exist mainly for their audiences and not for media entities, professionals or customers of the media (McQuail, 1987, as cited in Mokwena, 2018).

This particular point entrusts media practitioners with a very crucial task given that in today's world of conglomeration and rich and powerful owners, journalists tend to find themselves in a tangle web of conundrum as to whose needs they must first satisfy between their employers (the owners) or the larger society for whose sake they have joined what is known as the fourth estate. Today, with most news or media organizations heavily reliant on advertisement money as their source of revenue, the need to uphold the Social Responsibility theory becomes even more crucial; otherwise, they would be forced to relegate to the backburner their core values of educating and informing the people in a given society.

Rather than fostering government or business interests, the media have an obligation to serve society first and foremost. As a matter of fact, responsible journalism does not consolidate the administration in power, nor does it simply stress on the individual right to publish and make profit (Christians and Nordenstreng, 2004, as cited in Mokwena, 2018). In furtherance of this role, media, says Nayak (2013), have an incredible bearing on the way contemporary society regulates itself, coupled with the direction it sets out for itself tomorrow. Given the reality that people of various age brackets are influenced by the media, the social responsibility of the press in her view becomes highly crucial. She proposes target rating points, and financial incentives should overshadow the media's watchdog role.

This particular aspect of the Social Responsibility theory bears great relevance for this study given the huge implications it has for the political economy of the media. For example, in the case of the Gambia where government has the sole say in granting licensing for the registration of media organizations, online media executives will be most likely at the beck and call of the state and/or its operatives, leaving the ordinary people disadvantaged and marginalized. Whilst it will be premature to say this is one plausible explanation for the least attention they give to rural people or the common man and woman in the Gambia, what cannot be doubted is the allocation of huge chunk of airtime or space to business people in the form of advertisement. As regards ratings or the insatiable desire for likes, some online media in the Gambia had in the past come under attack when certain content were found to be at sharp odds with the norms and values of the society which remains a very conservative one. And while ethics was not something this study considered during the research, the question of ethics and professionalism is highly becoming a contentious issue facing the Gambia's online media industry as a matter of both content and the conduct of certain practitioners.

When online content is largely dominated by commercials, it does turn off people from going through it. Thus, it behooves online media operators to strike a balance between what the audience desires as news or other programming content and what their business customers want to see produced. It then becomes a question of responsibility for the online media platforms to satisfy the audiences while not also running their own commercial interests which largely pays their bill, including salaries and other benefits for staff.

In upholding ethical standards, the media perform an important role in society, especially in the delivery of information, issues pertaining to culture and creating room for divergent views. Therefore, it is his contention that the media ought to be independent and follow a set of

professional ethical standards and values in order to perform the role of information disseminator and making provisions for a divergence of views in society (McQuail, 1987, as cited in Mokwena, 2018). Nayak (2003) says in the era of contemporary democracies, the Social Responsibility theory also expects the media to uphold high ethical values. Also, the theory calls for the media to regulate itself and shoulder a sense of responsibility to society through by providing content that is premised on truth telling and objectivity and at the same time abstain disseminating anything that threatens national security.

The question of ethics in the Social Responsibility theory fits very well in this study because one of the things that Gambia's online media industry could improve upon from an ethical point of view is the one-sided coverage that is accorded to urban issues. For instance, when issues affecting the agriculture sector come up such the high cost and insufficient availability of fertilizer, it is very much likely that technocrats at the ministry would be the ones given a platform to discuss the matter at the expense of the poor rural farmer. Inadvertently, this allows the government functionaries to frame and build the narrative in favor of the state. Besides, the mere fact that they appear on these shows gives them a leeway to make claims that may not be substantiated by others such as the less privileged farmer in some faraway community.

As a result of this, fairness, and objectivity which are too very important ingredients of the canons of journalism get compromised along the way. To the credit of online media in the Gambia, having had to invite guests or panelists from rural areas of the Gambia to come and appear on shows may be cumbersome given the distance, time, and other travel logistics those people may have to incur just to come from hundreds of kilometers away from the provinces for a thirty-minute panel or at most a hour discussion and then return to their localities from the metropolis, especially when one

considers the fact that most of these rural-based people are farmers who would not like to leave their crops.

The social responsibility theory of the press pokes faults in the Libertarian version as it maintains that the audience is not as reasonable as the former indicates. Proponents of the Social Responsibility theory argue that consumers have a blurred perception of the universe based on what they see on television. In an event the media turn out to be damaging, backers of the Social Responsibility theory believe the government should come in to ensure they are controlled (Nayak, 2013).

While it is all bad also for government to invoke regulation on the mass media should they falter in certain ways as some of the Social Responsibility preachers contest above, there is a danger that governments, especially those that do not tolerate dissenting views to use that aspect of the theory to gag the press and in the case of the Gambia even put some critical online media under lock and keys. The theory can therefore be used by governments with dictatorial tendencies as a smokescreen to crush freedom of expression through the press through its regulatory powers in under the guise of national security. In the final analysis, Social Responsibility as media theory is regarded by many as one that is very hard to fault considering its emphasis on the media's fidelity to be at the service of the people and the common good of all. Its backers give it a ringing endorsement for frowning upon shunning the press' commercial interests, which in fact is seen as the main thrust of the theory's coming into being at a time when the U.S was contending with the commentariat at the time described as late capitalism. Regardless of this, the few who think differently of the Social Responsibility theory argue that despite its commitment to unhindered flow of information and the high premium it places on the upholding of high ethical standards by

the mass media , the name given to it seems to convey the message that any other theory besides it is in fact socially not responsible.

Literature Review

There have been several studies in relation to the way the digital revolution, the internet and even online media platforms have impacted access to news and other information in rural areas. The majority of rural population in developing countries, as highlighted by Cheunwattana (1998), are poor and not formally educated. And given their social and economic troubles, he argues that their information needs have not been getting much consideration despite the fact a number of studies have been carried out on the information needs of Africa's rural communities. Access to the right information by rural communities can aid them in acquiring the skills, knowledge and confidence to partake meaningfully in community matters. Unfortunately, though, and in a true reflection of the reality, Moore (2007) acknowledges that access to information is not balanced throughout society.

The afore-mentioned observations about rural people and their access to information are quite solid. However, in this age of online media proliferation, the research findings didn't say anything beyond the general use of information. It fell short of establishing any linkages between new media forms, the digital divide in African and how Information Communication Technologies can empower rural dwellers in terms of making their voices heard by contributing to discourses and holding their leaders to account through the media. In essence, information is used in its broadest sense without any referencing of rural people in the context of the news media.

According to Townsend et al., (2013), rural areas likely encounter financial and social challenges in view of issues relating to distance and their far-flung nature. They agree that Information

Communication Technologies, especially broadband can help such places by connecting persons, places, economic activities and services. At an increasing level, they affirm that a large number of daily activities are conducted online including banking, buying, working and social networking. This facilitates access to apparently unrestricted range of content, operations and resources as well as grabbing avenues for social interaction.

The gap in these findings is that much attention seems to have been placed on the importance of broadband access but how that enhances access and consumption of news, especially for the rural resident has not been explicitly addressed despite the mentioning of information. Also, online activities such as banking, shopping and social networking sound like the main priority for the middle-class whom news and other information online wouldn't have been an issue at all. The major gap inherent in this study is the fact it was conducted in rural Britain and is therefore no surprising that key findings in terms of priorities and implications aren't anywhere comparable to the African context. In comparison to the African context, these are dreams that are very far-fetched.

Afrobarometer (2020) reveals that Africa's media landscape is undergoing rapid transformation. It says frequent dependence on news has almost grown two-fold in less than half a decade, with a significant percentage of people that participated in a study in eighteen countries reporting that when it comes to news, they rely on the net or digital at least several times in a week. While radio remains the most popular major source in Africa by virtue of its user-friendliness and range, digital media are changing the information industry, and as a result politics with a transformative effect. In Africa, they establish that urban dwellers, the highly educated, male and, the younger generation are most likely to use consume media in Africa. This particular study resonates very well with the state of affairs in most African countries including The Gambia. In truth, there has been a

steady rise in the popularity of online/digital media outlets in most parts of the continent as internet service providers take maximum advantage of the digital revolution.

However, with the digital divide still a major reality between urban and rural settings in most African countries, radio sets still remain the main source of news and other vital information for a large majority. The findings of this research have great relevance to our own context in the Gambia looking at the way the ordinary people are now able to make informed political decisions as a result of the myriad of critical national issues that take prominence on digital/online media platforms. Further, Afrobarometer's discovery that persons in urban areas and most often the highly educated and the youth are most likely to use digital media in Africa also paints a true picture of the continent where those living in and around the metropolis tend to be the well-educated with a decent source of income that allows them to afford relatively high internet cost as well as the favorable internet coverage often accorded to urban areas at the expense of rural areas.

