

MEDIA MATTERS: EVALUATING THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN GHANA'S 2000 ELECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The role of the media, both state-owned and private, is an important and often overlooked component of any election, particularly those occurring in developing countries. Unfortunately, the existing academic literature on the subject is thin, especially concerning the recent flurry of democratic elections in Africa. This article briefly reviews the history of the media in Ghana's Fourth republic and then examines the crucial role the media played in Ghana's historic 2000 presidential and parliamentary elections. It details how the media contributed to the general success of the elections in which John Kufuor's New Patriotic Party defeated Jerry Rawlings' incumbent National Democratic Congress. Then, drawing on untapped public opinion survey data from the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development, the Afrobarometer in Ghana, and the University of Ghana, it demonstrates how the various forms of the mass media are 'consumed' by Ghanaians, and how they affect citizens differently. Despite persistent romanticizing of the role of the media in many quarters, it concludes that, while the media are extremely important to certain segments of the Ghanaian population, they are virtually irrelevant to others.

The state-owned media are supposed to support the government, because they are paid from government resources.

Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings, former First Lady of Ghana¹

For an election to be truly fair, different parties and candidates should have equal access to the media. Neither state power nor the power of money should determine that one party gets a hearing while another is denied it. The media must actively seek out the truth on the public's behalf, and be free to tell it as they see it.

Kofi Annan, Secretary General, United Nations²

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1. Statement by the First Lady at a 31st December Movement rally at Nyankumasi Ahenkro, Central Region. Quoted in *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 26 May 2000.

2. Kofi Annan, 'Africa's thirst for democracy', *Evening News*, 6 December 2000, p. 7.

OVER THE COURSE OF THREE WEEKS IN DECEMBER 2000, Ghana held two rounds of national elections. In the process, the people changed their sitting President and Parliament through the ballot box for the first time in the country's history. Ghanaians went to the polls for the presidential and parliamentary elections on 7 December; on 28 December voters repeated the exercise by voting in a presidential run-off. These two rounds of elections produced a resounding victory for the New Patriotic Party (NPP), Ghana's principal opposition party. The NPP's presidential flag-bearer, John Agyekum Kufuor, won the presidency with 57 percent of the run-off vote, defeating Vice-President John Atta Mills, and his party claimed exactly half of the country's 200 parliamentary seats. The elections were a monumental step in Ghana's progression towards a consolidated democracy, and they may have institutionalized electoral politics in the country.³ Furthermore, Ghana's electoral success may well serve as a model and source of hope for the entire African continent.

There are many potential explanations for Ghana's electoral achievement, and there will probably be many attempts to pinpoint exactly how and why Ghana has succeeded so far in its democratic transition as compared with other African countries.⁴ It is quite certain that any legitimate explanation will pay close attention to Ghana's media, both state-owned and private. The electoral process in Ghana certainly would not have proceeded so smoothly or successfully without the lively contribution of the media. It is no coincidence that one of Africa's most democratic countries is also home to some of the most vibrant and outspoken media outlets on the continent.

In this article, we concur with those scholars and practitioners who tout the importance of the media in cultivating a democratic ethos in developing countries. Clearly, the media matter in countries endeavouring to develop their democracies. The role of the media in countries experiencing 'consolidating elections' is particularly critical.⁵ In countries developing their democracies, as in more entrenched ones, the mass media can play a formative role in shaping the public's perceptions about political issues. There is a natural proclivity for a symbiotic relationship to develop between

3. Paul Nugent, 'Winners, losers and also rans: money, moral authority and voting patterns in the Ghana 2000 election', *African Affairs* 100, 400 (2001), pp. 405–28; E. Gyimah-Boadi, 'A peaceful turnover in Ghana', *Journal of Democracy* 12 (2001), pp. 103–17; but see also Daniel A. Smith, 'Ghana's 2000 elections: consolidating multi-party democracy', *Electoral Studies* 21 (2002), pp. 519–26.

4. For detailed analysis of various aspects of the elections see Joseph R. A. Ayee (ed.), *Deepening Democracy in Ghana: Politics of the 2000 elections, Volumes I & II* (Freedom Publications, Accra, 2001).

