

Politics, human rights and the media in Ghana

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The most important developments in the Fourth Republic that have facilitated and expanded media freedom and free speech are the introduction of independent and private broadcasting, the end of state monopoly and control of broadcasting, and the arrival of the new communications technologies of digital media and mobile telephony.

Introduction

Politics and the mass media are as interlinked as, to borrow a local expression, the teeth and the tongue. Neither can do without the other. Since the newspaper, the first medium of mass communication, was first developed, it has always served as an instrument for the pursuit of every significant social cause or movement everywhere in the world. So has radio and television broadcasting. And so today, in the 21st century, are the internet and digital media serving those same purposes. The media are instruments of mass information, education and influencing public perceptions and opinion.

They are therefore vital in the never-ending contests for the control of state power and of the management of the socio-economic resources of the society. They have been instruments for capturing and maintaining power, as well as for resisting the injustices and abuses of power. In sum, the mass media are as vital for the promotion of cultural objects such as literacy and general social enlightenment, as they are indispensable for the promotion of social justice and political inclusiveness and popular participation.

Because the media are so central to the control and maintenance of political power and to the dominance of ideological and cultural influence, who owns and controls the media – that is media policy – has also always been a critical terrain of political and social contestation. This is the reason why the media so often become targets of suppression and restraint by varieties of social and political forces whose interests may be threatened by the media's work one way or another.

In Ghana, the story of the mass media's place in the political development of our society has followed this same general pattern.

In this lecture, we will start by surveying the role and place of the media in the political development of this country from when the newspaper was first introduced here, with a look at the media's place in political life today. We will conclude with an overview of the media's attitudes to human rights in recent years.

The colonial period

As soon as there was a community of literate people, the idea of newspaper publishing became a possibility and a necessity. And once it was established, it took on its natural role of serving as the platform for public communication in politics: the management of state and public affairs. The first

Ghanaian owned newspaper was established in 1857. Exactly one hundred years after that, what is now known as Ghana became an independent new nation. The role of the newspaper in the mobilization and education of the people for the struggle for independence is well documented and assessed elsewhere.

For almost that whole period of a century, there was no foreign owned newspaper initiative until in 1950 when the Mirror Group London established the West African Graphic Company the introduction of the Graphic newspapers changed the face of the newspaper industry and the practice of journalism forever.

But during the entire colonial period, the press was owned by the trinity of (a) the church, (b) the intelligentsia of the nationalist movement and (c) intermittently the colonial state-which, indeed, was the first to introduce the newspaper (1822) and a little over a century later the radio (1935). The church press was primarily established for Christian evangelism. But quite often the church press took up the cause of social justice. Another important contribution of the church press was the development of Ghanaian languages. Apart from the church press, the only significant effort at publishing Ghanaian language newspapers was by the state, under the Bureau of Ghana Languages, from about the mid-1950s until the mid-1960s.

The nationalist press from inception took on directly political functions of information, commentary and debate. Progressively, however, they developed an adversarial and activist character and outlook. Thus, from the end of the 19th century, nearly every important member of the nationalist intelligentsia published a newspaper. And every organised political group also published a newspaper to promote its cause. John Mensa-Sarbah pioneered the party press as he set up the Gold Coast Aborigine as the organ of the Aborigines Rights Protection Society, the first modern political organisation in our history. He set it up with the fees the Fanti chiefs paid him for his services in the fight to protect their lands from expropriation by the British.

The party press

Though the UGCC, the first political party to propose colonial freedom as its objective, did not have its own newspaper, each of four of the Big Six published a newspaper or two: Ako Adjei (The African National Times), Akufo Addo (The Statesman), J. B. Danquah (Several newspapers during his adult life. He in fact made the second important attempt to publish a daily newspaper), and Kwame Nkrumah. Danquah and Nkrumah published the most newspapers among the nationalists of their time.

The idea of the party press, publications owned and managed by political parties, was most prominent during the height of the anti-colonial struggles in the 1940s-50s. The CPP had a newspaper in a number of principal urban centres: The Evening News in Accra, The Daily Mail of Cape Coast, the Morning Telegraph in Sekondi, the Takoradi Times and the Ashanti Sentinel in Kumasi. The National Liberation Movement published The Liberator. And Kwame Nkrumah articulated most succinctly the political objects of the newspaper.

For him, the newspaper “is collective organiser, a collective instrument of mobilisation and a collective educator – a weapon, first and foremost, to overthrow colonialism and imperialism and to assist total African independence and unity.”

After independence

After independence and under the one-party government of Kwame Nkrumah, the CPP set up the Guinea Press which published the party’s propaganda and ideological newspapers and magazines to

propagate socialist ideas and politics: among them, *The Evening News*, *The Spark*, several periodicals for the party's mass organisations like the Young Pioneers, women's association, student organisations, etc. It also published for the international market, Africa and the world, a magazine on anti-imperialism and African Unity.

