

Original Article

Development  
Studies

# Political Communication and Print Media Coverage of Political Campaigns in Ghana

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## ABSTRACT [ENGLISH/ANGLAIS]

In an emerging democratic society, the wielding of journalists' power can be described as a doubled-edged saw. Napoleon Bonaparte echoed such a depiction: "Three hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets". Essentially, how functional and dysfunctional a press can be depends on how its power is utilised in any democratic society. By employing content analysis method, the study examined the influence of the press in space allocation to political parties and the implications thereof to their political fortunes and the strengthening of the democratic process in Ghana. The paper brought to sharp focus and correlates five key concepts - state-owned and private press, democracy, political campaigns, parliamentary and presidential elections, and press/media performance. The study found out that though the private print media had more space in their front pages on political campaigns and party related issues, they failed to focus on other equally important issues: health, education, environment and agriculture. Comparatively, the state-owned press did better in balancing stories on party-related activities with equally important news items - health, education and environment. The paper suggests future studies to expand the current study beyond print media to include electronic media.

**Keywords:** State-owned and private press, democracy, political campaigns, parliamentary and presidential elections

## RÉSUMÉ [FRANÇAIS/FRENCH]

Dans une société démocratique naissant, l'exercice du pouvoir des journalistes peut être décrit comme une scie à double tranchant. Napoléon Bonaparte a fait écho une telle représentation: «Trois journaux hostiles sont plus à craindre d'un millier de baïonnettes». Essentiellement, comment fonctionnelle et dysfonctionnelle une presse peut être dépend de la façon dont le pouvoir est utilisé dans toute société démocratique. Par la méthode d'analyse de contenu employant, l'étude a examiné l'influence de la presse dans l'allocation d'espace aux partis politiques et les implications qui en découlent pour leurs fortunes politiques et le renforcement du processus démocratique au Ghana. Le document mis en netteté et corrèle cinq concepts clés - appartenant à l'État et la presse privée, la démocratie, les campagnes politiques, des élections parlementaires et présidentielles, et la presse / des médias de performance. L'étude a révélé que bien que la presse écrite privée avait plus d'espace dans leurs pages avant sur les campagnes politiques et les questions connexes du parti, ils n'ont pas réussi à se concentrer sur d'autres questions tout aussi importantes: la santé, l'éducation, l'environnement et l'agriculture. En comparaison, la presse d'Etat a fait mieux dans l'équilibre des histoires sur des parties des activités liées aux articles de presse tout aussi importants - la santé, l'éducation et l'environnement. Le document suggère de futures études d'étendre l'étude en cours au-delà des supports d'impression afin d'inclure les médias électroniques.

**Mots-clés:** Appartenant à l'État et la presse privée, la démocratie, les campagnes politiques, des élections parlementaires

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Accepted/Accepté:  
January 2013

Full Citation:  
Diedong AL. Political communication and print media coverage of political campaigns in Ghana. World Journal Young Researchers. 2013;3(1):9-16.

## INTRODUCTION

Apart from organisational influence on journalists, there are social and political influences on the value choices journalists make about angles of stories considered important [1]. The act of deciding what political news story to include in press coverage implies that certain kinds of political stories will be excluded since space is limited. Consequently, because of the multiple influences on the news selection process, news selection is hardly a neutral process [ 2, 3]

Do state-owned newspapers seem to give favourable coverage to incumbent ruling governments during political campaigns? How justifiable are claims that private newspapers are more disposed toward covering political campaigns of opposition parties than those of incumbent governments? The study attempts to find answers to these questions. How well the press performs is a key determinant of the extent to which it positively influences citizens of a nation.

### Conceptualising Political Communication and Media Performance

According to a broad definition, "political communication" is a category communication that includes a large proportion of all deliberative and hortatory activities that take place outside of the household [4]. For example, the speech of a candidate is political communication; but so, by this definition, is an employee's request that his superiors address him as "Mr." rather than by his first name, or a letter from a club to its members telling them that the dues are to be raised. However, a narrower definition of "political communication" refers only to the activity of certain specialised institutions that have been set up to disseminate information, ideas, and attitudes about governmental affairs. This narrow definition is often embedded in institutional studies of political communication. For example, studies on psychological warfare may focus on across-the-lines broadcasts and leaflet distribution [5, 6]. Studies on election campaigns may focus on the use of newspapers, posters, billboards, and speeches [7, 8].

Implicit in such studies is the notion that certain institutions have as their primary function the facilitation of the exchange and dissemination of messages. A systematic study of the nature of communication can be done through using the exchange of messages as an index by which to describe the media organisations that are specifically set up for the purpose of message dissemination.