5. Baffour Agyeman-Duah, *Elections in Emerging Democracies: Ghana, Liberia, and Nigeria* (Ghana Centre for Democratic Development, Accra, 2000); Gyimah-Boadi, 'A peaceful turnover in Ghana', pp. 103–17.

the media and political parties. The media need exciting political campaigns in order to market their product and sell advertising in their newspapers and on their television and radio broadcasts.⁶ Candidates, on the other hand, have come to learn that the media provide easy publicity and are perhaps the most efficient means of getting their message out to a wide range of people.

We also examine in this article the limitations of the media under Ghana's Fourth Republic, particularly in the 2000 elections, and we question how, if at all, Ghanaians at the grassroots are affected by the media on a daily basis. Our analysis reveals vast discrepancies in how the media are consumed. We show that, just as they are virtually omnipresent in Ghana's more urbanized areas, the mass media are largely absent in more rural and remote parts, where many Ghanaians have very limited access to media outlets. Thus, we argue that, despite the almost universal praise lavished on the media by political pundits, scholars, the general public, and especially the media practitioners themselves, there remains substantial variation across the country with respect to how Ghanaians use, rely upon, and trust the media to provide them with information during elections.

The remainder of the article is divided into three sections. First, we turn our attention to the development and effectiveness of the media in Ghana under the Fourth Republic. We argue that both the private and state-owned media have undergone major transformations during the 1990s, as a result of the increase in freedom afforded to the media by the state, and that these transformations have played a major role in the country's consolidation of multi-party, democratic rule. Second, we examine the role of the media in Ghana's 2000 campaign and elections. Using data collected by the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), a Ghanaian think-tank, we find that, while the media made significant strides towards devoting equitable coverage to the various political parties, the ruling National Democratic Congress still received the bulk of their attention. Third, we take a step back to assess what effect, if any, the media have had on the formation of political beliefs and attitudes among Ghanaians. Analyzing data from two recent public opinion surveys, we argue that, despite widespread praise of the recent advances among the various media houses in Ghana, there remains substantial variation across the country in how Ghanaians consume, and how much they trust, the media during elections.

6. While this relationship is taken for granted in advanced countries, it is not always the case in developing ones. For example, Major Courage Quashigah (rtd), national organizer of the NPP, called on parliamentary candidates during the campaign to 'cultivate the media in a constructive manner in order to win credibility in their campaign messages'. He encouraged NPP candidates to adopt the 'undirected media' approach by allowing media practitioners the freedom to present issues in their own language with professionalism without exerting any influence to ensure credibility. *Daily Graphic*, 25 September 2000, p. 11.

The media in Ghana's Fourth Republic: an historical backdrop

Ghana has a chequered past with respect to press freedom.⁷ Only recently has the country shed the 'culture of silence' that dominated the 1980s under the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) regime. Due to the authoritarian control of the media (private and state-owned, although there were hardly any private media) by the PNDC government during the 1980s, press freedom was slow to materialize during campaigning for the 1992 presidential and parliamentary elections, the first democratic polls held since 1979. Only six months before the November elections, the PNDC repealed the repressive 1985 Newspaper Licensing Law, which required anyone wanting to publish a newspaper or magazine to obtain a licence from the Secretary for Information. Soon after its repeal, nearly three dozen independent private newspapers opened for business, many of them highly critical of the NDC (successor to the PNDC) during the 1992 election. During the campaign numerous members of the private press were charged by the NDC government with criminal libel — on the books since the colonial era — which served to mitigate their criticisms of the incumbent regime. In the months prior to the elections the state-owned dailies (the *Daily Graphic* and *The Ghanaian Times*) 'showed considerable bias in favour of the NDC and its allies of the Progressive Alliance in their coverage of the election campaigns'.⁸ In the aftermath of Rawlings' victory and the subsequent boycott of the parliamentary elections by the opposition parties, the NPP successfully sued the Ghana Broadcasting Company (GBC) in 1993 for violating Article 55 (sections 11 and 12) of the 1992 Constitution, which stipulates: 'The state shall provide fair opportunity to all political parties to present their programmes to the public by ensuring equal access to the state-owned media', and 'All presidential candidates shall be given the same amount of time and space on the state-owned media to present their programmes to the people'.⁹ The Supreme Court ruled that the opposition parties should have had equal access to state-owned media during the campaign, but it did not award them any compensation.¹⁰ It should be noted that in 1992 there were no private radio stations in operation in the country.