The political party press was also a prominent feature during all the short-lived transitions from the military dictatorship to multiparty constitutional rule. The party press proper, however, went out of existence in the Fourth Republic. It was instead replaced by partisan media, especially radio and television stations, owned by individual wealthy leading members of political parties in the service of the communication purposes of their parties.

The state control and monopoly of the media was an intrinsic part of the structures of the one-party socialist state. The justification was that, after independence, the principal tasks of the entire society were of nation-building, national unity and economic development. These were not compatible with the cacophony of the differing, dissenting voices of privately owned and oppositional media.

To ensure conformity the post-colonial state sustained and enforced, rather than reformed, the colonial legislation that made critical and dissenting voices criminal offences. These included sedition, seditious libel and criminal libel. When the Preventive Detention Act was passed, the first victims to be rounded up for detention without charge or trial included A.D. Appa and Kwame Kesse-Adu, respectively editor and Accra correspondent of the Kumasi-based *Ashanti Pioneer* newspaper.

The military dictatorships that followed the First Republic maintained these same criminal laws to silence critical and dissenting voices. To ensure strict controls on private or independent press publication, each military junta, except the three-month-long Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, also re-introduced the Newspaper Licensing Law first enacted by the CPP government.

The PNDC, the longest ruling military authority, was harshest among the military regimes in silencing dissenting voices among the media and journalists. Apart from detaining arbitrarily more journalists than others before it, it banned several publications or created conditions that made it impossible for them to operate. It was the only regime to have tried and imprisoned (for 20 years) a journalist on charges under the State Secrets Act. The PNDC's suffocation of independent voices, besides it being an inherent character of military dictatorships, was also necessitated by the regime's determination to silence any opposition to its imposition of the harsh neo-liberal economic policies, structural Adjustment Policy, dictated by the IMF and World Bank.

Radio and politics

From the very first broadcast in the US in 1919 as a medium of mass communication, radio broadcasting has also always been used in the service of all kinds of political causes and objectives. When it was introduced in the Gold Coast in 1935 Governor Arnold Hodson, who initiated the development, had no misgivings about its uses for political objectives. He said that one of the objectives for radio was to combat the nationalist intelligentsia's press whose publications he considered to be "communistic" propaganda.

During the 2nd World War, the young broadcast station, Operation ZOY as it was called, was used to mobilise the colonial subjects to support Britain and its Allies. When the government introduced the Ewe language on the station, for instance, the principal purpose was to broadcast anti-German propaganda to the people of German-held Togoland.

Radio (and later television) was introduced as a project by the state and it remained state-owned and

controlled until 1995. Broadcasting policy was presented as an instrument for “national development”. There is no doubt the Ghana Broadcasting Service, later corporation, was possibly the most important institution in the promotion among the citizens of the new independent country, the idea and consciousness of a nation called Ghana to which we all belonged. At the level of cultural integration, however, that project of building a national consciousness was quite limited. It was not until 1986, fifty years after the coming of radio, that any of the languages of the communities that later became Upper (East and West) regions were used in broadcasting.

After independence broadcasting played very successful and important roles in educating and mobilizing the people for various programmes of social, economic and cultural development. It also contributed remarkably in the construction of a united, single multi-ethnic political state called Ghana. However, coming under the monopoly and control of successive authoritarian government systems – one-party and military-broadcasting made little or no contribution in the development of a culture of unconstrained popular participation in public affairs discourses. Instead, it became an instrument for promoting what, under the PNDC, became known as the “culture of silence”.

Under the PNDC, not only was access to the state-owned media closed to civil society and independent, much less critical, expressions. The regime employed some of the private press also in hounding persons and groups perceived to be opposition or “saboteurs”. The regime used the press for surveillance of its perceived and real critics, in the process setting them up in the public mind as enemies so as to manufacture justification for their repression.

In this period, the Ghanaian political exile community also set up press publications which were smuggled into the country to mobilise resistance to PNDC rule from afar. Inside the country, they still continued relentless efforts at publishing independent newspapers against the strictures of the Newspaper Licensing Law. In this throttling environment, one channel which some of the irrepressible spirits of freedom of expression used in their yearning to voice critical opinion was through columns of the many sports and lotto newspapers that proliferated in the 1980s. These were columns written in Aesopian style that employed satire, euphemisms and proverbs in the commentaries on national political affairs under the PNDC but disguised as sports issues.

It was all very logical then that, even before the repeal of the Newspaper Licensing Law in the 1990s, the return to constitutional democratic governance was heralded by a spring, a flowering, of private press initiatives from the last years of the 1980s. The champions of the new era of free speech and free press included Tommy Thompson’s Free Press, Kofi Coomson’s The Ghanaian Chronicle and Kabral Blay Amihere’s The Independent. It was also to be expected, considering the repressive experiences of PNDC rule, that the language of the newly freed press would be robustly uninhibited, absolutely irreverent to authority and decidedly focused on attacking the person, family, cronies and comrades of the architect of PNDC rule, Jerry John Rawlings.