There are a broad range of topics that can be analysed as political communication. Major contributions to the field prior to 1914 range from Plato's *Gorgia's*, which considers morality in propaganda; Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and Mill's *System of Logic*, which analyse the structure of persuasive argumentation to Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Lenin's *What is to Be Done?*, which are handbooks of political communication for the securing of power.

One tool political parties and their functionaries use during political campaigns is propaganda. Just as during World War 1 when propaganda was used a lot because of its so-called mythical power, to the extent that the myth was expressed in a large body of German literature that overestimated the power of propaganda, today politicians still have such exaggerated views of the influence that propaganda can wield if used efficiently.

However, there have been observations about the ineffectuality of propaganda. Notable was the National Opinion Research Centre's study (1948) of a large scale United Nation's week in Cincinnati, which despite

herculean efforts affected an almost unnoticeable segment of the population.

Contrary to the expected impact of election campaigns as portrayed in the Ghanaian press, for example, "Party A has held a mammoth rally at Kasoa in the Central Region of Ghana"; notable field studies [9] have demonstrated that relatively few minds are truly changed by a campaign. The studies, however, pointed out that a campaign serves other important functions; it may define the issues and mobilise interest and partisanship. It often does so without causing a person to decide what he previously thought to be false is true or vice versa. It is in connection with such key functional roles that the performance of the media can be examined. There is no doubt that the growth of the mass media has had a major impact on the conduct of political activities. For example, in terms of spreading information, the cost-effectiveness of the mass media is likely to be greater than that of more individualised campaigns methods [10, 11].

It is to give legal backing, enhance the standards of media performance and highlight the important role of the media in society that chapter twelve of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana has stipulated some fundamental principles, which should guide the operations of media organisations. Debates about how the media sometimes deviate from playing its role as expected can be understood in terms of the concept of public interest. It is in the public interest strong debates and open criticisms in the public sphere continually lay claims against the media and seek to influence public policy and keep issues of media quality and performance before the public eye [12]. Concerns about the quality of media performance come to the fore, especially during electioneering campaigns. Literature on the function of a political campaign indicates that it serves other important functions; it may define the issues and mobilise interest and partisanship [13,14]. Given the fact that a political campaign in the form of, for example speeches and rallies is limited in terms of the number of persons who can be reached by such modes and styles of communication, the relevance of modern means of communication, and the potentials they have in creating the desired impact through the definition of issues and the articulation and aggregation of political interests is appreciated by astute politicians and vibrant political parties.

It is evident that any political party and/or party functionary with the capacity to effectively utilise the press during elections can build substantial political capital needed for winning elections. Historically, in the

West Africa sub-region, starting with Sierra Leone, which is reputed to have established in 1801 the first newspaper in tropical Africa, *the Royal Gazette and Sierra Leone Advertiser*, to the first Ghanaian newspaper, *the Royal Gold Coast Gazette and Commercial Intelligencer* (1822), and the first Nigerian newspaper, *the Iwe Irohin* (1859), the earlier newspapers and even the modern ones in these countries have been reported to have contributed in many different ways to their countries' political and socio-economic development [15]. Therefore, the press occupies a pre-eminent place in the nexus of political power games and the dissemination messages to the public. What remains critical is to uniquely fashion out and implement a robust and functional press model, which is appropriate to the Ghanaian socio-political and cultural environment.

### **In Search of a Functional Model of the press in an Emerging Democratic Society**

Despite the much touted traditional role of the press - to inform, educate and entertain the public, there are nagging questions on whether empirically newspapers/the media do have some effects on social, political and national development. Though the search for answers is ongoing, there are now popular intuitive positive conclusions about newspaper effects on man, society, politics and socio-economic development ranging from Will Rogers' confession that "all I know is just what I read in the papers" [17] to V.I. Lenin's pronouncements on the powerful "role of the newspaper in revolutionary politics" [18]; and Joseph Goebbels' unflinching belief in and consistent use of the newspaper and other media as powerful tools of propaganda [19]. These perspectives about the effects of the press have reflected in different forms in different countries depending on the press theory in operation [20]. Under the regime of the First President of Ghana, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, newspapers were meant to foster unity and loyalty to the common cause by publicizing the progressive activities and optimistic pronouncements of government officials. Under the Fourth Republic, Flt. Lt. Jerry Rawlings, former President of Ghana repealed many of his own prohibitive decrees against the press. Within a nascent democratic context, Ghana operates a media model that can best be described as pluralised and polarised with its attendant problems of low level of professionalism. According to Hallin and Mancini [21] the Mediterranean or polarized pluralist model is one that has bearing for the developing world, as its characteristics of low or late literacy, strong role of state

in society, instrumentalisation of the press, clientelism and lower professionalisation of journalists are shared by many developing countries.