To build better systems and withstand the chaos, Musau (2006) proposes that media practitioners ought to adjust the needs of their audiences. As per his observation, the noteworthy fundamental coping mechanism for the continent's press is to leverage information technologies and to produce information in local languages in order for it to reach a larger number of the populace. With the exception of a few media entities in North Africa that publish in Arabic and within East Africa where Swahili forms their content, most media in Africa relies on European languages such as English, French, Spanish or Portuguese. This explains that news content might not easily reach a good proportion of the local populace that do not understand these western languages. This assertion captures the true state of most countries that experienced colonial rule. While there are shows in local languages, elitist bias by most online media continues as vital shows conducted in English in the case of Anglophone Africa and French for countries formally ruled by France. The

danger here is that the greater chunk of the people who comprise the very poor and marginalized are deprived of the opportunity to listen, watch and most importantly contribute to the shows in the form of feedback or even keep people in power to account based on the valuable information they possess.

In regard to the question of adaptation, Musau (2006) says it is important for the benefit of African audiences whilst Otieno (2009) is of the view that media executives have been forced to adjust their styles of telling stories and reexamine their business models if they want to remain competitive in view of the way the digital revolution has impacted on Africa's media industry. The latter equates the arrival of the internet and spread of mobile phones on the continent to bush fire. Describing the mobile phone story in Africa is breathtaking, Otieno (2006) recounts how there was hardly any mobile telephone network on the continent two decades ago with the exception of South Africa and Mauritius.

Even whereas Africa ranks only second behind Asia being in terms of population, (Otieno,2009) observed that it had ranked last in terms of telephone connectivity. He discloses that the continent had registered only 8.6 million telephone subscribers as of 1990 with Norway alone surpassing sub-Saharan Africa in telephone users. In the same vein, he described Internet as a dream by then.

The total sum is that the processes in media houses were mostly physical and audiences favored to consume media products in a non-digital way until the mid-1990s when and there was a transformative shift. The mobile phone reached Africa and, in just half a decade, fast outdid fixed lines in terms of penetration (Otieno, 2006).

In an article exploring and evaluating the growth of digital journalism in South Africa in the framework of increased online and social media use in the field, Bosch (2010) asserts that at an

increased rate, local activists are using mobile and online social networking to promote their events and causes, and reach their publics. In the same vein, he notes that journalists are making the most of digital media to practice their trade, reach new audiences, as in the case of citizen journalism.

The observation of Bosch (2010) in relation to local activists is very much apt in the way they continue to take advantage of the digital media ecosystem. In the case of the Gambia, local activists that operate online have become an important source of news for almost all the digital or online media operators, lending great credence to the two-flow theory of communication. As a result, they become not just key sources of online news, but more importantly they continue to shape public opinion in a way never before seen in the country.

With the growth of Web 2.0 and increased access to the internet, Bosch (2010) also indicates that digital journalism in South Africa has spread to cater for a huge focus on user-generated content, with mainstream news media using Twitter and other social media to generate feedback. This, as a matter of fact, is the reality not just in South Africa but even less technologically advanced countries. User-generated content from individual citizens has become a significant aspect of the online news media, especially in regions or communities that are hard to be reached by journalists.

Today equally, almost every digital news media and traditional media such as newspapers, radio and television largely operate their own social media handles where the stories they post allow for a greater interactivity with online audiences. Even more importantly is the fact that online news media operators are better suited to hear, take note and perhaps improve upon their news and other programming content based on the feedback that comes from their online audiences.

The proliferation of online news media outfits regardless of their tremendous gains have serious issues, especially in their amalgamation of their own social media pages. For instance, Reuters

Agency for the Study of Journalism's 2021 Digital News Report on South Africa indicates that social media platforms have become an important domain for corrupt politicians, unscrupulous business people, and conspiracist in their bid to discredit the news media. It cited the self-titled Radical Economic Transformation group that attacks journalists on the corruption hearings and former president Jacob Zuma, attempting to brand the coverage as racially motivated or by media biased toward a particular government branch.

Furthermore, in light of the apparent surge in online and social media platforms, Roper (2021) reports that fears over fake news over are 70 per cent higher in Africa than other parts of the world, with the global average standing at 58 percent. In South Africa, he says, there have been agitation by politicians for Facebook to be subpoenaed to parliament to discuss means through which it can tackle fake news on its sites. Facebook which now goes by the corporate name Meta reportedly owns three of the top six platforms used by South Africans with WhatsApp accounting for more than 80 per cent and Facebook over 70 per cent being the most used networks for news and other purposes.

Despite the recent growths in social media use in Africa, the continent still lags behind in comparison to other parts of the world. Facebook use, as Wyche et al. (2013) find out in a study in rural Kenya, is widespread in the advanced world where computers, good bandwidth internet, and electricity are adequate. And even whereas Facebook use is said to be on the rise as does social media participation by the populace, they reveal that charges associated with using the internet, limited access to computers and smartphones, coupled with erratic electricity supply impede online participation. As a matter of fact, the issue of internet affordability in relation to data bundle charges and electricity which remains a serious problem even for most urban settlements in Africa as well the overall poor technological infrastructure account for the major reasons responsible for

the digital divide in most of Africa, putting particularly those in rural settings at a very disadvantaged situation.

In this age of online news media, the trend of people sharing online news and other content on social media outlets comes with some serious credibility issues. Fake news are one of the highly debated phenomena related to news sharing on social media (Mustăţea, Maria, et al., & Balaban, 2019). Lazur et al., (2018) define fake news as invented information that impersonates news media content in form but not in the structural process or intent. According to the authors, fake-news outlets, in turn, lack the news media's editorial standards and steps for ensuring the correctness and authenticity of information. While Lazur et al., (2018) fell short of mentioning that journalists themselves can be propagators of fake news, especially those operating online, the appearance of fake news has been facilitated by journalists keen on quickly publishing news (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2017). This is attributed to the news media's desire to commit users to click on their stories by all means in order to produce advertising income (Scott, 2017), putting the media platforms at risk, as they can easily become avenues for misinformation (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2017).

Fake news happens to be the one of the issues examined in this study. It is proving to be one of the biggest conundrums associated with online news and online media in general, especially where users lack the skills and techniques to verify or fact-check the content they come across. It is a problem that goes beyond the news media alone, for people, especially politicians employ dissemination to cast aspersion on their rivals whilst others who have undergone huge scrutiny from the media for all the wrong reasons use fake news and fake media to discredit the media. Politicians and their acolytes are the guiltiest of this practice.

On a rather positive note, the sharing of political information on social media can be defined as a form of political expression including posting or suggesting news about public affairs and politics, offering one's network access to such information (Kümpel et al., 2015). The news-sharing component is highly crucial in terms of the civic and political life, as it encourages the participation and adherence to them (Oel-dorf-Hirsch, Sundar, 2015). Individuals are accessing only the news which corresponds with their own viewpoints or that of their associations, facing the risk of losing the ability to engage in more constructive and wider debates (Hargi ai et al., 2018).

Researches have proven that consuming content from the media, including content from internet-bases sites ignites political engagement. News use shapes political participation by building political knowledge and supposed effectiveness, while influencing the behaviours and the conclusions drawn by the citizenry (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000; McLeod et al., 1996; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Thorson, Swafford, & Kim, 2017). In the context of the United States of America, there is proof that accessing news through digital media is on a bright not linked with political contribution both online and offline (de Zuniga et al., 2009, 2012, 2014). In the same vein, De Zuniga et al., (2009) indicate that using social media or blogs to access news, as shown by studies, is key or even stronger in driving political participation in comparison to the conventional media, depending on citizens' demographic characteristics. This is remarkable given that more than half of the world's number now enjoys access to the internet and more than while three billion others are active on social media platforms, which serves as their source of news diet (Global Digital Report, 2018).

Bode (2016) does not only credit social media use for citizen engagement as it arms them with information on politics, enhancing their understanding of issues, but ((Dimitrova et al., 2014) adds that it equally connects them with other like-minded persons such as actors in politics, and partisan

establishments. As a result of this, consumers of social media are exposed to avenues of participation in social undertakings, thereby increasing their chances of involvement in collective ventures (de Zuniga et al., 2014; Dimitrova et al., 2014).

However, de Zuniga et al. (2012, 2014) says research has established that the power of social media use goes beyond online settings. arguing that getting news on social media sites was positively linked with political participation in both online and offline. Whereas the ties between media use and political engagement have attracted extensive studies in the advanced world, especially the U.S., investigations in African nations are reportedly less common. Beyond differences in the spheres of economics and politics, Nyirenda-Jere and Biru, (2015) charge that poor communication infrastructure could limit access to information and connectivity. result in limited information access and connectivity. A clearly testimony of such a scenario is the gap between the United States which stands at over 70 per cent and two African countries Kenya and Nigeria which respectively are rated over a little over 45 per cent and 47 per cent (Freedom House, 2017).

As such radio and newspaper are effective tools for political orientation, organization, and community development in both Kenya and Nigeria (Edegoh, Ezech, & Anunike, 2015; Omwoha, 2016). Nigeria and Kenya that are herein mentioned can be described as a microcosm of the general state of affairs on the African continent and the two countries as a matter-of-fact head and shoulders above a lot of African countries in terms of internet penetration. As such radio remains a valuable source of news and not just news but general information for a lot of Africans. Its affordability, portability durability and the fact that it doesn't require any electricity makes it a popular asset of communication, especially for rural people. In this age of digital communication,

the downside of this that radio seems to be late in the delivery of news given how net-based platforms do so as and if incidents and developments occur, sometimes on minute-by-minute basis.