7. Rosalynde Ainslie, *The Press in Africa: Communications past and present* (Gollancz, London, 1966); Louise Bourgault, *Mass Media in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 1995).

8. E. Gyimah-Boadi, 'Ghana's uncertain political opening', *Journal of Democracy* 5 (1994), p. 79.

9. Republic of Ghana, *Constitution of the Republic of Ghana* (Ghana Publishing Corporation, Tema, 1992).

10. Michael Oquaye, 'Human rights and the 1996 elections in Ghana', in Joseph Ayee (ed.), *The 1996 General Elections and Democratic Consolidation in Ghana* (University of Ghana Department of Political Science, Legon, n.d.) p. 104.

By all accounts, the media's coverage of the 1996 elections was a marked improvement over the 1992 elections. By 1996, the private media had begun to establish a solid footing. A handful of private FM stations, generally critical of the Rawlings regime, were broadcasting on air. Electoral coverage by the independent radio stations and newspapers helped to offset favourable coverage of the NDC in the state-owned print and electronic media. Gyimah-Boadi argues that independent media outlets were 'largely responsible for keeping the election somewhat competitive and saving opposition candidates from total despair about their chances against the incumbents, who had ample resources and the vocal support of the state-run media'. However, he laments that 'the independent media continue to struggle with an unfriendly legal system, slender resources and government machinations designed to circumvent constitutional guarantees of free speech'.¹¹

Despite the Supreme Court's 1993 ruling, the state-owned media's coverage of the 1996 campaign was still far from even-handed. According to Gyimah-Boadi, there remained 'a clear pro-NDC bias in news coverage and editorial opinion in the state-controlled print and electronic media, though the opposition parties had equal opportunity to hold press conferences and to broadcast on Ghana television'.¹² Furthermore, Ayee argues that during the 1996 contest, the 'radio and television campaign was blatantly and consistently biased towards Rawlings and the NDC', and 'the situation with respect to the newspapers was no better'.¹³ Clausen also writes that in 1996 the state-owned media were 'heavily biased in favour of the current government', and that 'press freedom is not fully established in Ghana'.¹⁴

A National Democratic Institute report on the 1996 elections confirms these sentiments. The study found that the state-owned media provided 'largely disproportionate coverage of incumbent political contestants and is overwhelmingly positive, while coverage of other political contestants often is not presented in a positive tone, or not presented at all'. In the months leading up to the December elections, coverage of the opposition was 'completely obliterated' by the two state-owned papers, the *Daily Graphic* and *The Ghanaian Times*. On 28 and 29 November, *The Ghanaian Times* even ran a picture of the ballot with a thumbprint next to the NDC

11. E. Gyimah-Boadi, 'Ghana: the challenges of consolidating democracy', in Richard Joseph (ed.), *State, Conflict and Democracy in Africa* (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, 1999), p. 174.

12. *Ibid.* pp. 174, 414.

13. Joseph R. A. Ayee, 'The December 1996 general elections in Ghana', *Electoral Studies* 16 (1997), pp. 416-27.

14. Thomas Clausen, 'State-civil society relations in Ghana's Fourth Republic', in Ayee, *The 1996 General Elections*, p. 193.

box, and the editor of the *Daily Graphic*, Elvis Aryeh, stated publicly that he was a member of the NDC and that the paper existed 'to promote policies of the NDC government'.¹⁵

