

## **Role of the Media in Africa's Democratization Quest: A Case Study of Ghana**

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In most African states, political openness and tolerance is measured by the non-existence of government censorship, and also the ability of the media to operate without fear. In agreement with the debate posited by Wasserman (2013) including other scholars suggests that the media is capable of building democratic structures as it provides a platform for continuous discussion, communication and dialogue amongst various stakeholders within the state. The objectives of this paper is to assess the disadvantages of sensationalism in the media on the democratic development of Ghana

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Although the media plays an important role in the advancement of democracy, its merit has been overshadowed by the advent of over indulgence of sensationalism. This is because media ownership and prominence for crime reportage continues to formulate public opinion and views along political lines thereby reducing national integration and collective response to national issues. In most African states, political openness and tolerance is measured by the non-existence of government censorship, and also the ability of the media to operate without fear. In agreement with the debate posited by Wasserman (2013) just like most scholars suggests that the media is capable of building democratic structures as it provides a platform for continuous discussion, communication and dialogue amongst various parties within the state. The objectives of this paper are to assess the disadvantages of sensationalism in the media on the democratic development of Ghana. The paper will examine the various roles Ghana's media played in strengthening the country's democracy by gathering data from news publications, media-public engagements and scholarly articles. Likewise, media development and Ghana's political history will also serve as a reference. The media as a tool in empowering civil society to participate in politics in Ghana will be discussed while considering factors that either facilitate or hamper the growth of democracy.

### **Media Development in Ghana**

Democracy generally referred to as government by the majority, dictates that the globally accepted and appropriate means of managing resources - human and natural alike and involves an inclusion of all members of the society in state making. After World War II, global awareness was drawn to the dangers of dictatorship governance. The concern was to eliminate the tendency of absolute concentration of power amongst a few elite within nations.

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In Africa, the debate became prominent as most African leaders employed dictatorship rule and strict control over the affairs of the state, citizens and media. Such a system of governance placed authority in the hands of few which contributed to high infringement on human rights and non-existence of rule of law (Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah, 2012).

In Ghana's political history, the media has transitioned from era of strict censorship and government control (1956 to 1991) to free speech (1992 onwards). According to Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah (2012), vibrant media and civil society emerged creating civil–military relations, which facilitated the process of democratization. As result most military policies were replaced with civil processes of governance such as the full autonomy of parliament, judiciary and the security forces.

Governments before the Fourth Republic, controlled the media with strict rules governing its establishment and operations. There were limited private media entities to compete with State owned media. Private media entities had to choose either to be active supporters of the ruling government or risk being shut down, harassed or its officers imprisoned. After May 1978, General Akuffo, led media freedom exercise which was characterized by withdrawal of cruel media policies and released some jailed journalists and opposition members. The action led to the establishment of two party papers, "The Star" which propagated the doctrines of the Popular Front Party (PFT) and the "Gong Gong" which was for the People's National Party (PNP). Dr. Hilla Limann who took over from Jerry John Rawlings by winning a general election on September 24, 1979 on the ticket of PNP, later advocated for liberal media reform which established a twelve member Press Commission on July 25, 1980 (Temin and Smith, 2002).

But his government did not last and was overthrown by Jerry John Rawlings under the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) on December 31, 1981. Rawlings changed almost all the laws that gave some liberty to the media and replaced them with those that impeded their operations. These policies also affected all media entities including the state owned media such as the Ghana Broadcasting Corporations (GBC) and Daily Graphic and for that matter most editors were sent on early retirement and some dismissed out rightly. When Ghana finally adopted the 1992 Constitution, as stated by Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah (2012), there emerged a 'culture of silence' as there was not a clearer understanding of expectations in terms of media freedom and operations despite the fact that this new system of governance provided a considerable transparent governance and accountability. Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah (2012) argued that, the reason for this phenomenon was a as a result of non-preparedness and understanding among the people, government agencies and civil institutions. More so, Ghana's democratization was seen more as a means to gain global attention and access funding and assistance in supporting and boosting the economic structures of Ghana. For instance, after the economic reforms under the 1992 constitution, donor funding increased. Likewise the number of donor institution providing assistance to Ghana equally increased. Donors include World Bank, African Development Bank, European Union, Nordic Development Fund, Arab Bank for Economic Development of Africa, International Monetary Fund and many more.