Alarming, despite the global information flow (Vargo & Guo, 2017; Nwamwene, 2017), many African media are still dependent on western news sources (Kafaulu & Burton, 2013). This is due to the fact many of the continent's media are not sufficiently equipped to financially produce their own news beyond their closest borders (Segev, 2015). Such a trend has led to the media in Africa reporting and running news stories that have no, or little impact on their lives while neglecting those that are newsworthy. In the Gambia for example, even the state radio and television do carry significant chunk of international news, sometimes dominating local happenings in prime-time news. Almost every new bulletin aired caters for a segment called international news. Because those 'international news' are recorded ahead, they are usually way behind time by the time they are broadcast as more new developments would have unfolded minutes or hours later.

Thus, as a matter of concern to this study, the research seeks to question whether the bulk of the news and other programming content of Gambia's online media are in fact relevant to the local populace, especially those living in rural areas contending with dire social, economic, health and infrastructural challenges. Also, African media aren't only fond of reporting on developments unfolding in the western world, for most of the Gambia 's online media based on anecdotal evidence appear to be loaded with sound bites of the elites and the high and mighty resident in the metropolis largely operating in the spheres of politics, academia and showbiz. This study, as such, investigates whether the voices of the common man and woman are truly captured by the country's digital news content providers from the comfort of their studios. One likely reason for Africa's online media's coverage/publication of western news could be traffic generation purposes in view of the large number of readers such news stories attract.

It is quite interesting to note that, despite Africa's dire access issues, the continent is not alone when it comes to perception of fairness in degree of coverage by the news media. Fletcher, (2021) observes that in the United Kingdom for example, some section of the society considers the media to be too fixated with London, suggesting a North-South divide in how different areas are portrayed. Cognizant of those allegations, he indicates that both the BBC and Channel 4 recently had relocated their activities out of UK's capital. Even though on average most parts of Britain believe such as places like Midlands, the North of England, Wales, and Scotland do enjoy a somehow balanced degree of coverage compared to London and the South, those settling in the country's North East believe their places which haven't benefitted a lot in terms of media investment, are showcased in a manner they do not clearly recognize (Fletcher, 2021).

The gaps that can be poked in most of the literature is that nothing has been said specifically about the West African region as most inferences were drawn from Eastern and Southern part of the continent. However, while that is true, the African countries mentioned in the different literatures that were presented and reviewed in this paper are consistent with what obtains in Gambia, where this study is conducted.

Chapter Four: Research Methodology

In this chapter, the researcher explains the methodology employed to undertake the study. It deals with three sub-themes, focusing on the methodology of research, study sample and data collection as well limitations of study.

4.1 Research Methodology

The study employs a qualitative approach whereby interviews were held with five major online media executives/digital content operators in the Gambia. Additionally, questionnaires have been used to obtain information from people of different backgrounds in randomly selected communities in four of Gambia's rural regions. How rural dwellers receive, consume and process news and other information from online/digital media platforms in the Gambia were examined with a view to identifying the challenges they encounter factoring in internet access, affordability and the relevance of issues discussed on these platforms to their local realities/contexts.

The reason for choosing this methodology is that it allowed the research subjects to provide a deeper insight into their own situation in regards to the research topic without any external influence, prejudice or biasness. More importantly too, it is the most trusted and reliable way of collecting first-hand information from the target population as opposed to depending on secondary data sources which have the tendency to be misleading or misrepresenting the views and positions of the subjects of the study. The researcher has also gone through a number of scholarly articles or previous studies whose findings align with the focus of this study. These resources provide extra contexts and understanding of the online media ecosystem, their indispensability in modern day journalism practice and how they influence access to news and other information such as political

and civic engagement and more so inherent challenges faced by people in disadvantaged digitally deprived societies, especially in Africa.

4.2 Research Sample and Data Collection

A total of eighty people were recruited for this study across the four provincial regions of the Gambia. In other words, twenty respondents randomly took part in this research from each of the rural regions: URR, CRR, LRR and NBR. This includes women and men across the different demographics and background such as farmers, civil servants on postings in these regions, young people both in the formal and informal sectors and students. The respondents were aged 18 and above.

The researcher employed two sets of data collection techniques for the study. A one-on-one interview was the first research instrument used with online media executives as a way of understanding their content substance and coverage strategies, particularly reportage as they relate to people in rural parts of the Gambia. Among other issues, the in-depth interviews with them sought to assess the relevance of their news and overall content to the lives and livelihoods of the rural folk, and more importantly whether these online media that are now the most dominant actors in Gambian journalism do even conduct audience surveys that inform their editorial policies.

Interviewing has long remained an important aspect of social science research. (Dörnyei, 2007, as cited in Alshenqeet, 2014) argues that interviewing is ‘a natural and socially acceptable’ method of gathering data as it can be used in different settings, covering a variety of subjects. Other scholars notably (Bell, 1987; Kvale, 1996; Berg, 2007 as cited by Alshenqeet, 2014) recommend that interview should be implemented as a tool for social research as it facilitates the collection of unhindered accounts of people’s activities through a broad and comprehensive verbal interactions.

The importance of interviewing is that it doesn't only paint a complete picture of a particular situation, discusses words and takes stock of detailed views from respondents, it also enables the interviewees to express their own opinions and perceptions (Berg, 2007, as cited by Alshenqeet, 2014).

In addition to in-depth interviews, another way in which the researcher went about collecting data for this research was administering questionnaires to the research participants themselves. It mainly investigated the question of access, consumption, and relevance of online media content, especially news, but more crucially whether their voices are in fact captured or represented by the many online news media currently operating in the Gambia. The good thing about the two data collection approaches is that the responses from the research participants in rural Gambia serve to validate or invalidate those of online media managers.

The question format contained mainly a closed-ended, open-ended and multiple-choice questions, among the demographics. The data collection process commenced from 13th February to March 13th 2022. Within this captured scope, pre-prepared structured questionnaires were filled by respondents whose age grades range from 18 years and above. The field work resulted in 80 transcribed interviews with people in rural areas.

4.3 Limitations of study

There was a sense of reluctance on the part of some people to grant the researcher interviews, much more being recorded for the purpose of transcribing. Nonetheless, a good number of the research participants expressed their delight with the move taken by the researcher to meet them in their regions to talk about a topic that they considered as very important. A lot of them described it as one step towards making their plights known despite this being purely an academic exercise.

The remoteness of most of the communities made it impossible for the researcher to travel down to the most isolated villages in the regions to administer the questionnaires. This, compounded by logistical challenges in travelling to these far-flung settlements, compelled the conduct of the study in major towns across the four rural regions: URR, CRR, LRR and NBR.

Unavailability of in-depth interview tool in soft copy proved to be an inconvenience for some of the online media executives. This caused a delay in the amount of time some of them took to provide the answers needed from them which in turned t resorted to scanning their responses for them to be dispatched via email.

Certain respondents, especially those that couldn't fill the questionnaires on their own due to their lack of understanding of English, found it hard to easily grasp some of the questions and key terminologies therein even when the researcher translated for them. This created a back-and-forth explanation, thereby creating disruptions in the schedule allocated by the researcher to each of the four regions covered: URR, CRR, NBR and LRR.

There wasn't any recent nationally commissioned research report or findings on the state of digital divide or the general state of internet coverage/penetration in the Gambia that could be accessed by the researcher as part of this study. The one that was eventually available was largely focused 'Access to ICTs in the Gambia' and comes from a study conducted in 2013, nearing a decade now. Apparently, some of the figures cited under that sub-theme may not necessarily reflected the

current realities in the sphere of digital inequalities between urban and rural Gambia as they relate to the mass media, especially the online sector.



Chapter Five: Findings and Discussion

This chapter embodies the fundamental part of the study where the very results of the research are examined and presented as they relate to the ramifications of the online media industry on Gambia's rural audiences in terms of access to news and other information within the context of the digital divide. Being a qualitative method, the researcher relied on an analysis of the different themes that consistently surfaced from the responses of the research participants. The transcribed interview notes from the field informed the classification of the patterns out which a raft of preliminary conclusions was drawn. The key findings are hereby presented as follows:

5.1 Poor internet services and high data charges compounded by weak digital infrastructure

Despite the availability of multiple internet service providers in the Gambia, access to online news and other information thereof, as revealed by this study, is greatly hampered by challenges bordering on connectivity problems. Nine in every ten rural residents that were interviewed cited unreliable and weak internet as a reason they find it very hard to access online media outlets. The few number that visit online news sites namely Kerr Fatou, The Fatou Network, What's_On Gambia usually via Facebook with some degree of convenience are civil servants with Wi-Fi connections at their disposal.

In addition to the poor internet services that are experienced by all the provincial regions, the study revealed that high cost of data bundles is equally a major factor denying the bulk of people in rural areas from accessing and consuming news and other programming content relayed by online media in the country. Given that the majority of Gambians in rural settings live from hand to mouth, the respondents complain that the cost of internet bundles which mainly come in the form of megabytes aren't the least affordable. T.C, a young man in CRR sums it up when he says "you

cannot think of internet when you do not even have your basic needs intact. Light (electricity) alone is a problem when one wants to charge their mobile.”