There remains the question of how far-reaching the private media were in 1996. Clausen contends that the power of the independent media during the election should not be underestimated. Despite the minimal circulation of the independent newspapers, Clausen argues that in 1996 they 'manage[d] to stimulate public debate, contribute to keeping the government on its toes, and in the longer term influence the operations of the state-owned media'.¹⁶ Explaining why the opposition's message failed to resonate with the people, Nugent shifts the blame from the state-owned media to the campaign strategies of the opposition parties. Specifically, Nugent argues that the NPP 'depended heavily upon the print media to disseminate its message', which did not allow for its message to 'reach the majority of the population', as 'newspapers were unavailable across most of the country'.¹⁷ On the other hand, Oquaye notes that, while most of the fledgling opposition press supported the opposition parties, the independent media had several limitations. The total circulation of private newspapers was low and their distribution was limited primarily to the southern sector of the country. Because publication costs for newspapers were high, many of the papers, while coming out against the Rawlings administration, were financially compelled to print paid advertisements for the NDC.¹⁸

Ghana's 2000 elections: assessing the media's coverage

There is little question that the media's performance in the 2000 elections was a vast improvement over the previous two elections. In post-election analyses, many people credited the media with playing a major role in ensuring the relatively successful polls and smooth transition that characterized the elections. But it is important not to give too much credit to the media without carefully analyzing how they actually performed. While they may have provided better access and fairer coverage to the political parties and their candidates during the campaign than in the past, we must critically assess how the media covered partisan activities and whether or not they provided thorough analyses of party activities during the campaign.

To assess the access the private and state-owned media provided to the various political parties and presidential candidates, we draw on data

15. Oquaye, 'Human rights and the 1996 elections in Ghana', pp. 103–5.

16. Clausen, 'State-civil society relations in Ghana's Fourth Republic', p. 193.

17. Paul Nugent, 'Living in the past: urban, rural and ethnic themes in the 1992 and 1996 elections in Ghana', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 37 (1999), p. 310.

18. Oquaye, 'Human rights and the 1996 elections in Ghana', p. 106.

collected by CDD-Ghana. Its Media Monitoring Project analyzed how much and what tone (positive, negative or neutral) of coverage the media provided the parties and their candidates during the 2000 campaign.¹⁹ It reveals that over a seven-and-a-half months period both the state-owned media (newspapers, radio and television) and the private media (newspapers and radio) granted disproportionate coverage and access to the NDC. However, the disparity between coverage devoted to the NDC and the NPP in all forms of media diminished as the election drew closer. This could indicate that as time went by it became increasingly apparent that the opposition stood a serious chance of defeating the NDC, and the media adjusted to that realization, devoting more coverage to the NPP. Of course, the outcome of the election validates this shift. Alternatively, it could indicate that over time the NPP staged an increasing number of newsworthy events and became more adept at getting its candidates media coverage. Finally, it suggests that the increasing attention paid to the media's role and responsibilities compelled media outlets to be more even-handed in their coverage.

Coverage of political party activity by the state-owned print media included in the survey — the *Daily Graphic*, *The Ghanaian Times* and *The Evening News* — favoured the ruling NDC in terms of the quantity and length of stories, but these stories were not entirely uncritical of the party. Overall, 45 percent of all political stories carried by the three state-owned newspapers focused on the NDC. But the tone of the state-owned papers' reportage of party activities was quite balanced, with both the Progressive Alliance (consisting of the NDC, DPP and EGLE) and the opposition parties receiving largely positive or neutral coverage, with relatively few negative stories appearing in the state-owned press. Meanwhile, there was considerable variation in coverage in the four private newspapers monitored — *The Ghanaian Chronicle*, *The Dispatch*, *The Ashanti Pioneer*, and *The Independent* — but in the end the NDC was the focus of 42 percent of all stories and the NPP the focus of 36 percent. However, these papers were extremely critical of the ruling party, as over half (52 percent) of the stories on parties in the ruling Progressive Alliance appearing in the four papers were critical, while only 11 percent of stories on the NPP had a negative tone.