The introduction of the national Constitution dictated governance processes, entrenched fundamental human rights, justice and multiparty democracy. Rawlings won the general election and became the first president under the Fourth Republic on the ticket of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) (Temin and Smith, 2002). Since democracy gives much prominence to the fundamental human rights which consist of freedom of speech and guarantees the freedom of the media, Rawlings opened up the air waves and repealed all laws that impeded the free flow of information and operation of the media.

Freedom of the media, enshrined in the constitution which allowed for establishment of media businesses without government interference, prohibited any form of censorship and protected media personnel from arrest or any form of abuse from government, private organizations or persons. Signifying an end to media abuse, Joy FM became the first privately owned media house to be established in 1995. Other, several radio stations sprung up in various parts of the country as well.

In addition, the repeal of the criminal libel law that mostly empowered governments to prosecute media broadcastings and operations on the basis of 'national security', further empowered more free speeches within the media. Today, there are about 136 newspaper businesses, 50 television stations (including satellite television), 146 FM stations including BBC, Voice of America and other international media organization and countless online journalism (Gyimah-Boadi & Yakah, 2012).

Democracy alone poorly implemented and managed does not have the ability to promote freedom of the media and its people. Two important factors contributed to the freedom enjoyed by the media from 1992. The first was the legal framework-constitution which contained laws that gave and protected the rights and freedom of the masses including the media (Temin and Daniel, 2000). Without this framework, the operations of the media would have still remained controlled.

The second factor emerged as the borders of Ghana opened to international involvement and participation in the country's development, implementation and adherence to the tenants of democracy was prioritized. As key players, multi-governmental organizations such as DANIDA, USAID, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation as well as Policy mentors such as Centre for Policy Analysis (CEPA), Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), Private Enterprises Foundations and IMANI were among the many civil institutions that monitored and ensured that governments did not interfere in the operations of the media (Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah, 2012). Greater part of these institution functions were in the areas of training, advocating and supporting media entities in the country.

Again, from the global level, there existed a growing need of governments to gain international recognition and increase support. In order to maintain global image and goodwill, there has been effort among governments and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) alike to improve the work of the media and its operations. In agreement with Matterlrt and Thussu (2009), the mass media today represents a central point of global cultures. As a result of globalization, the media must conform to certain standards in its reportage to be considered fair and easily accessible by the masses to be considered transparent. This gives governments and the country as whole positive rating amongst international community. The argument is that, once freedom of the media is guaranteed, the masses can participate in political discussions and keep governments in check.

Globalization and modernization has contributed to media development in terms of its programming, influencing and shaping cultures and also from the national perspective as a tool of providing adequate information to members of the diaspora of issues happening in the country. Matterlrt and Thussu (2009) debates that globalization as a postmodernity condition, has influenced media programming, content and dissemination of information. David Harvey as cited by Matterlrt and Thussu (2009) defined globalization as "a concept referring both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as whole". Backed by the understanding of mass production and 'geographical mobility', media entities tend to import foreign content to gain international recognition as well increase audience.

The challenge however, is that most African countries view this as unitary and does not take into consideration time, place and issues surrounding globalization. Stuart

Hall a key British Cultural analyst cited by Matterlirt and Thussu (2009) states, “globalization has been thought in unitary way, represented as absorbing all the differences. It is necessary to move away from this notion of singularly, unitary logic of capital which does not mind where it operates in order to fully understand the issues of globalization.” This is important because the media ‘certify reality as reality and when their certification are doubted or opposed, as sure they are, it is those same certification that limit the terms of effective opposition’ Hawk (1992). Therefore it is important for the media to approach globalization using the down-top approach and carefully analyze foreign contents that serve the benefits of the nations as a whole. Media presentation is needed to contextualize information about the nation outside the limits of commercial and financial correspondents and restrictions of governments.

## **Role of Media in the State**

The control of media operations in times of oppression has taught an important lesson if democracy is to be developed and sustained. Such lessons are embedded in complete understanding of the role of the media as a civil institution with vested interest in maintaining and sustaining democracy. Peter Wanyande in ‘The Media as Civil Society and its Role in Democracy Transition in Kenya’ (1997) explained that, the media should not be perceived as an institution only occupied with guarding itself from state encroachment but a civil society player with the aim to promote the interest of other civil associations using political space.