As a result of the unaffordable nature of internet for most people in rural areas, some, especially the elderly relies on radio stations for their daily news and current affairs diet. Despite having about four GSM companies namely QCELL, AFRICEL, COMIUM, GAMCEL alongside other internet service providers in the Gambia, internet remains a largely unaffordable service even for those living in the urban centers. The most frustrating aspect of high internet data charges for most of the respondents manifest itself when they try to follow online media content that is in video form.

In fact, according to the 2021 Gambia Digital Economy Diagnostics Report administered by the World Bank, Gambians are required spend a whopping 47 percent of their average monthly gross national income (GNI) to consume 20 gigabytes. Alarming, the report says even 300 megabytes each month (10 MB per day) exceeds the 2 percent affordability target set by the International Broadband Commission. The report further indicates that that prices for mobile broadband are two or three-fold higher in the Gambia than in Senegal, the neighboring country with whom it shares all the social, cultural and economic commonalties, but the former French colony is said to generally outshine the Gambia’s entire digital infrastructure value chain. In line with this reality, many respondents in this study singled out WhatsApp platforms or forums as the alternative site in which they access news materials (audio and video) that are downloaded from online media networks, adapted and shared in several WhatsApp pages or news groups. From this study, it also became apparent that the lack of a smart phone is not in any way a stumbling block for rural people when it comes to accessing news and other information online, but rather a question of internet

affordability, quality and speed for a country where the bulk of the populace are said to be living on less than a dollar a day.

Due to the costly nature and slow speed of internet in the Gambia, the prospects of citizen journalism are virtually very slim or at worst nonexistent at all in the rural areas. Where a people are preoccupied by their daily survival, acquiring expensive but fast consuming megabytes for the purpose of filming and reporting incidents happening within their regions or communities is the last thing that would occupy anyone's mind. In the face of slow, disruptive, low penetration and expensive internet charges, alternative journalism which nowadays feeds into the new media ecosystems in most countries would become an illusion. This, as a result, also deprives the masses, especially those that are living far away from online media stations, of a powerful platform to make their own voices heard and be counted.

Table 1

Mobile Internet Usage and Coverage Gaps in The Gambia and Selected Peers

COUNTRIES	UNIQUE MOBILE INTERNET SUBSCRIBERS (million)	POPULATION (million)	3G POPULATION COVERAGE (%)	USAGE GAP (covered by a mobile broadband network but don't subscribe to mobile internet services)	
				Million	%
THE GAMBIA	 0.58	2.3	88	1.5	63.5
Structural Peers					
GUINEA	2.8	12.8	75	6.7	52.8
GUINEA- BISSAU	0.4	1.9	90	1.3	69.2
TOGO	2.0	8.1	66	3.4	41.7
Aspirational Peers					
SENEGAL	4.1	12.6	90	7.3	57.6
RWANDA	5.6	16.3	95	9.8	60.4
UGANDA	12.1	44.3	85	25.5	57.7

Adapted from The Gambia Digital Economy Diagnostic Report (Muller, A., Sylla, D., Kibuuka, K., Dib, F., & Grimsland, A. M. 2021, p.52).

In the grand scheme of things, the question of poor internet connectivity in rural areas generally underlines the overall state of the Gambia's fragile internet and telecommunications infrastructure which in itself continues to suffer from frequent outages whenever the Africa Coast to Europe (ACE) cable system experiences one problem or the other. is said to be the first international submarine cable to land in Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, Guinea, Liberia, Mauritania, Sao Tome and Principe and Sierra Leone. Another reason found to be exacerbating the issue of access to online media in the Gambia is that of electricity. With most people in rural areas of the Gambia lacking electricity supply in their homes, it becomes hard for them to power their smart phone in the first place for the purpose of normal communication let alone using it to access the internet. To address the growing concern of high internet charges, the study participants believed the government must play its part in regulating the telecoms sector, especially the GSM companies, all of whom are operating as internet service providers. There were affirmative calls that telecoms operators must also see it as a form of social responsibility to make internet both accessible and affordable for all, not least digitally disadvantaged people in rural parts of the Gambia. Recently, PURA in reaction to a study on the high cost of internet in the Gambia cited the investment by internet service providers on their own corresponding infrastructure as a likely factor.

5.2 Exclusion/ Under representation on the online media ecosystem

The feeling of being left out or deliberately excluded in the programming or news content of existing online media in the Gambia has come out as a recurring theme in this study. In other words, a good chunk of rural people is largely not on the new media ecosystem. Across all the different demographics in all the four provincial regions that formed part of this study (URR, CRR,

LRR, NBR), the lack of inclusion from the point of view of rural people was echoed prominently. And when asked what could be the reason for their voices not being captured as they should, they cited their remoteness from the metropolis as the one likely reason for not getting the attention they deserve from the numerous online media outlets in the country. In other words, priority, in their views, is given to urban audiences at the expense of those living in the regions; away from the Greater Banjul Area (GBA). In fact, none of the 80 people that were involved in this study could remember a moment when they had seen or met a reporter from any of the online media in the Gambia doing a story or program within their localities. B.N, another person in one of the farthest regions in the Gambia sounded even more frustrated when he said “the media do not consider we the rural folk. I think it’s because we live very far from their operational stations. They hardly come down here even though we too are citizens.”

An online media that has branches in two cosmopolitan centers in rural Gambia is Gambia Talents Promotion, a digital outlet that was first registered in the United States of America in 2006 and later in the Gambia in 2017 but even they didn’t get mentioned by the study participants as an online media that is doing well in capturing their voices. An in-depth interview with Gambia Talents Promotion revealed that they currently run eleven programs in total. These are entertainment, health, sports, culture, rural programs, women and children’s affairs, religion, politics, legal affairs and the environment. While ‘rural programs’ sound somehow general if not vague in the above-mentioned catalogue of programs, Gambia Talents Promotion mentioned ‘Teyesito’ as the one weekly show that is dedicated to different categories of people in the provincial regions. Even whereas health, culture, environment, as well as women and children’s affairs are cross cutting and that they each affect the lives of rural people, especially the poor and vulnerable groups, no research participant was able to explicitly name a program that they believe bears

significant resonance with their lives and livelihoods. The only issue of interest that they believed gets to be talked about is politics which by its very nature affects everyone regardless of their status or geographical location.

Similarly, an interview with the Fatu Network, an online TV in the Gambia that was established in 2014 equally revealed some very fascinating findings. The network's News Review program which deals with current affairs in the Gambia, coupled with interviews with several individuals, especially newsmakers, is the one daily avenue in which they supposedly capture the voices of the people in rural areas. The TFN also cited For The People By The People Show and Giss Giss as two programs they air with rural people in mind. However, the composition of persons that appear on these two popular programs indicate total dominance either by the educated elite or Gambians in the diaspora (America and Europe). Thus, this particular online media inadvertently lends credence to the assertion by the rural respondents that they are hardly considered by Gambian online media in their programming or news content.

Another much followed online media in the Gambia involved in this study is Kerr Fatou. With nine weekly programs, they have a content that purely showcases the strives of women and their daily challenges in mostly rural areas. Like the rest, they do visit rural communities when they deem fit and use such outings to conduct interviews and other recordings with people. However, what they do not have in place is a mechanism in which feedback from audiences in the regions are monitored, which can prove to be an invaluable asset for improvement of currently run content and the development of new concepts and ideas for better service delivery. Overwhelmingly, there was a general consensus by this study participants that their voices aren't being captured by the many digital media in the Gambia. Eye Africa TV which began operations as a purely online

platform has now joined the growing mainstream TV channels having been challenged by people to do so in view of its desirable content package. Eye Africa TV cites its 'Bii Tiloo' current affairs program as one caters for the needs of the masses, including rural audiences.

Another serious element that borders on exclusion and highlighted some of the respondents is the prominence given to the English language on most of the major online media in the Gambia. In reality, there exists local language content in the form of news and some current affairs programs. However, with elitist domination of most of the content, members of the populace that haven't undergone western education naturally do not understand some of the discussions they hold. While no particular online media have been mentioned by the respondents, their generalizations do hold water to a large extent if one considers the fact that they the online media have become the conduits for the dissemination of most of Gambia government press releases. The need to introduce more local language content, especially where issues affect the ordinary rural people cannot be emphasized.

As it stands in the Gambia, there is no single online media site that provides text-only content in any of the ten or so major local languages although online outlets that operate as in the form of TV networks all run one form of local language program or the other. In the grand scheme of things, the frustration surrounding the excessive use of English Language goes beyond the country's online media industry, for in recent times, there have been calls by some rights activists that for the benefit of a majority of uneducated masses, even National Assembly proceedings ought to be conducted in the local languages not only because parliamentarians are elected and are the people's representatives, but also the issues they table and discuss revolve around the social and economic developmental needs and aspirations of the ordinary Gambian.