The NDC dominated coverage on the state-owned Ghana Television (GTV) station. Over 50 percent of the political stories on the station focused on the ruling party's activities, with 91 percent having a positive tone. Political coverage on the regional state-owned FM radio stations, of

19. *Media Coverage of the 2000 Election: A report on the media coverage of election 2000 (May 2000–January 2001)* (Ghana Centre for Democratic Development, Accra, 2001). Media monitors were placed throughout the country and monitored coverage of the election; their reports were relayed to CDD-Ghana where they were aggregated, analyzed and published.

which there is one broadcasting in each of Ghana's ten regions, also reinforced the pattern of NDC dominance of the state-owned media; 56 percent of stories on these stations featured the NDC, while only 22 percent focused on the activities of the NPP. However, a majority of stories on these regional FM stations were neutral in tone towards the NDC. The seven private FM radio stations surveyed, all broadcasting in English, also devoted a disproportionate amount of air time to the NDC; 43 percent of their stories featured the NDC, while only 28 percent focused on the NPP.

The findings of the CDD-Ghana study reflect a dilemma faced by all media outlets: how to distinguish between the NDC's official 'state' events and the party's campaign activities (a dilemma encountered in almost any democracy; in the run-up to the 2000 United States election Republicans criticized Al Gore's sudden visibility in White House affairs). This is an inherent problem when incumbents run for re-election, but the NDC did not make drawing the distinction any easier, as the party clearly took advantage of its incumbency. The state-owned media are in a difficult position because of their constitutional obligation to cover the activities of the government and its leaders. But the number of ribbon-cutting ceremonies and dedications presided over by Vice-President Mills in the months leading up to the election was substantial. Compounding the problem was that many of these choreographed ceremonies were immortalized in colour spreads in the *Daily Graphic* and covered extensively on GTV's 'Evening News'. In a tongue-in-cheek editorial in the *Daily Graphic*, of all papers, George Sydney Abugri mused: 'Vice-President Mills, who is running for President, was on television on Tuesday night receiving foreign diplomats in his office. He was not campaigning mark you, but incumbency has its advantages, see?'²⁰ Also troubling was the state-owned media's extensive coverage of blatantly partisan activities, such as the NDC's self-proclaimed 'Super Mammoth Rallies'. Such events were sometimes broadcast live on GTV and were almost always featured in the state-owned newspapers. While NPP rallies were also frequently covered, they did not receive nearly the same degree of attention, and gatherings organized by the other opposition parties rarely received significant coverage in the media.

The fact that the CDD-Ghana media monitoring project and a similar project run by the National Media Commission were conducted at all reflects the widespread awareness of the media's responsibilities, particularly the constitutional requirements borne by the state-owned media.²¹ Throughout the campaign period the role and responsibilities of the media were frequent topics of conversation and debate. This new-found emphasis

20. George Sydney Abugri, 'The fifth chief', *Daily Graphic*, 18 August 2000, p. 7.

21. National Media Commission, *A Report on Media Coverage of Political Parties by the State Owned Media and Selected Private Media (Reports 1-6)*, (National Media Commission, Accra, 2001).

was evident when the *Daily Graphic*, on more than one occasion, devoted a full page to reproducing the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation's 'Guidelines on Coverage of Election 2000', which detailed the objectives and guiding principles of their election coverage.²² In addition, many of the parties' manifestos included sections specifically devoted to their media policies, and these sections were subsequently reprinted in the newspapers.²³ Even if they disliked their treatment by the media, the parties clearly recognized the media's importance.

Of course, this did not stop some of the parties from criticizing the media. President Rawlings, on behalf of the NDC, often led the charge, as hostility between the private press and the ruling party occasionally boiled over. The 16 November edition of *The Independent* featured a massive front-page headline, 'Rawlings Accuses Private Media of Nonsense', quoting Rawlings as saying, 'you switch on your radios to listen to FM stations, the sense and the nonsense'. Ironically, just a week earlier *The Dispatch* ran an editorial criticizing Rawlings for 'scapegoating' the media, arguing 'if anybody is to get credit for exposing wrong doings, then it is the media'.²⁴

