

## **Informing the Public: How Ghana's Newsrooms are Learning to Change**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Advances made in information and communication technology has impacted on the operations of journalists and the nature of information that is being disseminated, especially in developing countries. In Africa, the dynamics of the emerging information society has compelled media organizations to introduce modern communication instruments to catch up with the times. Many of the major newspapers in Ghana now have their on-line editions. In a nascent democratic system such as in Ghana, information plays a vital role in enabling the citizenry to make well informed choices and decisions on important national issues of public interest. Some people have argued that internet connectivity in the newsroom has broadened (or better still, is broadening) the boundaries of information beyond the immediate locality of media environment to a global audience. Yet paradoxically it is argued that the current trend of news dissemination by media houses through the internet rather than accelerate the pace for more people to have access to information may widen the information gap between city dwellers and people living in rural areas in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa. In responding to the current challenge of using state of the art digital technology in newsrooms, what is the state of preparedness of journalists and media organizations in ensuring that their major role of informing, educating and entertaining people is well catered for? How is journalism education system responding to the technological changes occurring in communication by ensuring that people trained are adequately equipped with basic ICT skills to face the task in the field of practice? Does the broader system of ICT infrastructure in Ghana constitute a formidable and credible base to facilitate the process of shift in the mode of operations of journalists? If internet connectivity and the speed of getting information across to those connected is what it means to be in the information society, what is the implication for traditional media, (how they can support NGO work among lower-status groups – how of the training and skills) which still constitute vital sources of information for many people in Ghana, and indeed in many developing countries? The paper seeks to give answers to these pertinent questions by focusing on current shifts in major Ghanaian newspapers as they attempt to use modern communication technology to inform the public. It is an exploratory study, which attempts to put into perspective through document analyses and participant observation, debates surrounding journalism, participatory communication and global divide in accessing ICT to foster a knowledge-based society worldwide.

**Key-words:** Access, participatory communication, on-line news, traditional media, information gap, ICT skills.

## 1.0 Historical Overview of the Press in Ghana

Ghana's press institution is one of the oldest in Africa.<sup>1</sup> In West Africa, journalism dates back to the first part of the eighteenth century (Merrill 1995). Ghana was the first Black African country to gain political independence from Great Britain in 1957. Since the country gained independence in 1957 the expectation of Ghanaians for a truly pluralistic press scene was fulfilled with the inauguration of constitutional democracy in 1993. The cancellation of the Newspaper Licensing Law (PNDC Law 211<sup>2</sup>) in 1992 was one essential factor that paved the way for freedom<sup>3</sup> of expression in Ghana.

The state-owned press—the *Daily Graphic* and the *Ghanaian Times*—dominated the print media scene before the fourth republican constitution, providing some guarantees for the protection of press freedom in Ghana. The Constitution of Ghana states: “All persons have the right to freedom of speech and expression, which include freedom of the press and other media.”

Today in Ghana in comparison, the media landscape has witnessed a marked improvement. On the newsstands for example, there are eight dailies, 14 bi-weeklies, 50 weeklies, and nine monthlies (Lugey 2005: 5). In fact, there are more than 100 print media publications registered with the National Media Commission (NMC). There are 900 journalists who are members of the GJA. The independence of the media was guaranteed by the 1992 Fourth Republican Constitution of Ghana. Journalists now perform their work without undue pressure from the government. Notwithstanding these advancements in the freedom that the press now enjoys, some concerns are being expressed about the irresponsible manner in

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<sup>1</sup> The press in Africa goes back over a century. Countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya have had some of the best-developed press systems (Herbert 2001, 207).

<sup>2</sup> The powers of this decree dictated what was known as a “culture of silence”, which subjected the Ghanaian media to intense repression and control for 11 years. Among the journalists imprisoned not all survived the oppression. A few months after his release from prison by the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC), John Kugblenu of the *Free Press* died.

<sup>3</sup> It must be stated that, as important as it is for the press to be guaranteed freedom from government restraints, the obligation of the press to exercise their freedom for the interdependent communities in which they are situated is of primary importance still. This implies that real freedom for journalists means having a deep sense of responsibility, which carries with it the obligation to actively oppose economic, political, and social injustices—that is, to remove whatever impedes the freedom of other persons or groups (See Ferré 1986).

which some journalists report. It must be pointed out that “even though journalists in Ghana have won the battle on quantity, they are yet to win the battle on quality”.