5.3 Fake news concerns

Of all the issues that emerged as findings in this study, concerns over the dissemination of fake news stood out very strongly in all the regions. There has been unanimity on the part of the rural people that one of their worst fears or problems they have with online news media networks is the reporting of stories that do not align with the facts. This was raised by both civil servants from different government institutions that are on postings in the provincial regions as well as the ordinary people themselves. While no particular online media was mentioned, it was worrying that eight out of every ten persons interviewed cited the spreading of false news, especially about individual personalities as a major challenge or shortcoming they find troubling with the Gambia's online media networks and expressed fears that it could bring not just ethical issues for the media themselves but could threaten the peace and stability of the country itself. It was observed across the regions that this usually happens during political campaigns when rival candidates, their parties and supporters use every platform including any slight opportunity with online media journalists to assassinate the characters of their opponents. A.J, a civil servant on postings in one of the URR says "our online journalists should always promote peace and not to undermine our peace and sovereignty. Gambia is in a very delicate state. Some of them a lot of unfounded things. They need to verify before breaking any news."

Against the backdrop of such concerns in a society that is as conservative and as prejudicial as the Gambia, the research participants identified fact checking and verification of both stories and their sources before the broadcast or publication of any material to minimize harm or totally avoid the attendant pitfalls of fake news. Incidents of 'fake news' have in the recent past been rife in the Gambia, particularly in the new media landscape. It has resulted in bitter war of words between

digital media practitioners and politicians and at time even public officials. With a sharp rise in the usage of WhatsApp, online news or content that are deemed fake has the tendency of going contagious in every facet of the Gambian social media ecosystem. Further, the huge reliance of most rural folks on WhatsApp platforms as their primary source of news due to their limited participation in the new media ecosystem in itself also serves as recipe for the spread of fake news albeit unintentionally.

Considering the status of WhatsApp as dark social media, coupled with the fact that the majority of ordinary people not media literate and devoid of any knowledge and skills in information verification, they themselves become both victims and propagators of false information. This in itself becomes an equally worrying situation in respect of fake news at the level of the rural communities, adding to the concerns they have about the Gambia's new media industry. The irony here is that those that are trained by the Gambia Press Union and other media actors in fact-checking and verification techniques (in this case journalists) are the ones coming under scrutiny for the publication or dissemination of news and other information that are deemed to be misleading from those that are considered less educated and less economically endowed. It must be said that ahead of the December 2021 presidential election alone, different training programs have been provided for media practitioners in the Gambia by institutions like UNESCO with a view to arming reporters and editors with the requisite skills and techniques needed to detect and tighten the noose on incidents of fake news and hate messaging. But even with such efforts, concerns still exist among the rural populace that something needed to be done about the airing and publication of news and other contents that border on falsity.

When it comes to the general question of fake news in the Gambia, it is a trend that seems to have witnessed an unprecedented surge in the past five years due mainly to the widespread use of social

media use as a market place or rather a battle ground for political discourse amongst and between Gambians of all walks of life. While those debates have largely contributed to the public's understanding of the inner workings of the Gambian state and its leadership which in itself can be seen as a positive development in the aspect of freedom of expression, social media use and the discussions thereof have also turned toxic due to the polarized nature of our politics in recent times.

The number of individual citizens operating their own online pages in the Gambia has also created a rather troubling situation as far as fake news is concerned. Largely devoid of any formal journalistic training, some of these citizen journalists operating on Facebook seem to be enjoying even more followership than the conventional ones. Hardly without any expertise or inside knowledge of issues and policies of government, self-styled reporters and content producers have tended to talk about anything and everything at times without facts to back up their claims, particularly as they relate to governance and a plethora of content laden with politics.

Nowadays, there is also the small matter of the emergence of hyper-local journalism in the Gambia whereby narrowly focused websites or platforms are designed for the purpose of covering certain geographic entities such as regions, major towns and even villages. Understandably, the rise in this form of journalism could be down to the dissatisfaction with the mainstream media for their perceived failure in not catering for indigenous needs/context of certain localities. As with others, they too present a great deal of challenge in terms of responsible, factual and accurate reporting. Misinformation as a concern needs some contextualization here given that the online media industry is a relatively a very young sector in the Gambia that just started prominence in 2017. It is still a reality that concepts such as disinformation and misinformation and their differences remain unclear to certain sections of the Gambian media. The breaking news syndrome in the

country where online sites compete with each for clicks and views is regarded by many in the Gambia as a contributing factor to the spread of fake content.

5.4 Audience surveys not happening

As established by this study, none of the four main online television networks and the leading online investigative new site in the Gambia has ever conducted any form of an audience survey in any of Gambia's four provincial regions. This, to a considerable extent, justifies the argument by rural audiences that they do not get the consideration they deserve from new media entities. The lack of any audience survey or research by these new media platforms means contents that are supposedly tailormade for people in rural areas are only conceived within the confines of the newsrooms by media executives and their management without any input whatsoever from those whose behalf they are created.

When asked what informs their decision making in terms of news and other programming content, one online media said they rely on some of the issues that are raised by people in rural areas during tours by politicians. Even though it is commonplace among rural people to catalogue the raft of problems they are contending with during meetings with politicians, it is imperative to note that who gets to speak or says what in those sorts of gatherings tend to be micromanaged by either the politicians themselves or their handlers. Besides, it is one thing for a rural resident to tell a journalist or a media house content they believe resonate with their lives and livelihoods, what time they are available to follow those shows and how they can contribute thereof and another thing altogether to be interviewed by a reporter taking advantage of an opportunity presented by a political rally to sound their views on a burning issue.

It has also come to light in this study that in the absence of an audience research, one way in which a particular media generates content ideas is through the observation of trending daily and weekly developments which form the basis the basis of program ideas as in the case of a particular network, one of the biggest digital news platforms in the Gambia. F.C, an online media executive explains “we have decided to stick with the information we get from our page. With online media, you could see the insights from the page and that informs you.”

In terms of feedback generation, the obvious mechanism is through the comments on their web page, social media accounts and emails in some instances when people feel strongly about certain topics that are being discussed. And while rural audiences express the need to be met in their respective regions, decentralization and diversification of online media content for their voices to be heard and captured, online media owners cited financial, logistical and human resources, particularly in terms of reporters as the main constraints preventing them from conducting audience researches in rural communities and more so travelling upcountry to engage people there on matters that revolve around their way of living and their developmental aspirations.

Although all the five major online media in the Gambia cited resources, specifically finance, manpower and logistical challenges as the main hindrance for not conducting any audience surveys, there could be more to it. The other major factor might have to do with the dearth of capacity on the part of online media operators in the Gambia when it comes to undertaking a study of that nature. Even if it were to also be a purely resource issue, this study recognizes that media and communications research itself in the country, as crucial as it is, is not something that has been treated as a matter of priority in the country. The capacity question could also be attributed to

the fact that it is only a few years ago that the Gambia as a country has its first journalism school under the University of The Gambia and that it is only in the last few years that the faculty of journalism and digital media has started churning out graduates.

It would be surprising if any of the Gambia's state-run media themselves had carried out a national level audience research over the years. The one research that provides some aspects of media and communication in the Gambia was the one by the country's statistics bureau, but even that looked at ICT access and was done almost ten years ago. Conducting audience researches would be also in the best interest of the online media operators as they will get to know what sort of content are most desirable by the people, the right timing for shows and more importantly how their audiences access and utilize the information from these internet-driven platforms. Without any mechanism for feedback generation from indirect rural audience members that depend on WhatsApp to consume online news through video and audio clips, it is safe to say that Gambia's online media networks are missing on the opportunity to hear the perspectives of the common people on the content they provide which could help improve content packaging and overall delivery in a very meaningful way.

5.5 Digital illiteracy

As revealed by this study, access to mobile phones is not a major problem for most residents of rural Gambia with many of them having android phones for their day-to-day communication needs. This assertion is supported by the 2013 Housing and Population Census by GBOs which shows a relatively impressive access to cell phones from more than 65 % in Kuntaur, one of the farthest settlements to over 85 % in the capital Banjul.

Whilst smart phone possession today must be far higher than nine years ago when the GBOs study was done, it is only natural there have to significant increase both in terms of access and ownership of smart phones almost a decade later. KF, a middle-aged woman in NBR admits “I have a smart phone but the only I can do with is making calls, receive and send WhatsApp voice notes. That’s because am not schooled.” In essence, the tools of communication are largely found to be in existence, but the requisite digital knowledge and skills are glaringly lacking for a lot of people also. The bulk of those that are elderly people who haven’t undergone any formal or Western Education. This category of people is thus constrained to go online and consume digital media content, especially text-based information. A typical example of an online newspaper that launches investigations on alleged corrupt practices within the Gambia government is MALAGEN. The paper has succeeded in uncovering several cases of high-level graft, but the downside is that since it is largely in the form of text only, only the educated people are able to read and digest the issues they report on. With the majority of rural audiences without any form of Western education, they are by default not ruled out from consuming what appears on the pages of the Gambia’s premier investigative news site. MALAGEN, as a matter of fact, does cover and publish a raft of public affairs issues that are very pertinent to the lives and livelihoods of people in rural areas of the Gambia. These include the situation of shortage of portable water in the rural communities and the lack of fertilizer for poor rural farmers.