Perhaps not unrelated to this tension, there were times when the new-found freedoms enjoyed by the media seemed tenuous. Four incidents in particular served to conjure unwelcome memories of private media repression under the 'culture of silence'. Chris FM, a private radio station in Berekum in the Brong-Ahafo Region, was closed down by the Brong-Ahafo Regional Minister and surrounded by military personnel after a NPP candidate allegedly spoke critically of the NDC government on the station. Nana Kofi Koomson, publisher of the private *Ghanaian Chronicle*, was arrested on charges of receiving a diskette allegedly stolen from the NDC, and Felix Odartey-Wellington, a lawyer and popular media personality often appearing on GTV, was apparently arrested for general criticism of the government. Finally, in November, the Accra office of *The Crusading Guide*, an outspoken private newspaper, was covered in excrement, prompting widespread coverage and condemnation in the media the next day. No suspects were ever arrested, but there was widespread speculation that the NDC was involved in the incident, and it seemed clear that the attack was intended to intimidate and subdue the strongly anti-government newspaper. In *The Independent* article mentioned above, in reaction to Kwaku Baako Jr, editor of *The Crusading Guide*, receiving the Ghana Journalists Association's Journalist of the Year award, Rawlings commented 'it looks all that one needs to do to get an award is to have his offices smeared with human feces'.²⁵

22. 'Guidelines on coverage of elections 2000', *Daily Graphic*, 3 October 2000, p. 4.

23. 'Election 2000: what the parties say on the media', *Independent*, 2 November 2000, p. 8.

24. 'The President and the media', *The Dispatch*, 3-9 November 2000, p. 2.

25. Andrew Edwin Arthur and Arhinful Mensah, 'Rawlings accuses private media of nonsense', *Independent*, 16 November 2000, p. 1.

These four incidents served to remind people of times not so long ago when media freedoms were widely suppressed by the government, and to reinvigorate the fight to sustain and institutionalize such freedoms.

One of the words most often used of late to describe Ghana's media is 'vigilant', and the moniker certainly seems appropriate when analyzing the 2000 election, particularly with regard to the private media outlets. In fact, the private press could be criticized for being excessively vigilant, as some newspapers seemed to be over-zealous in their attacks on the Rawlings regime, sometimes to the point of printing stories of questionable credibility. Matthew Kainyah, in a editorial appearing in the state-owned *Daily Graphic* months before the election, wrote:

But frankly, are our private journalists sacredly discharging their constitutional duty without pride and prejudice? That is the big question. Many of our private media men have only one theme — to spite Rawlings and his associates. It is as if disgracing Rawlings and his family will necessarily improve the lot of Ghanaians.²⁶

Indeed, it seemed that some private newspapers, and often certain private FM stations as well, seemed so bent on denigrating Rawlings that they were almost blind to other issues and personalities. These media outlets certainly have the right, and perhaps the responsibility, to criticize Rawlings and his regime, and there is definitely an audience for such criticism and sometimes sensationalism. But when their criticism begins to define the identity of the newspaper or radio station a certain amount of credibility is lost, as the paper or station becomes known simply as anti-government. Furthermore, with such behaviour media outlets neglect their aspirations to be impartial and informative; in such instances they are informative on only one topic, and even then their information is partial and sometimes of questionable credibility.

There were occasionally concerns expressed about media professionalism, particularly in the private press. Touching upon this issue, Peter Schellschmidt, Resident Director of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, observed that 'whereas the parties have to understand that the media are not supposed to function as mere mouthpieces, the journalists must also understand that information received must be treated responsibly and facts must be checked with all concerned'.²⁷ Particularly in the private press, breaking a blockbuster story on the front page or attacking the Rawlings regime seemed too often to be prioritized over fact-checking and accuracy. Some stories were built upon what could only be characterized as flimsy

26. Matthew Kainyah, 'Do our journalists understand their mission?' *Daily Graphic*, 27 July 2000, p. 7.

27. Isabella Gyau Orhin, 'Media will hold gov't accountable — Affenyi-Dadzie', *Public Agenda*, 25 September–1 October 2000, p. 6.