Discourse about the role of the press in strengthening the democratic process, especially during elections note the down-playing of values such as diversity, openness and responsiveness, independence; objectivity and fairness, accuracy and completeness of information by the press, which are crucial to enhancing a sense of professionalism among media practitioners and the forging of synergies between the media, civil society organisations and political parties towards building a stable and peaceful democratic society [22]. African press systems are greatly influenced by the communist and social responsibility theories of the press. Omu [23] argues that the development media theory seems ideal. Accordingly, it is ideal in the sense that the media and the government become partners in progress. However, in Ghana the theory is hardly applicable. In reality it is not usually the case in many African countries as the government in power tends to use resources of state-owned media to its advantage. Sometimes such practices result into acrimonious relations between the government and political parties in opposition. The so-called marriage between the media and government as partners in progress in the modernisation paradigm of development in Africa and Ghana in particular seems problematic. What appears to be a more dynamic and functional model, which is capable of meaningfully supporting and sustaining a multi-party democratic governance process could be a democratic participant media theory with a strong emphases on social responsibility. Central to the theory is the empowerment of people by the press to realise their potentials through the provision of an enabling environment to facilitate the participation of people in decision-making at different levels of institutions within a democratic society [24, 25, 26]. This theory goes beyond Hasty's [27] depiction of "while journalists with the state press profess a strong commitment to the national interests of unity and development reminiscent of the political project of the state in the 1960 and 1970s, the neoliberal rhetoric of democracy and human rights embraced private journalists represents a more recent, competing version of postcolonial nationalism, less vested in state patronage and more oriented toward global articulation and market competition".

Despite constraints and influences from proprietors, social environment, propaganda, audience, regulations and self-regulations on journalists, there is the need for

journalists to have agency, that is 'the ability to be able to actively intervene,' Harcup [28]. Journalists' active interventions in public affairs demands a high sense of responsibility as mandated by the fourth republican constitutions of Ghana, 1992. Being responsible implies the press ought to be true representatives of vast and varied segments of society. The concept of representation, which is quite useful in several different contexts, has been used to evaluate the representativeness of the content of the media. Does it reflect the community and the most salient and pertinent issues for society? Even though there is no agreement about who should decide whether content is representative or not, the basis for the representative claim seems well founded [29]. There is surely constitutional authority for freedom of the press, which has come to mean not only dissemination of information but gathering and impartially packaging it into some kind of coherent form and format. When the press seem to renege on this responsibility for partisan political interests, it constitutes an abuse of freedom of expression and can create unnecessary tension, especially before, during and after presidential and parliamentary elections. Critical examination of print media content with regard to their responsiveness to public expectations of balanced, fair and comprehensive coverage politics and socio-cultural issues is necessary.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

A qualitative research method, namely content analysis was used to provide relevant data on newspaper coverage of political parties by examining the following:

- a) Amount of space (in paragraphs) in the front pages of newspapers given to political parties and/or their candidates.
- b) Tone of coverage, that is whether favourable, unfavourable or neutral coverage is provided for certain political parties and/or their functionaries.

The main tool employed to gather data was a specially designed coding sheet. In the coding process, the determination of the nature of coverage was guided by three key indicators. Front page stories/features/editorials were coded in the following manner:

- i) Favourable; if it carried supportive or positive information
- ii) Unfavourable; if it carried critical information or negative information about a political actor/party
- iii) Neutral; if it is impossible to categorize the story as either positive or negative.

Through a purposive sampling technique, four Ghanaian daily newspapers were selected for the study. Two state-owned newspapers - *Daily Graphic* and *Ghanaian Times*, were selected because of their national reach and readership. The other two privately owned papers selected for the study - *The Chronicle* and *Daily Guide* have carved out a niche for themselves as being prominent in reportage on political issues and discourse. The study was carried out in four phases covering the period before, during and after the elections in 2008, that is between October 1 to January 14, 2009.