On account of this reality, their main source of new media diet becomes WhatsApp as they also keep wedded to the national radio and community radio stations that are now spread across all the provincial regions. It is important to point out that smart phones have gained prominence in rural areas just as the urban centers because they are the obvious choice for people, including the

uneducated elderly persons to communicate with their children living overseas in the form of WhatsApp voice notes and calls via the same platform. This is in sharp contrast to the situation of civil servants, other white-collar employees as well as young people in rural areas who are very much dependent on new media forms for their daily news and other information uptakes. By virtue of their low digital literacy level, particularly as regards text-based online content, most formally uneducated people in Gambia's provincial regions do not enjoy such characteristics of the new media like interactivity, hypertextuality, among others. More importantly however, digital illiteracy is a recipe for information blackout which in turn gives rise to ignorance. It doesn't augur well for civic and political awareness and engagement which in turns undermines their participation in democratic processes. This is significant by virtue of the fact that most agenda-setting, particularly in the realms of politics, governance and policy in the Gambia now mostly takes place on the digital media ecosystem. But for the issue of digital illiteracy to be addressed, policies and strategies at the national level must be formulated and implemented in addition digital awareness campaigns

5.6 Content relevance

Generally, the content being provided by most online media in the Gambia has been observed to be dominated by politics or political discourse. This has featured consistently as a recurring theme from the responses gathered. It is something that didn't come as a surprise at all because the very history of most Gambian-owned digital platforms is grounded on political messaging against the brutal dictatorship presided over by Yahya Jammeh. His ouster in 2016, paved the way for the opening of the democratic space which also gave rise to the emergence of a plethora of online

media sites in the country. Health, current affairs, agriculture, and education related issues have emerged a lot, especially amongst the educated respondents.

As the Gambia transitioned to a democracy under current President Adama Barrow in the aftermath of installation in January 2017, a lot of what transpires in the media in general revolved around politics, governance, democratization, transparency and accountability. That happens to be the very reality to this day as online media platforms compete for political soundbites and/or sensational attention-grabbing headlines from politicians across the different aisle.

The sacking of long-time opposition leader Ousainou Darboe as Vice President in 2017 by the President with whom he shared the same political party and whom the president described on many occasions as his political god father proved to be a major area of focus for the online media in Gambia in not just news reporting but their overall daily programming content. Consequently, the media were often accused of neglecting other sectors of the society that requires significant coverage.

Those charges against the online media in the Gambia were validated strongly by the findings of this research as some of the study participants highlight that their most pressing issues aren't getting the attention they deserve. When asked what issues are there that needs to be spotlighted by the online media but aren't getting the required, the high cost of living in the Gambia featured a lot as an answer. S.J, an elderly man in CRR put it this way "they need to talk a lot about the problems of we the poor farmers. Some of us are struggling to feed our families. Everything has gone up now."

This particular issue of concern by the rural populace might have also been influenced by the fact that the timing of this study coincided with a harrowing rise in food prices across the Gambia with most households, particularly those in rural areas struggling to feed their large family size.

Interestingly, while content choices depend on person to person and even as there was general disapproval of bias towards political content, there appeared to be a unique pattern amongst the certain demographics. Most women that were interviewed, especially in the North Bank Region identified challenges the female population face in marketing their horticultural produce while there was a resounding suggestion that the Gambia's health sector as major areas of concern that should be heavily and consistently be featured in the country's online/digital media content. This doesn't come as a surprise given that the gender-based division of labor reserves horticultural production as a female affair. With the increase in maternal mortality cases also in recent years, some women of child bearing age consider health issues to be an important subject that needs too much coverage by the online platforms. In equal measure, but on rather a positive note, corruption in the public service was highlighted as a governance issue that has been coming under attention by digital media platforms. This was a view largely shared by young civil servants across all the four regions. That too could be down to the fact that with their ability to read and advantage over the rest, they spend more time going through scandals and other issues of civic matters relating to the state. Unfortunately, while that observation may be apt, the one big source of frustration for many Gambians would be the lack of any tangible outcomes or actions alleged perpetrators of financial crime such as graft.

Conclusion

The intent of this research was to investigate and study how the emergence and proliferation of online media outlets in the Gambia are impacting access to news and other information for people living in rural areas of the Gambia using a qualitative approach. This comes amidst a paradigmatic shift in the nation's new consuming habits ever since the media landscape in the country became

a more liberalized and conducive one beginning in 2017 when a new democratic dispensation replaced the ultra-repressive regime presided over by former president Yahya Jammeh from 1994 to 2016.

It could be recalled that during the 22-year dictatorship that the country had been governed under, almost all the online news media that were serving as an alternative source of news for many Gambians were based in the diaspora notably the United States of America. Gambians at home were entirely reliant on those West-based media to uncover the gruesome human rights abuses that were happening in their own backyard due to the failure of the media in the country itself to report on any news critical of the regime. To a large extent, the few independent media in the country, especially Foroyaa and The Point did their best to give the citizenry news that the state-controlled media dare not broadcast. The state-owned radio and television were at best pandering to the whims and caprices of the president who had on several occasions boasted that even the cameras that were being used by the national television came out of his own pocket. As such, he could determine what was to come on air and not just that but could decide whose face appears on television and whose voice is also heard on state radio. Due to the president and the state's unwillingness to open up the media space and entertain dissent, Gambia had only one television station until 2017 when the first private TV was commissioned by a businessman Muhammed Jah under his Q Group conglomerate.

The fate of journalists in private news organizations were even worst. Not only have radio stations been burnt down on arson attacks believed to be masterminded by the state, a good number of journalists with the private press were killed, tortured or disappeared. The most prominent journalist assassinated at the behest of the former president Jammeh was Deyda Hydara, editor and co-proprietor of The Point Newspaper in December 2004 whilst he was closing from work. Calls

for the Gambian state to investigate his gruesome murder by the Gambia Press Union, Amnesty International and other rights organizations fell on deaf ears as the Jammeh regime showed no keen interest in launching any probe into his death. It only took confessions from members of the Presidential Death Squad called the Junglers at a truth commission hearing for members of the public to know the exact circumstances surrounding the death of the veteran journalists.

It is safe to say that with the ouster of the Jammeh regime in 2016, and the coming into force of a democratic governance system, the media in the Gambia today operates under a very liberalized and conducive climate. Radio stations have sprung up in not just the urban areas of the country, but every nook and cranny of the country including community radios that offer their audiences content in their own local languages and local contexts. While these community radios are owned and operated by the staff from within the communities themselves, most if not all of them have been established with the support of projects run by some of Gambia's development partners to raise awareness on critical development issues such as HIV/AIDS/ reproductive health, family planning, agriculture, culture and tradition, among others.

The biggest victory for the Gambian media since the coming of a new democratic administration is that it has opened the floodgates for the proliferation of a plethora of online media organizations that are now based in the country itself rather than abroad. Today, it is the online media that even sets the governance agenda in the Gambia as they have become the platform for the debate between citizens themselves, between the electorates and politicians, and a potent avenue for the discussion of current affairs. Thanks to the Gambia's online industry, the government has been compelled to act and fulfil certain responsibilities it owes the citizens. Where they have been found to be negligent in delivering their key mandate (s), citizens resort to the online space to hold the government accountable and make sure the wrong things they committed are rectified in a timely

manner for the good of the citizens. Perhaps, the most significant achievement that the country's online media industry should be credited for is their role in exposing incidents of official corruption by high-profiled government functionaries or state institutions. Through its spokesperson, the Gambia government has been compelled to come out to either clarify, refute or totally distance itself from allegations of graft or abuse of office whenever and wherever they have been made. And because of this, it is the online media industry in the country that has become the go-to space for the ordinary citizens, arguably even more than the national assembly when they want to seek redress for one form of executive redress or the other.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that the many online news media in the Gambia aren't doing a lot to capture the views and aspirations of the people living in rural areas of the Gambia despite the huge they are playing in the socio-political development of the Gambia. It is perplexing to find out that none of the online platforms in the Gambia that are involved in this study have ever conducted any form of an audience research to cater for the content needs and preferences of the people in those regions. That begs the question how they even conceptualize the assortment of content they have been and are still giving out to their audiences. In other words, they do not have any content strategy, but rather programs are designed and aired as deemed fit by the online media executives and team. Essentially, this points to gross marginalization of the ordinary people who are situated away from the urban centers where the online media executives and their organizations are concentrated.

In view of the findings of this study, it is evident that the concerns and aspirations of the rural people aren't receiving the spotlight they ought to have gained from the content that are provided by the online media industry in the Gambia. For instance, the high cost of living in the country is found to be a pressing issue that in the views of rural audiences is not getting the seriousness it

deserves. This could have helped refocus the attention of the government and other concerned parties such as the business community to be alive to the dire concerns and priorities of the poor rural settlers in doing something about the high cost of basic commodities. Giving that most of these rural people eke out a living as subsistent farmers, they lack the finances to spend big even on a bag of rice which is the Gambia's staple food. In fact, fertilizer alone is proving to be beyond the means of the farmers themselves. It is therefore not surprising to hear them express their dismay and disappointment with the people practicing online journalism.