**2.0 Methodology: The Structure** – Changes occurring in newsrooms through the introduction of new communication technology affects not only the mode of operation of journalists, but also the manner the public is informed. The analysis is based on the shift in newsroom operations of three major newspapers. Data was collected through observation and interviews with journalists.

**Theory/Hypothesis:** Journalism schools or media houses could incorporate into their training programmes not only ICT skills, but knowledge of indigenous forms of communication in order to enable journalists produce culturally relevant information that could respond to the needs and aspirations of the general public.

### **3.0 Journalism Education in Ghana and Communication Technology**

The issue of how to ensure that journalists receive quality education is a major concern for people, especially interested in enhancing the standards of media performance in Ghana. Despite the fact that in Anglophone Africa, Ghana was one of the countries to start running a journalism training school in the late 1950s, much still remains to be done in terms of raising the standards of journalistic education. A Ghana News Agency report ((GNA, April 13, 2008) has indicated that there is an incidence of “mushrooming of journalism training institutions”.

The phenomenon of the unprecedented growth in journalism training schools is not peculiar to Ghana. Nigeria alone has some 45 such institutes (Anyakora and Pokiskum 1996). In a brief survey, Ogundimu, Oyewo and Adegoke ([www.ajs.uwpress.org/](http://www.ajs.uwpress.org/)) have reported that the rapid growth of the media sector in West Africa over the last ten years has fuelled a major demand for trained journalists and other media practitioners. This demand-supply pull has meant a remarkable expansion in the number of journalism and communications training institutions and programmes in West Africa. Another notable factor is because of the liberalized economic regime prevailing in many countries across Africa, especially those with democratic systems of governance.

The problem of how to ensure that the performance of journalists is of professional quality is compounded by the presence of quack journalists, mostly employed by particularly the private press. These journalists sometimes ask silly and embarrassing questions at press conferences and other important functions. The implications of this development on the quality of journalistic education can be observed in the new and more commercially oriented schools, which do not seem to offer better prospects. The high demand for journalists to fill job openings in the newly established media outlets has put a lot of pressure on Journalism Training Institutes. With this development quality standards in the training of professional journalists should not be sacrificed at the point of supply on the altar of commercial interests. The reality is that even in the older institutes for the training of journalists such as the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ) state-of-the-art facilities for effective teaching and learning leaves much to be desired, little can be said of the newly established private institutes. A UNESCO report (2007) has indicated that Ghana failed the eligibility criteria to qualify among twelve other countries as potential centres of excellence in journalism in Africa

Today, it is of paramount importance that journalists apart from having the relevant technical skills, are well equipped intellectually to enable them sharpen their abilities to interpret information and report on events in a more meaningful manner. The pace at which internet is becoming accessible to people the world over, has provided opportunity for people to become more analytical and sophisticated in the manner of reading news and events occurring in the media landscape. It is therefore crucial that African journalists become conversant with new technologies in information gathering, processing and dissemination (Ochieng 1992), and the ethical implications of using these technologies (Pratt 1994).

In Ghana, the training institutes for journalists and media organizations lack modern communications technologies. The teaching and learning of ICT skills as an inevitable technical skill, is yet to take a firm root. However, an exception can be made for South Africa. Not only does it boast of several technikons (vocational colleges) and university departments that offer courses in journalism and media production, it is also a leader in relevant and new technology in information and communications (Nyamnjoh 2005). Though this is a commendable effort worthy of emulation, the debate still persists in scholarly circles as to whether journalists who are well educated can be described as professionals. In fact, this precisely is the problem facing journalism and communication training because individuals desirous of becoming journalists are lodged between two choices - formal training and training on the job. There seems to be no consensus view on who qualifies to be a journalist.

Notwithstanding the differences, Kasoma (1999) has noted that everyone seems agreed that training of some sort, formal or informal, is indispensable for good or professional journalism. The need for sound and effective education for journalists is not a luxury at all because journalism is seen as fulfilling the essential need of humans to be informed in order to participate in social and political processes. As an autonomous practice unwilling to compromise its ethic of 'public service' - in order to serve particular interests - journalism makes a claim to being a profession (Hallin 2000).