Specifically the units of analysis for the study were:

- a) Published front page spot news, editorials, features and stories on political parties and party functionaries.
- b) Political parties being referred to here were those that contested the last general elections in Ghana in 2008 – National Democratic Congress (NDC), New Patriotic Party (NPP), People National Convention (PNC), Convention People Party (CPP), Democratic Freedom Party (DFP), Democratic People Party (DPP) and Reformed Patriotic Democrat (RPD)

**Table 1:** This table shows the period of analysis of newspapers

Period	Dates	Days	Remarks
1	October 1- 18, 2008	17 days	
	October 20–November 6, 2008	14	
2	November 7- December 7, 2008	26	Period before the parliamentary and presidential elections
3	December 8- 28, 2008	20	Period before presidential run-off
4	December 29-January 14, 2009	16	Period after the presidential run-off
	TOTAL	93 days	

## RESULTS

The total space measured in paragraph-length for favourable, unfavourable and neutral stories for all the four newspapers analysed was 4,512. Out of that number (4,512), 1,526 were neutral stories. The details of the front-page space allocation for both favourable and unfavourable stories in the newspapers are shown in tables 2 to 5. In terms of tone of coverage, the private press gave more space for favourable (835) and unfavourable (1,523) stories than the state-owned press, which had 510 and 118 respectively.

**Table 2:** This table shows space allocation for favourable stories in the *Daily Graphic* and the *Ghanaian Times*

Newspapers	No. of paragraphs	Percentage
NDC	372	72.94
NPP	28	5.49
CPP	40	7.84
PNC	70	13.72
OTHERS (DFP,DPP & RPD)	0	0
TOTAL	510	100

**Table 3:** This table shows space allocation for unfavourable stories in the *Daily Graphic* and the *Ghanaian Times*

Newspapers	No. of paragraphs	Percentage
NDC	6	5.08
NPP	24	20.34
CPP	0	0
PNC	88	74.58
OTHERS (DFP, DPP & RPD)	0	0
TOTAL	118	100

**Table 4:** This table shows space allocation for favourable stories in the *Ghanaian Chronicle* and the *Daily Guide*

Newspapers	No. of paragraphs	Percentage
NDC	266	31.85
NPP	532	63.71
CPP	37	4.43
PNC	0	0
OTHERS (DFP,DPP & RPD)	0	0
TOTAL	835	100

**Table 5:** This table shows Space allocation for unfavourable stories in the *Ghanaian Chronicle* and the *Daily Guide*

Newspapers	No. of paragraphs	Percentage
NDC	1077	70.72
NPP	88	5.78
CPP	264	17.33
PNC	94	61.71
OTHERS(DFP,DPP & RPD)	0	0
TOTAL	1523	100

## DISCUSSION

The pattern of coverage of political campaigns before, during and after 2008 presidential and presidential elections by the print media, indicate that over eighty per cent of the stories that newspapers covered were based on party-organised or party-driven events. It is therefore not surprising that only two major political parties – NDC and NPP had a high percentage of stories covered by the newspapers in their front pages. The total number of election-related stories (both favourable and unfavourable) covered in the front-page of the four newspapers were 3,630.

The total space measured in paragraphs for favourable and unfavourable stories in all the four newspapers analysed was 2, 986. Out of that figure the private press - the *Daily Guide* and the *Chronicle* alone had a total of 2,358 paragraphs for election-related stories, representing 78.97% whereas the state-owned papers - the *Daily Graphic* and *Ghanaian Times* had 628 paragraphs, representing 21.03%. In the current democratic dispensation, there is a somewhat ambivalent posture of the private press toward giving balance and fair coverage of political issues pertaining to incumbent government during national elections. The concept of “straddling” public and private realms that is common in the accumulating strategies of the African politico-commercial bourgeoisie is described by Bayart in his comparative description of African politics, *The State in Africa: The Politics of Belly* (1993). He illuminates to a large extent the reason for such posturing in the press scene today. According to Hasty [30], by straddling the realms of political opposition and private accumulation, the editors of private newspapers fuse the two interests in a public rhetoric of private journalism. It is a classical demonstration of how difficult it is to fulfil the

expectation that the relationship between the press and government should ideally be one of critical distance, but not necessarily of hostility [31]

In earlier elections held in Ghana, the issue of incumbency advantage on the part of the ruling government using state-owned media to support its political campaigns has been raised by several experts on democratic governance such as the Ghana Centre for Democracy and Development. According to Gadzepko, [32] in previous presidential and parliamentary elections, the reports of Election Observation Bodies revealed that the state-owned newspapers were favouring the incumbent government in their coverage of party-related events.

However, in the 2008 elections the findings of that study with particular reference to the state-owned print media pointed to the contrary. On the whole, the quantum of space in both the *Daily Graphic* and the *Ghanaian Times* allocated to the NPP in their front pages in respect of favourable stories – 5.49% was far less than what the private press gave – 63.71% to the same party in government. The change in direction of reportage could be a pointer to the fact that state-owned press are becoming more mature and accountable in their respect for the constitutional provision of giving balanced and fair coverage to all political parties.