Gorman and McLean’s (2009) points out that the mass media is considered a viable tool in nation building and politics, to shape opinions and public understanding. It helps build unity among the masses towards a common purposes and resistance to authorities of dictatorship and oppression. Therefore, it becomes imperative that governments controlled the ‘minds’ of the people by controlling the media. According to Gorman and McLean’s (2009), ‘capitalist society maintain social control and cohesion through ideology: the culture industry reproduced the values necessary to maintain capitalist society; and the media made people passive recipient of the dominant ideology’. This is an indication that, the media forms an active part of civic society, shaping views, opinions, perceptions and most important determinants of the actions of the masses. Gorman and McLean (2009) states that, “the growth of the newspaper as vehicles for radical political ideas, attracted official attention. Governments took steps to limit the press, lest it became a means of spreading of radical or revolutionary sentiment that might undermine established authority.” Pro-governmental propaganda is usually employed to create a form of acceptance and trust amongst the people so governed.

One of single function of the media is to inform and educate the masses and by so doing shape public opinions through the presentations and interpretations of facts. Through repetition, structuring and framing, the masses are made aware of the happenings in government. Through such public awareness governments are forced to account to the public. Hawk (1992) argues that, “the mass media have become the core system for the distribution of ideology. That is to say every day, directly or indirectly, by statements and omission in pictures and in words, in entertainment and news and advertisement the mass media produce field identities and associations, symbol and rhetoric, through which ideology becomes manifest and concrete.” By informing the public, a discussion of government actions are held at the grassroot level. This promotes a sense of belongingness and inclusiveness in the governance amongst the public.

As stated above point, the media is considered a key factor in the formation of public perception and opinions. This helps the public to determine which political leaders lead the country during elections, exert pressure on government to cause changes and make the machinery of government accountable and transparent.

Adding, a democratic state, the media is an agent capable of promoting development. Government machinery is mostly considered to be overburdened with responsibilities in maintaining the socio-economic fabric of the state. As a result, pertinent issues of public concern are usually glossed over or neglected. It is through media reportage, news and documentaries that grabs the attention of the governments and civil institutions to take the necessary action. The importance of television in any country is critical as it a medium through which several successes could be achieved in areas of development. It is a medium through which information and other education programs are relayed to the public. According to McCauley et al (2003), "when television was introduced in a number of countries, it was also viewed as an instrument of development. Priority was given to educational programs for schools, teacher training, literary programs and promotion of national development projects." This goes beyond infrastructural provisions to addressing some pertinent social issues in the country. For instance the government of Ghana, civil institutions and the international community's attention were drawn to the corrupt practices in most public institutions through media broadcast of the works of an investigative journalist Anas Aremeyaw Anas. Anas in 2011 uncovered corruption at the Ghana Ports and Harbor Authority (GPHA). The report brought about structural changes within the operations of the Authority. It is through such activities of the media, that the society is made an active part of charting new course and participating in governance.

Elections are considered another key factor and benchmark in a democratic state. Credible elections are where the leadership of the country is determined by the masses through voting in free and fair elections. Most African countries have witness chaos during these exercises as government attempts to alter the 'voice of the masses'. It is based on the global understanding that, elections places power in the hands of the masses referred to as electorates. Through elections, citizens are able to demonstrate their commitment in building a society of equal opportunities for every member to exercise their sovereign rights. Simply put, the masses have the final say to accept, reject or maintain a set of leadership through elections.

Conducting elections is an expensive exercise but obviously one that cannot be ignored as it encourages public participation in nation building. Since the adoption of the 1992 constitution, Ghana has organized successful and peaceful elections and now considered as an icon of democracy in the Africa Sub-Region (Paul, 2012 ).

Temin and Smith (2002) accounted that, elections in Ghana has been a flashpoint for chaos due to tensions between ruling party and opposition parties. Debates are usually carried as a do or die affair. The media campaign for peace, mutual respect and tolerance has been an important contribution to peace building. For instance, Ghana's 2008 general elections was considered as test of the country's democratic accolades and ability to sustain peace and national coherence. The election was peaceful with little pockets of mishaps as expected in a human society. The Chairman of the Electoral Commission (EC), Dr Afari Djan, on the eve of December 7 declared late President John Evans Atta Mills as the winner with 50.80% of the valid vote for the presidential results. Upon the declaration, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) challenged the results and its leader Nana Addo Dankwak Akufo refused to concede defeat. The media lunched a campaign for peace immediately to offset any confusion that was likely to arise. By so doing the masses were enlightened to put the nation first and value peace above political defeat or victory. Without this contribution of

the media, matters surrounding the elections would have been thrown in doubt and speculations which could fuel misunderstanding and chaos (Temin and Smith, 2000).