In Ghana the profession can strengthen and enhance its credibility if the issue of addressing quality education is tackled seriously by all the relevant stakeholders. Individual journalists need to take the initiative of showing strong interest and determination in how to build their capacities in order to measure up to the challenges being brought about as a result of the information and communication technology. If proactively journalists take capacity-building seriously, pressure will be brought to bear on other stakeholders such as media organizations; Journalism Training Institutes as well as the Ghana Media Commission and the National Accreditation Board play their expected roles of guaranteeing high level of journalistic education in the country.

#### **4.0 Internet Connectivity in Ghanaian Newsrooms and ICT Resources**

Ghana is privileged to be among the first countries in Africa to achieve connection to the Internet. The Network Computer Systems, a privately owned entity, which introduced the internet in 1995, is credited with registering the gh.com domain name. Today, over 140 new Internet Service Providers (ISPs) have been licensed, even though a handful remains active. The problem is partly because there is stiff

competition among ISPs to attract a significant share of the small customer base for their services. Internet penetration is estimated at around 2 per cent (Darkwa 2007). The current figure of internet users is 609,800 ([www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com)).

At the tertiary level of education in Africa, many of the leading universities and Polytechnics are connected to the internet. What still remains as a serious challenge for higher institutions of learning is how to increase the ICT facilities to cater for the high demand arising from increasing enrolment of students. More importantly the task of digitizing information available in public libraries in Africa to make it more easily available is far from being achieved. In other words, the use of ICT to facilitate the process of learning, and the making of learning materials more accessible to students is a challenge to especially higher institutions of learning in most parts of Africa. In Ghana for instance, even though most of the public universities and private university are connected to the internet, the quality of ICT resources and the efficiency of the services provided leaves much to be desired.

Generally, internet connectivity in Africa is lower than elsewhere in the world. Today all countries are connected, at least at the level of the capital city, and the number of computers permanently connected to the internet in Africa increased from 10,000 in early 1999 to 25,000 by January 2000 (Jensen 2000:215). Countries such as South Africa and most North African countries, such as Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, got advanced communication infrastructure earlier than countries in sub-saharan Africa, for example Zambia, Tanzania and Ghana. Although connectivity in Africa is lower than any where else in the world, local cultural values of solidarity, interconnectedness and interdependence (Nyamnjoh 2002a) make it possible for people to access the internet and its opportunities without necessarily being connected.

Media organizations in Ghana have found it quite useful to be connected to the internet to boost their operations. The introduction of ICT has led to a change in type-setting, layout, designing and printing infrastructure at most African newspapers. For instance in Zambia, which is representative of sub-Saharan Africa, almost no newspapers use typewriters for typesetting or editing their news stories, or for page layout or designing. Instead they are now using computers to typeset, edit and design their publications (World Association of Newspapers 2003). In Ghana there are still a few newspaper establishments which rely on typewriters. Nonetheless, of the three newspapers studied - the *Public Agenda* ([www.ghanaweb.com/public\\_agenda/](http://www.ghanaweb.com/public_agenda/)) the *Ghanaian Chronicle* ([www.ghanaiian-chronicle.com/](http://www.ghanaiian-chronicle.com/)) and the *Daily Graphic* ([www.graphicghana.com](http://www.graphicghana.com)) management are conscious of the need to enhance the quality of the content of their websites by constantly updating their websites. The *Daily Graphic*, the largest state-owned newspaper in Ghana, has a pool of thirty-seven computers that are fully networked in a modern newsroom. However, the *Ghanaian Chronicle* and the *Public Agenda*, which are privately owned have a limited number of computers connected to the internet. A basic requirement for employment for prospective job-seekers at these newspapers is basic knowledge and skills in ICTs.