On the contrary, what prevails is that the bulk of content that are published or aired is dominated by urban-based educated elite such as political analysts and university lecturers even where the issues that are talked about revolve around the very survival of poor and less educated rural residents. There has hardly been a case where someone from each of the four rural regions was called upon to serve as a guest or panelists in the daily shows that are aired by these online platforms, even if the issues that are being discussed have a direct bearing on the lives of these rural folks. It is no wonder the research participants from across the regions expressed a sense of exclusion on the online media ecosystem. There is also the issue of too much politicization of online media content. Despite the fact that governance issues tend to be high on their agenda, sensationalism and cases of political dogfights between rival political parties at the expense of more urgent matters that could have been accorded equal if not a more in-depth coverage. It is imperative from the foregoing that the online media industry in the Gambia is failing to uphold their social responsibility role of serving the common good which in this case would be the plights and concerns of the ordinary. It is evident that they are more involved in only setting the agenda in favor of the middle class rather than striking a balance between political content and

More importantly, as part of the key findings of this study, the high cost of internet in the Gambia in the form of data bundles comes as a very worrying matter for Gambia's rural residents, particularly in their quest to follow current affairs that unfold every now and then in the country. Given that the majority of rural people live from hand to mouth, purchasing one megabyte of internet package is proving to be a daunting reality for most people. The Gambia, as it has proven by research spends two or three times more than what her closest and more resource endowed neighbour Senegal spends on internet. Alarming two months after this study, a research firm called Statista upon its study on the cost of mobile data in the Gambia as of 2021 disclosed that one gigabyte of mobile internet in the country is found to be costing an average of more than five dollars. This state of affairs means getting to follow online media content for the typical rural man or woman becomes an elusive dream, forcing them to rely on news spread from word of mouth or WhatsApp audio clips that are usually hard to be verified. The situation is aggravated by the fast rate at which these internet bundles are consumed. This implies that even for people that have the means to easily afford internet, there is hardly any value for money as the four GSM companies in operation are considered to be exploitative by the consumers. What is even more frustrating is that the Gambia's telecoms regulator, the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority seem powerless to do anything about the exorbitant cost of internet in the Gambia attributing the situation to the liberalized market environment in place as for the way internet prices are in the country. As it stands, the Gambia sits eight on the list of the most expensive countries in Africa when it comes to purchasing mobile data. At the global level, the Gambia is rated 102nd from 230 countries as per the survey by the research firm Statista. Here, Van Dijk's theory of material and usage access are both prevalent in the Gambia since the cost of internet is beyond the reach of the ordinary people in the rural areas. And when a people lack the financial wherewithal to be on the digital ecosystem,

they are kept in the dark are regarding the developments going on in their own lives. As a result, their rights of holding their elected representatives, especially those in parliament get curtailed, thereby hampering accountability and transparency.

The Gambia's weak internet infrastructure poses a huge bearing on both the quality and speed of connectivity. Although there now exists a good number of internet service providers alongside the national telecoms operator GAMTEL, intermittent disruptions in the internet are very often. In the face of these disruptions on the internet, access to online media is denied not least for the rural areas where the coverage provided by the internet companies is not as strong as those in the urban parts of the Gambia. The coming into being of the Africa to Europe submarine cable in 2012 was hailed as a watershed moment in the country's digital infrastructure.

However, with the ACE suffering multiple outages, registering three of such in 2021 alone, reliable and quality internet services are never guaranteed for an extended period of time in the country. This doesn't only have implications for access to online news and other information in the country but in the grand scheme of things the entire business sector, particular banks and other financial institutions that the populace depends on daily basis to receive remittances for their feeding, health and school bills. As a matter of fact, the internet infrastructure in the Gambia also spells trouble for the online media operators themselves since in the absence of strong internet connectivity, which does happen a lot, newsrooms struggle to provide timely news reportage and other relevant content to their audiences. Consequently, what happens at the end of the day is an information blackout for the populace. Overall, the question of poor digital infrastructure is one main reason why Africa, particularly Sub-Saharan region is still lagging behind the rest of the world in the digital age. Thus, it is no coincidence that when live phone-in shows are being done by the numerous online television networks in the Gambia, the bulk of people who makes calls online

through WhatsApp are people living in the diaspora where reasonable and quality internet services enable to partake in those discussions at the mercy of people within the country itself where these online media are based and operate from. The great irony is that audiences that are based in western countries do not even vote in elections that happen back home despite their strong voices channel through the online media industry during the electioneering period.

Concerning the growing fears over the dissemination and publication of fake news, that has come as one of the major downsides of the new-found press freedom and freedom of expression in the Gambia. It is an issue even the mainstream media are guilty of despite the series of training programs by the Gambia Press Union and its partners. News organizations in their desperate attempts to beat one another to exclusives and scoops at times let themselves down by not doing the due diligence in fact-checking certain stories confirming their veracity. It is a scenario that can also be blamed on the large number of online media outlets operated and run by self-styled journalists. Those kinds of platforms almost outnumber online news platforms being managed by well-experienced and highly trained journalists with the editorial acumen to determine what stories are fit for publication and which ones are not bearing in mind ethical principles such as accuracy, fairness, truthfulness, impartiality among others. In the face of the high rate of digital illiteracy in the Gambia, it is out of place to conclude that even though a lot of Gambians now own smart phones and are relatively technologically savvy, the proliferation of the online media industry has brought with it the propensity for the spread of fake news. The situation is worsened by the fact that almost every single political party in the Gambia today operates their own online television platforms and social media handles managed and run by their respective media wings. With little if any journalism training at all, what these partisan online media channels do is more of

propaganda rather independent media work. Consequently, they do not help in efforts by the press union and other civil society groups to nip in the bud disinformation and hate speech.

This study has so many academic and policy implications for the Gambia. First, the significance of this research is that it is the first of its kind to be conducted in the Gambia as confirmed by the Gambia Press Union. And being the umbrella body of Gambian media practitioners, including online media journalists and their executives, the findings of this study could serve as a useful resource for the Gambian media fraternity. If anything, it will challenge them to do more by living up to their Social Responsibility theory of making sure that there is fairness and adequate representation of people in the rural areas in their coverage, news reportage and other programming content. In particular, for media organizations that were part and parcel of this research, very useful lessons can be drawn from this study should the key findings be shared with them. This would allow them to reinvent the wheel from a content point of view, thereby ensuring that they can set the news agenda in favor of poor, less privileged rural dwellers. In turn, they can make the government alive to their developmental challenges, needs and aspirations, especially when it comes to all-important matter of the high cost of living which they continue to grapple with on a daily basis.

Further, this study presents an opportunity for media and communications researchers in the Gambia to further explore digital divide research in the country beyond its linkages with mass media. Given that the issue of digital rights has become an important subject in development work these days, it is research that would immensely contribute to the campaign to also bridge the gap between people in rural and urban parts of the Gambia. With digital rights becoming a growing subject in human rights and governance circles, especially for poor and disadvantaged communities, Internet Society Gambia, a not-for-profit body might as well find the content of this

work useful in their efforts geared towards promoting the use of the internet for the good of societies.

Also, students of the University of The Gambia's School of Journalism and Digital Media could find this research work a useful academic tool, especially in both their Digital Media course and Mass Communication which exposes them to mass media theories like Social Responsibility which is one of theoretical frameworks in which this study itself is situated. Beyond the Gambia itself, this study should provide a snapshot to non-Gambians and others outside Africa with a research interest on the continent's online media industry and the state of digital infrastructure, particularly in the Sub-Saharan region access to the internet still leaves a lot to be desired.

On a more important note, this study can avail the government of the Gambia and its agency responsible for regulating the national telecoms sector a blueprint to fully comprehend not just the state of urban-rural digital divide but also draw insights from the study that could be instrumental in helping to better regulate the country's ICT sector and improve service delivery. The much-maligned high cost of internet as consistently featured in this study should be an issue of interest for the government to make sure that internet service providers do not charge prices that are deemed exploitative for the ordinary consumer. With the majority of Gambians finding it hard to put food on the table, it would be prudent if government through its telecoms operator to come up with better policies that would make access to internet and other digital technologies a matter of national priority as opposed to a privilege for only the rich and the educated.

Apart from ensuring that better internet tariffs are instituted with punitive measures against internet service providers that are bent on profiteering, the findings of this research should also give the policy makers in the Gambia a window through which they would understand the not-so-favorable ICT environment. Problems arising from internet quality and speed are much more than

an issue of news consumption by the populace, but rather one that has serious ramifications for foreign investment, and the national economy itself. Having just created a new ministry for Communication and Digital Economy, there is no better time than now to address the problems associated with the current state of Gambia's internet sector. The importance of fixing the country's poor digital communications infrastructure in rural areas also goes beyond addressing the news and other information of the rural audience as it equally bodes well for the education of rural children. It could be recalled that during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic between 2019 and 2020 when schools were forced to shut down and lessons delivered through the existing mass media in the country including radio and some of the major online TV channels, hundreds if not thousands of children in four provincial regions faced huge difficulties in accessing the virtual classes as the widespread social and economic inequalities meant they lack the resources to provide the much-needed radio and television tools ; a problem compounded by the lack of electricity in those less endowed settlements.

Suggestion for further research

This research has yielded some useful conclusions on Gambia's online media industry and their ramifications for rural people in terms of access to news and other information within the framework of the digital divide. Notwithstanding this, the following suggestions are being made for further research:

1. A comparative study of both urban and rural areas as regards this research topic could prove even more useful and interesting giving that in spite of the urban-provinces divide, Gambians generally share similar economic challenges while the state of the internet infrastructure itself in the country leaves a lot to be desired in the aspects of quality and penetration.