Democracy thrive on openness and accountability, with one very important exception: the act of voting itself. To cast a free ballot and minimize the opportunity for intimidation, voters in a democratic setting must be permitted to cast their ballots in secret. At the same time, the protection of the ballot box and tallying of vote totals must be conducted as openly as possible, so that citizens are confident that the results are accurate and that the government does, indeed, rest upon their “consent”. Based on this assumption, media house conducts their own collation of results and tallying during elections. Its mandate has not been to announce the winner, but to provide the general public with a point of reference for the verification of results communicated by the EC.

One of the most difficult concepts for some to accept, especially in nations where transition of power has historically taken place at the point of a gun, is that of the “loyal opposition.” This idea is a vital one, however, it meant, in essence, that all sides in a democracy share a common commitment to its basic values. Political competitors do not necessarily have to like each other, but must tolerate one another and acknowledge that each has a legitimate and important role to play. Moreover, the ground rules of the society must encourage tolerance and civility in public debate. The media has been the championing platform for the exchange of views and ideas to build public tolerance among oppositions (Wasserman, 2013). When elections are over, the losers accept the judgment of the voters. If the incumbent party loses, it turns over power peacefully. No matter who wins, both sides agree to cooperate in solving the common problems of the society. On the contrary, the opposition, whether it consists of one party or many, can continue to participate in public life with the knowledge that its role is essential and worthy in any democracy. They are loyal not to the specific policies of the government, but to the fundamental legitimacy of the state, the public and to the democratic process itself.

In a pluralistic society, one in which the reach of government is limited, tends to offer election losers alternatives for public service outside government. Those defeated at the polls may choose to continue as a formal opposition party, but they may also decide to participate in the wider political process and debate through writing, teaching, or joining one of many private organizations concerned with public policy issues. The media aids in advancing this important aspect of democracy by giving equal platform to all parties, persons and institution to communicate their views and opinions to the masses.

## **Challenges of the Media in a Democratic Nation**

The media face numerous challenges in the space of a democratic nation. Media ownership has been one of the foremost concerns of scholars in assessing the level of factual dissemination of information to the public. Media ownership also referred to as media convergence or consolidation according to Shmykova (2010) is defined as “concentration of media ownership is a process whereby progressively fewer individuals or organizations control increasing shares of the mass media”. Shmykova argues that this creates a situation where governments and individuals through several media outlets shape the opinions and perceptions of the masses. Information only reflects the agenda of the party and not that of public interest. As a result of lack of restrictions for the establishment of media organizations backed by constitutional provisions, politicians are setting up media businesses to advance their political ideologies.

Simon et al (2003) equally suggests that media ownership could be understood from Pigouvian theory which is primarily concerned with public interest and responsibilities

of the media-government or private owned. According to Simon et al (2003), government control media has three importance. First, that information is a public good without restriction to certain segments or section of the public. Every member of the community is assured to receive the same information irrespective of social, economic or political standing. Second, the provision and cost of production does not rely on available of revenue generated from advertisement or donation. For that reason, information is sure to reach its intended audience with no additional cost. Lastly, government owned media is mandated to provide unbiased and factual information to the public. With public media, the masses “control” the media guided by the provision spelled out in the continuation.

On the contrary, public choice theory stipulates that ‘a government-owned media outlet would distort and manipulate information to entrench the incumbent politicians, preclude voters and consumers from making informed decisions, and ultimately undermine both democracy and markets’ (Simon et al, 2003). Private media gives alternative information thereby creating alternative views and opinions and forming public agenda. As pointed out by Simon et al (2003), private media “enable individuals to choose among political candidates, goods, and securities—with less fear of abuse by unscrupulous politicians, producers, and promoters.”

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the competition among media firms creates a healthy information hub where credible information is assured. The existence of private media side by side with government owned serves two importance purposes. First, it serves as a guarantee to personnel of government media entities to provide information without fear of abuse or censorship. Because, if such responsibilities are neglected the private media will move quickly to fill such gap, gain public trust and recognition. Secondly, the private and competitive media tends to perform checks and balances on the arms of government in a democratic state for which it is called “the Fourth Estate”. It performs its watch dog role ensuring that the Executive, Legislature and Judiciary performs their duties and responsibilities as stipulated in the constitution.

The media is a civic institution that plays an important role in promoting democracy in Ghana. Aside its traditional role of educating, informing and entertaining the masses, it provides civic society the platform to debate ideas that shape perceptions and opinions needed for nation building and sustainability. As the Fourth Estate of the realm, it allows the masses to make government accountable and transparent. Simply put, it checks the over concentration of power in a single government.

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