The use of the internet in newsrooms has paved the way for “journalists and aspiring journalists to use the internet to research and send stories, either as employees of an African news service or freelancers”. (Franda 2002: 18-19). It should, however, be noted that the process of adaptation to the ICT environment is rather too slow for the

press in Ghana. There is still a high-level of computer illiteracy among journalists, especially among old journalists who have no knowledge of computers and even some of the modern trained ones. One prominent reason which account for this situation is that many of the eight-page private newspapers operate with slim budgets. It can therefore be understood why in some situations the publisher is at the same time the editor and reporter.

Another factor hindering the process of improving knowledge and skills in ICT among aspiring journalists is the inability of Media Training Institutes to provide good training package and high-tech media facilities in the country. The Northern Regional Branch of the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) has expressed concern over the looming danger posed by the mushrooming of journalism training schools in the country. In an editorial entitled; “Weed out unaccredited Journalism Schools”, the *Daily Graphic*, noted that the Northern Regional Branch of the GJA is not a lone voice in this regard, as others have expressed disquiet over the mushrooming of journalism institutions and the large army of imposters who have invaded the profession (*Daily Graphic* 2008:7).

Even in accredited Media Training Institutions like the Prestigious Ghana Institute of Journalism and the School of Communication Studies of the University of Ghana, computers are not enough for every student to be abreast with ICT. These weaknesses in media training institutions indirectly affect attempts by newspapers to adapt their newsrooms operations to the emerging ICT environment. The three media organizations in which the study was done, none of them offered a continual or in-service training course on ICT skills for practicing as part of their strategic initiatives to fast-track the adaptation of their organizations to the modern media landscape.

## **5.0 Forging Linkages between Traditional Media and Modern Communication Technology**

In the technologically-driven age, the role of a journalist assumes an added dimension - namely the challenge to creatively search for and disseminate information, which is culturally relevant. People’s desire for fresh information has been given a boost with the internet. However, for journalists truly interested in writing news, which actually take into consideration the needs of various audience segments, the challenge is how to be culturally responsive to information that people desire. In Africa, the potentials of software development that caters to the interest of local cultures are yet to be adequately developed.

There is a lot to be learnt from traditional media forms such as group communication, songs and dances. These channels of information, even in the ICT age still constitute a formidable force in social integration and mobilization for many communities across Africa. The type of information put on the internet and its ability to affect other cultures have been recognized (Ansu-Kyeremeh 2005). The writing of news in the public interest, more so news that focuses on important cultural issues can be a dynamic way of actively promoting dialogue of cultures by journalists. Journalists can do this if they appreciate and are committed to identifying and organizing local media resources in favor of developmental issues, aimed at improving the lives of people. The internet itself has come to be associated with a communication chain. African

journalists who live in a cultural environment in which traditional media are still a vital source of information for many, need to actively get culturally relevant news inserted in the communication chain. Journalists need to be at the fore-front of fostering a communicative media environment both internally and externally. By so doing, they will encourage the participation of all sectors of the community so that all talents, interests and subcultures are represented in the public forum, (Christians, Ferre and Fackler 1993).

Internally, at the organizational level, it is a daunting task for journalists desirous of identifying and pursuing stories on under-represented sub-cultures in newspapers. The resistance to 'citizen participation' in the media is well documented through the series of forums which were opened to develop an intellectual foundation for the 'the right to communicate' (UNESCO, 1980: 160-174). In view of the resistance, journalist seeking to communicate in the public interest need to perceive their roles as advocates of the 'right to communicate' especially in favour of sub-cultures, which hardly receive coverage in the media.

At the external level, journalists need to critically examine the extent to which institutions responsible for the promotion and protection of cultural resources are performing their roles. In Ghana, according to Ansu-Kyeremeh (2005), though at the initial stage of the development of a "National Information and Communication Policy" there was a recognition in the form of a recommendation that "existing indigenous communication channels should be examined and developed;" that this would "make it possible for an incorporation of such channels into the overall communication plan," currently the public has no information on the extent to which such laudable recommendations have been concretely implemented. It is in such circumstances that journalists need to investigate the current situation and adequately inform the public about what is happening. On community development issues, for example child health care and parental social responsibility and HIV/AIDS pandemic songs and drama could be performed during special occasions such as annual National Child Health Promotion Week to create awareness within communities about the need for everyone to get involved in collaborating with the relevant health institutions to nurture healthy families.