2. In view of the experiences of the researcher in terms of female participation which may have a bearing on the representativeness of the findings, further research might do better by engaging women in focused group discussions. It has been proven that in deeply conservative societies where the culture of silence is still prevalent amongst women, conducting separate interviews with the women folk away from men yields more frank and unhindered discussions or responses as they feel less pressured , shy or intimidated to provide their own independent views.

3. For the convenience of both the researcher and some study participants such as media executives, providing them the research instrument electronically could help save more time and energy without the trouble of travelling and meeting them in their work places. A timely completion of the tools could have a positive bearing on the progress of the data analysis and the overall success of the study itself.

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APPENDIX-I

Questionnaire for People in Rural Areas of The Gambia

INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS STUDIES

Questionnaire for rural people

Note: This exercise is purely an academic one designed to collect data on the implications of online news media proliferation for rural people in Gambia in terms of access to news and other information. It is in partial fulfilment for the award of an MA degree in Media and Communications Studies, Faculty of Communications, Ankara University, Turkey.

1. Questionnaire no:
2. Sex/gender of respondent: M F
3. Age:
a. 18 -30 b. 31- 40. c. 41- 50 d. 51- 60 e. 61-75 f. 76 - 80
4. Occupation:
a. Farmer b. Fisherman c. Civil Servant d. Community Leader e. Student f. Other
5. Region or Local Government Area
a. NBR b. LRR c. CRR. d. URR
6. Do you follow news, current affairs and other information that comes from the Gambian media?
a. Yes b. No
7. Do you also follow news, current affairs and other information that are broadcast or relayed from the country's online news media?

a. Yes b. No

8. If **no** is the answer, what is preventing you from following any online news platform? Could you kindly specify the problem/issue?

a. Poor internet service/penetration b. High/unaffordable data cost c. Lack of smart phone. d. Lack of computer e. Other

9. If **yes**, could you name the online news media that you usually follow for news, current affairs and your other information needs?

a. Kerr Fatou b. The Fatu Network c. Suu Radio. d. Facebook e. Twitter f. WhatsApp forums g. Gambia Talents TV h. What's_ On Gambia

10. How do you access these online news platforms?

Mobile phone. b. Computer c. Tablet d. Other

11. Do you think the online news media outlets showcase or talk about issues that are of interest/relevance to you or community?

a. Yes b. No

12. If **yes**, kindly name the main issue (s) they talk about that are of interest/relevance to your lives and that of your community.

13. Could you list these issues in order of significance/relevance?

a. b. c. d.

14. If **no**, what makes them uninteresting or irrelevant to you or your community needs?

15. Are there any issues that you think deserved to be captured by Gambia's online news media but are not being given serious attention in your view?

a. Yes b. No

16. If **yes**, could you kindly share these issues.

17. Do you believe that the online news media platforms in Gambia in general or the ones you follow capture your voices in their reportage or programming? In other words, do you think people in rural areas have the chance or the opportunity to participate on shows by the online media, either as in-studio guest or by phone-ins?

- a. Yes b. No

18. What in your opinion could be responsible for the non-participation of rural people in the shows/programming of online news media?

19. Generally, what problems or challenges do you experience when it comes to accessing news, current affairs and other programmes from the online news media you follow?

20. What would you consider as the shortcomings or weaknesses of online news media platforms in the Gambia?

- a. Mis/disinformation (Fake news) b. Too much focus on politics. c. Bias in favour of the urban elite
d. Too much prominence given to English Language e. Other

21. What would you suggest as areas of improvements for the online news media platforms both in terms of content and access?

Thank you for your time

APPENDIX-2

Key In-depth Interview Tool for Online Media Executives

INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS STUDIES

In-depth Interview Tool

Note: This exercise is purely an academic one designed to collect data on the implications of online news media proliferation for Gambia's rural communities in terms of access to news and other information. It is in partial fulfilment for the award of an MA degree in Media and Communications Studies, Faculty of Communications, Ankara University, Turkey.

1. Respondent no:
2. Name of online media
3. Year of establishment
4. Number and types of programmes currently run by the online media in question
5. Do you cater for the voices of rural people in your news reportage and/or programming?
6. How do you ensure that the voices of rural people are captured in the contents you produce and air?

7. Do you have any program right now that is targeted at people in the rural areas i.e., a program that is designed with the people in the rural areas in mind?

8. If yes, could you name the shows/programmes and how often do they come?

9. How do you initiate these programme ideas? In other words, what informs these programmes ideas?

10. Is there any mechanism to specially get people in the rural areas participate in the shows/programmes, either through in-studio quests or phone-ins?

11. Is there any mechanism in place to monitor feedback from people in rural communities?

12. If yes, what are some of the things or issues they have been raising?

13. Have you ever conducted any audience research or survey at the level of rural communities?

14. If yes, what were the main findings or results?

15. If no, could you explain what prevented you from doing any such exercise.

16. What internal shortcomings or weaknesses do you have that need addressing in order for your media to be responsive to the news and other information needs of rural people?

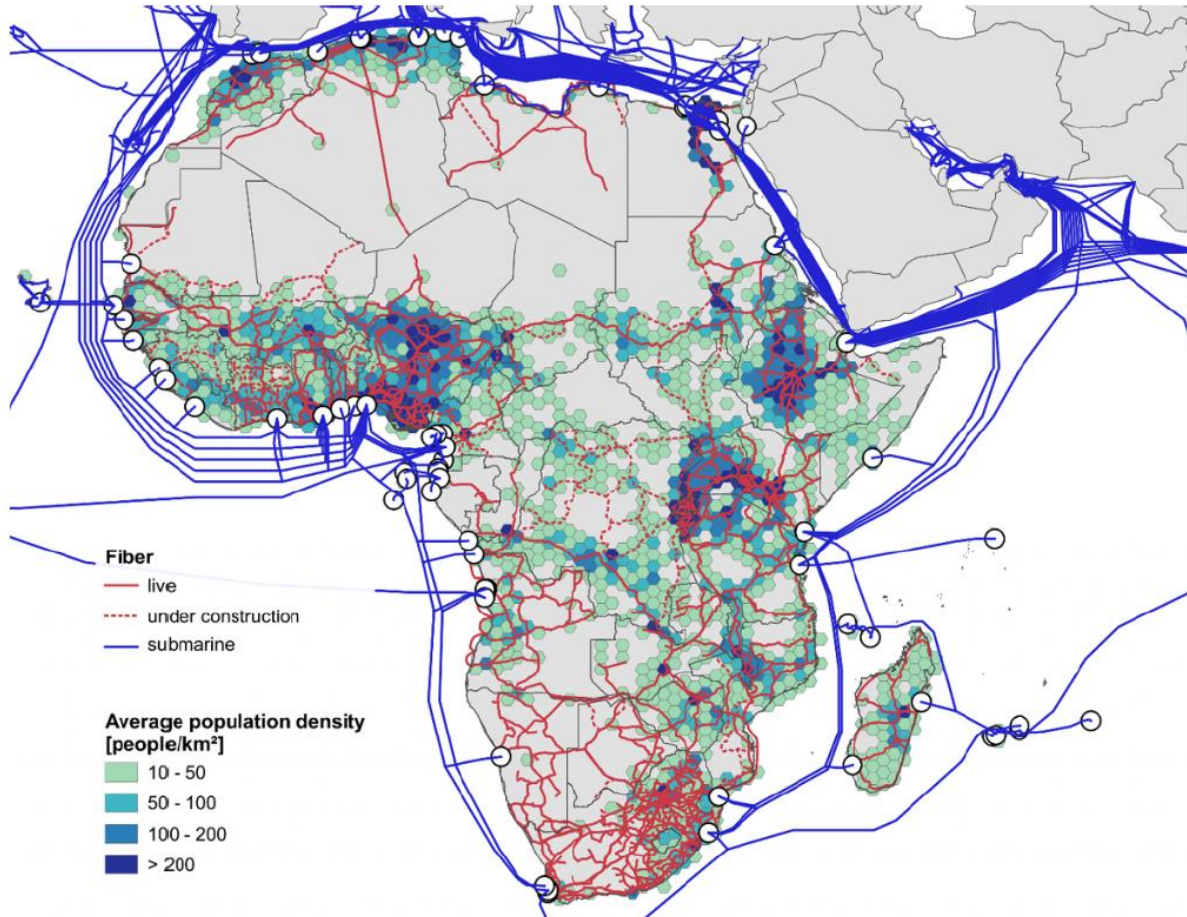
17. What do you make of the digital divide between urban and rural Gambia and does this in your view influence the way rural people access news and other information from online news media platforms including the one our own or manage?

18. What do you think should be done to address the phenomenon in the Gambia?

Thank you for your time.

APPENDIX-3

Visualization of fiber infrastructure in Africa and population density, showing unserved regions



Note: Total population is estimated for each 10,000 km² hexagon; those with populations below 100,000 are excluded. Fukui, R., Arderne, C., & Kelly, T. (2019). Africa's connectivity gap: can a map tell the story?'. Digital Development, 7