The media in the Fourth Republic

The two most ensuring outcomes of the democratic reforms and constitutional governance of the Fourth Republic are (a) free, fair, transparent and peaceful elections, and (b) the prevalence of freedom of speech and of media. And it can be said without any contradiction that the progress of democratic elections has been sustained and advanced by media freedom and citizen’s freedom of speech and expression.

Indeed, the most important developments in the fourth republic that have facilitated and expanded media freedom and free speech are the introduction of independent and private broadcasting, the end of state monopoly and control of broadcasting, and the arrival of the new communications technologies of digital media and mobile telephony. The global and local political environments

aside, innovations in the technologies of communication in the 1980s and 1990s made untenable, impossible and unsustainable state monopoly and control of mass media and information dissemination. These facilities, enabled by constitutional guarantees and civil society commitment to protecting these rights, have promoted the phenomenal citizen participation in public affairs discourse via mass media.

As with newspapers from old, political parties have made use of broadcasting in their contest to control state power and the management of public resources. The result is partisan capture of broadcasting and of the public discourse. And thereby the polarization of public affairs debating which threatens the promotion of a culture of democratic discussion for public affairs.

However, even more serious for the future of unencumbered media pluralism and cultivation and tolerance of diversity of opinions in the media, indeed for the essence of freedom of expression through the media, are developments in trends in media ownership in the country. In a two-part article appearing in its issues of April 27 and 30, 2015, the *Public Agenda* warned that the ownership dynamics in the private media industry show a pattern towards “convergence of business, politics and media”. In other words, there is a growing tendency toward concentration and monopoly of media, especially in broadcasting. And this development is even the more insidious and inimical to free speech considering the fact that there is, as the *Public Agenda* put it, “a nexus” of interests between business and politics.

The development takes the form of politicians in business, on one hand, and business people invariably with connections on all sides of the political divide on the other, together owning controlling sections of the commercial media.

In terms of media policy and regulation, we have already seen the potential dangers this trend poses for democratic practice. The first is that frequency management by the NCA has been densely opaque. The second is that successive governments and parliament have refused to enact a broadcasting law that might put some limits to this inimical development that threatens to subvert freedom of expression, not from the state but, from the private business sector.

But can a democratic reform oriented broadcasting law slow down or reverse this trend for the promotion of unencumbered media independence and pluralism? But it may even be questionable if the media ownership cabal of an alliance of political and business elites will encourage enforcement of rules and regulations that threaten their hold on these vital instruments of economic, political, ideological and cultural dominance.

The Ghanaian media and human rights

Madam Chair, I want to end with a short overview of the Ghanaian media’s attitudes and handling of human rights issues.

States have predominantly always been the perpetrators of human rights violations and abuses. In recent decades, as a result of so many factors, non-state actors, including especially various kinds of armed combatants, have also joined the league of perpetrating human rights violators. Yet the state still leads the race.

With this as the context, it is hardly conceivable that in countries like Ghana with long decades of state monopoly and control the media would investigate or cover human rights issues.

However, the state-owned media have sometimes exposed human rights abuses and advocated for reforms when the issues were of cultural and other social origins and do not confront the state as perpetrator. It is in this context that the state-owned media exposed and called for reforms

concerning the *trokosi* phenomenon in the Volta Region, the witches' camps in the Northern Region and against practices such as female genital mutilation and for improvements in the lives of female potters, *kayayei*. Interestingly these and others the state media have often addressed relate to women's collective rights but not the civil and political rights regarding personal liberties of citizens which are often the terrain of state repression and violation.

The private media, on the other hand, when the environment permits, have often taken up causes of human rights protection. The introduction of investigative journalism in the Fourth Republic, and the use of broadcast programme formats such as the radio documentary have enabled sections of the independent media to investigate and expose cases of violations of rights. Even then, it appears all the media have concentrated more on socio-economic rights issues than they have done on issues pertaining to civil and political rights.

The media's limitations on reporting on human rights are due to institutional weaknesses such as lack of investigative capacity and excessive focus on officials of government or public and traditional institutions. Most media do little independent research and do not question critically government actions and policies. Most media are news reports and not much in-depth features based on research and investigation. Usually, too, the media make very little or no follow-ups to news reports on rights violations for findings by non-governmental organisations working in the field of human rights and governance.

Conclusion

Generally speaking, the media could do much more under the prevailing conditions of freedom of the media and citizen's expression in investigating and seeking redress for violations of citizens' rights. It is to be acknowledged also that violations of civil and political rights, such as personal liberties, under the Fourth Republic are not likely to be widespread and alarming as they were under previous authoritarian and dictatorial political regimes. What is obviously visible are social and economic rights of citizens which demand constant media exposure, campaigning and advocacy for resolution and reforms.

The first is the threat to media pluralism and independence posed by the ownership trend toward concentration and monopoly. The second is the gaping absence of coverage of issues concerning the conditions and interests of the poor, the working classes, and thereby the majority of the labouring masses. These are the social groups whose votes count but whose voices count very little in the corridors of power. Perhaps their voices do not reach the powerful because they themselves do not shout, are not organized, do not have their own political parties, and therefore the media too can afford to ignore their existence.

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