On the contrary, the potential inherent in traditional media such as songs, story-telling and dances is either under-exploited or not given the needed attention to support development initiatives by relevant organizations, especially at the grassroots levels. Generally relevant government institutions such as health, social welfare, community development, which could draw on songs, dances and proverbs as core ingredients in the planning and implementation of their information and education programmes are yet to appreciate the need for them (institutions) to be pro-active and creative in identifying talented persons to perform or produce such messages. As prominent initiators of public discourse, journalists need to be more discerning in the kind of stories they write, since their stories now go into the internet for a much more broad-based readership. A more discerning outlook on the part of journalists can broaden and deepen their method of 'reading' a situation from a mere description of outer features to reflection first on core values that foster social harmony and cohesion toward the development of communities. A more discerning outlook by journalists, in writing for example a story about an aspect of African festivals - dance could enable readers see dance not as "cultural spectacle", but rather as moments of

communal sharing, cooperation, unity and the fostering of solidarity among people of different sub-cultures. Cultural festivals are special occasions of group communication, which cannot be glossed over by newspaper organizations simply because giving them an in-depth coverage amounts to erosion of their profit margins. Ghanaian newspapers are increasingly becoming more interested in profits than the “promotion of creative diversity and cultural plurality”, judging by the amount of space allotted to such themes. The consequence is an idea of democracy hardly informed by popular articulations of personhood and agency, and media whose professional values are not in tune with the expectations of those they purport to serve (Nyamnjoh 2005:2-3).

## **6.0 Journalists’ Role in Fostering Participatory Media Environment**

The practice of democratic system of governance in Africa has led to the establishment liberal press regimes. How has the Ghanaian journalists taken advantage of the opportunities of the free press environment to creatively serve the interest of both democracy and development concurrently? There is a general consensus that apart from the traditional functions of the press - informing, educating and entertaining, the media of developing countries have the additional responsibility of promoting development. The press is a great tool of social transformation and it is the expectation of society that journalists play a lead role in the process of enabling people to get the kind of information they need. With the advent of the internet, people have become more active and critical of the kind of information they read from newspapers, including those produced on-line. Letters received from readers commenting on some of the news stories published in the press is a pointer to the fact that there is shift in relation between the reader and journalists regarding who wields more influence in determining news items for publication and their relative importance. Given the marginal influence of stories on the internet on the lives of majority of people who cannot read nor write but who nonetheless can use their mobile phones during phone-in programmes to discuss news stories during newspaper reviews on FM stations in various local languages, it is a challenge to Ghanaian journalists to raise important issues in their reportage, which can address the concerns and aspirations of people of diverse cultural backgrounds. The heightened interest of ordinary people, facilitated by the use of mobile phones during phone-in programmes is a clear indication of the importance of the interactivity factor in the production and dissemination of news. Within the current context of information dissemination, one sees the relevance of the idea of a “participant press” system, which Anim (1976) considers appropriate for the needs of developing countries. Of the ten principles that Anim has put forward underlying his “participant theory of the press” it is worth mentioning two of them quite germane to the discussion:

- A participant press would conceptualize the process of national development as a search by all members of the community for viable solutions to problems which affect leaders and followers alike.
- A participant press would operate on the principle that every member of the community is a searcher after the truth and that until a consensus is reached, one member’s decisions are as important as those of any member (Anim 1976:126).

Nyerere (1973) referred to the underlying principle of participative communication for development, when he said that a man develops himself by joining in free discussion of a new venture, and participating in the subsequent decisions; he is not

being developed if he is herded like an animal into the new venture. It is important to emphasize the need for Ghanaian journalists to reconceptualise their role in the new media environment in order to enable them become more creative and analytical in the kind of issues that they raise in the newspapers.