Even though the private print media had more space in their front pages devoted to political campaigns and party related issues, they failed to focus attention on other equally important issues such as health, education, environment and agriculture related stories in their agenda-setting. Comparatively, the state-owned press did better in balancing stories on party-related activities with equally important news items on health, education, agriculture, environment and science and technology.

Generally, in terms of tone of coverage, the private press devoted more space for favourable (835) and unfavourable (1,523) stories than the state-owned press, which covered favourable (510) and unfavourable 118 stories respectively.

As compared with the NPP and NDC, the CPP, PNC DPP, DFP and RPD had a very small share of space allocated to them by newspapers in the front pages. The implication of such a development in political communication in terms of visibility for the parties in question was that there was the possibility that the greater the number of stories highlighted for the NDC and NPP in the front pages of newspapers the better the chance for their messages, ideologies and propaganda

could become the subject of attention and discussion among people.

Consequently, it is more likely that the visibility provided by such exposures facilitated the process for the two major parties to garner the interest and support of voters. However, the other parties were disadvantaged in obtaining the benefits of visibility since they had a small number of stories highlighted in the front pages of newspapers. Even in the few instances where the CPP, PNC, DPP, DFP and RPD had stories in the front pages, such stories were not published consistently. They were rather highlighted in a sporadic manner. Perhaps their inability to organise big party -related events was due to their inadequate financial base. Apart from the two major parties – NDC and NPP, which seem to be relatively better off financially, the other parties are poorly funded. Currently there is an on-going debate on state-funding of political parties.

The issue of the Ghanaian press' over- dependence on party-driven events as a means of informing the public on political issues in the country, especially during elections raises questions about the quality of the professional performance of the media. This trend of affairs has the tendency of giving undue advantage to powerful political "spin doctors" to subtly set the news agenda for the press on how to report political activities, especially during elections. Consequently, there is the need for the National Media Commission to consistently monitor press coverage of political parties, especially during election. This could ensure that not only the print media, but also the electronic media meet constitutional requirements of equal coverage to activities of all registered political parties.

## CONCLUSION

The claim in journalism that the press can help produce a more informed electorate in the context of an emerging democratic dispensation is a daunting task. News media organisations need to be more proactive in setting up of dynamic databanks on election monitoring and evaluation to complement the efforts of the National Electoral Commission and other stakeholders such as the National Commission for Civic Education, the Institute of Democratic Governance and the Centre for Democratic Governance to strengthen multi-party democracy in Ghana.

The Ethics and Disciplinary Committee of the Ghana Journalist Association (GJA) still has a long way to go in ensuring the institution of effective monitoring structures

in the media. The GJA needs to learn and adopt very useful and interesting trend of establishment of press observatories in French-speaking countries. Such “press and democracy” and “press freedom” ethics observatories have been created by professional bodies for example in Benin (l’Observatoire de la Deontologie et de l’Ethique et les Medias) and in Ivory Coast - l’Observatoire de la Liberte de la Presse, de l’Ethique et de la Deontologie [33].

One major challenge for the profession to sharpen its capacity to carefully examine socio-cultural and political practices and to question those practices that seem to be unconstructively out of sync with contemporary democratic social life. The adoption of such an approach could enable issues of public concern to be put in their proper perspective in textual narratives.

Given the relatively young press system in Ghana, it may not be quite helpful for the press in Ghana to adopt an overly liberalised approach to the practice of journalism as happens in Western democracies. In the midst of scholarly debates about which normative press theory could be more applicable, the theory of social responsibility could be appropriate in the African context and the Ghanaian socio-cultural environment in particular, if journalists could imbibe its basic principles, and apply them in concrete situations in their reportage. For example, in northern Europe especially, this theory provided the importance of the press to social life and politics, particularly the need for independence and diversity [34].

The greatest challenge for Ghanaian journalists lies in the need for them to make greater efforts to position themselves as agents of reform, dialogue on development issues such environmental degradation, reconciliation and social cohesion. In this way, journalists can strategically get more socially and politically engaged in making morally meaningful forms of news that eschew violence and divisive tendencies, and transcend professional objectivity for the common good [35].

Although there has been limited research on media and elections in Africa, generally the media are active in the ten dimensions of elections in Africa as outlined by Lindberg [36]. Future studies could expand the current study beyond print media to include the electronic media. It is possible that the newspapers miss a segment of the Ghanaian population who equally need messages/information on political activities but due to their poor earnings are unable to buy newspapers or are hindered by their low literacy background.

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**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT / SOURCE OF SUPPORT**

Nil

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

Nil

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