In the current democratic dispensation in which people freely express their opinions on a wide range of developmental issues so as to draw the attention of the public for appropriate action to be taken to address them, more openness on the part of journalists to such views can enrich social, cultural and political discourse. However, the strong influence that market and political forces have on the practice of journalism dictates what kind of news gets covered. The challenge facing Ghanaian journalists is how they can reconstruct the taken-for-granted way of doing things in newsrooms in order to make professional journalists become more responsive to people's needs and interests. Complacency on the part of journalists about the existing newsroom culture, which pander to the interests of powerful groups, strengthens the case for raising the question about the democratic quality of newspaper operations in Ghana. Conditioned by market and political forces, young journalists simply adhere to or rather are socialized to the norms and modus operandi of newsrooms. Paradoxically, even though journalists are alert on any attempt on the curtailment of their right to freedom of expression by outside forces, internally the cultivation of participative communication culture in Ghanaian newsrooms is yet to take firm roots. It is important to note that how journalists react and what they do usually depends on the immediate working environment of the press and how it is structured to handle important news stories. The institution, as well as the individual, plays a role in the outcome.

However, according to my findings, the way newsroom hierarchy operates inhibits communication from the lower levels. Sometimes reporters could have a keener way of understanding relevant details of an important news stories than do the news editors and other top level editorial staff. Typically, however, such reporters have little opportunity to review and comment on coverage because the only forum in which it could have been possible for them to share these comments—editorial conferences—excludes them. In the light of these developments, the Ghanaian journalist can hardly confidently pride themselves as representing the voice of the voiceless.

If indeed communication is to support development and empowerment of ordinary people, the process leading to its actual democratization needs to start right in the newsroom even as the search for appropriate communication channels that can genuinely represent civil society needs to be intensified. The fundamental principles and norms such as the promotion of sustainable development through working for good governance and giving a voice to the disadvantaged, which guide the operations of the *Public Agenda* newspaper, offer a people-centred paradigm worthy of emulation by the Ghanaian press in order to give tangible expression and meaning to the concept of a participatory media environment.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

In conclusion training remains the number one priority in the drive towards professionalism in Ghana. Many young reporters desire to further their education, but

their meagre salaries cannot support such laudable initiatives. It is therefore not surprising that no newspaper is yet providing specialized content for its readers. Newspapers, especially the private ones face financial difficulties and therefore cannot afford to sponsor their staff for further studies. Newspapers need to collaborate in order to pass on not skills and knowledge from one organization to the other but also to pool their resources to enable them acquire modern communication facilities to enhance their services.

Complacency on the part of reporters about the existing newsroom culture in which they hardly participate in news conferences in which important decisions are taken about which stories to publish cast a pall on the integrity and credibility of the profession. A more participative communication culture in Ghanaian newsrooms is needed not only within individual newspapers, but more importantly among different newspapers to facilitate the sharing of skills, experiences and cross-fertilisation of ideas in order to face the challenges posed by ICT.

The issue of offering effective training in journalism needs more attention in order to stem the increasing numbers of quack journalists. If newsrooms operations are to have new outlook in tandem with international standards, not only should the provision of modern communication equipment be taken seriously by media organizations, but also there is need for adequate technology at Journalism Training Institutes to enable students learn the practical dimensions in dedicated modern computer labs and radio stations.

There is the need for a systematic and periodic interaction between teaching staff of various Journalism Training Institutes and reporters in order to enable lecturers of Journalism adequately understand relevant factors influencing the quality of work of journalists on the ground. In this way, periodic consultation among the various the various training institutes of Journalism to review their curricula to make them more relevant to contextual issues such as indigenous communication, which must be incorporated in contemporary media practice would received the needed attention.

The laying of a strong foundation of effective training in Journalism has much to do with respect for and committed to maintain quality standards in the teaching of Journalism. If the mode of practice of journalism is to witnessed a more professional outlook, the issue of how “mushroom Journalism Training Institutes” get their licenses to churn out half-baked journalists, whose mediocre performance affects the image of the profession needs to be properly addressed. The National Media Commission, which is constitutionally mandated to guarantee the highest standards of journalistic practice in the country need to prevail on the National Accreditation Board to explain to the public why such unqualified Training Institutes of Journalism are allowed to operate. Little information is available to the public about accreditation standards or requirements. Fishermen learn the rudiments of their trade before they go to out to fish. In the same vein, journalism students need adequate and effective training before they plunge themselves into newsroom business. If that is properly done by all stakeholders, the of mission of the journalists, which consists in disseminating, contrasting, classifying, analysing, clarifying and interpreting for society all knowledge with a view to improving harmonious social coexistence would become more beneficial and meaningful to society.

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