evidence, often a single source. For example, in mid-November the private *Ghanaian Chronicle* published an article under the title 'Voters with thumb-print ID cards will be disenfranchised'.²⁸ Reading the text, however, reveals that this headline was based only on one mid-level Electoral Commission (EC) member who 'hinted' that the EC would soon issue a statement decreeing that such ID cards would not be allowed — hardly a strong declaration of the EC's intentions. After much legal wrangling, thumb-print ID cards were deemed to be a valid form of identification.²⁹ The point, though, is that, in this instance as well as many others, the *Chronicle* failed to double-check its facts and based its assertions on rather weak evidence. It is important to note that the state-owned media also failed to sufficiently verify some of their stories, but they seemed to have less of a problem in this regard, perhaps because of their close association with the government.

There is some justification for such lapses in professionalism, however, given the severe logistic and resource constraints faced by both the state-owned and private media. An article appearing in *The Independent*, a private newspaper, on a symposium on free expression discussed comments from the paper's editor, Kabral Blay-Amihere, in which he 'cautioned those who expect so much from the press whether private or state-owned to recognise the many problems that the media of Ghana face and therefore appreciate what it can do and not do'.³⁰ An editorial in the state-owned *Daily Graphic* echoed the same sentiment:

Speaking for the *Daily Graphic*, we have significant human resource and logistic constraints that impinge upon our ability to effectively cover every activity of all the political parties throughout the country . . . there is thus, for the media, a gap between the public obligations and expectations of the state-media and the resource base to accomplish them.³¹

This gap was not limited to the print media. GTV operated throughout the entire election period with only one camera stationed outside Accra. Besides this camera in Kumasi, its other camera, stationed in Cape Coast, broke early in the campaign period and the station did not have the resources necessary for repairs. This resource gap is also apparent in a passage penned by the United Ghana Movement's (UGM) flag-bearer, Charles Wereko-Brobby, on his party's coverage in the media: 'Sometimes, we are even requested [by GTV] to pay for the hire of cameras and film

28. K. Appiah Kubi, 'Voters with thumb-print ID cards will be disenfranchised', *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 16–20 November 2000, p. 4.

29. Daniel A. Smith, 'Consolidating democracy? The structural underpinnings of Ghana's 2000 elections', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 40, 4 (2002), pp. 1–30.

30. Henrietta Blankson, 'Don't expect too much from the media', *Independent*, 14 September 2000, p. 6.

31. *Daily Graphic*, 'What about resources for the media?', 22 September 2000, p. 7.

just to get our events covered. In contrast to our fending for ourselves, the Regional Administration makes vehicles available to cover the political activities of the Vice-President in the region.³²

The actual content of the media's election coverage, however, often left something to be desired. Both the print and electronic media frequently lacked any sort of critical analysis of the events unfolding in the run-up to both rounds of voting. While the media are now very adept at reporting the news, they still lack in-depth examination of the events they report. Some outlets made more of an effort at this than others; the private newspaper *The Dispatch* occasionally scrutinized the news more closely than its competitors, and some private FM talk shows endeavoured to scratch below the surface of the latest stories. But on the whole the media's election coverage was still very topical. Tim Acquah-Hayford, Chairman of the National Media Commission, argued 'perhaps seven years or so is not long enough to firm the culture of democracy in an environment that has experienced a one party system and military dictatorship'.³³ In order to improve their election coverage in the future, the media will need to look more critically and analytically at stories appearing on the front pages and leading the news broadcasts.

Do the media matter?

In the previous section we established that, with certain significant exceptions, the media adequately executed their role in the 2000 elections in terms of providing better access to the contesting parties and candidates. But an important question remains: How much do the media in Ghana matter? There is a definite tendency for foreign observers to place tremendous weight on the importance of the media in elections in developing countries, and Ghana is no exception. The argument most often promoted is that free and independent media are essential to the democratic dispensation of the country, and thus critical in its democratic development. But such pundits often neglect to consider just how many people live within reach of the still fledgling media. Furthermore, there is a tendency for Ghanaians living in cities where newspapers and radio stations are in abundance to assume that people in the rest of the country have similar access to them. This is far from the case, and such assumptions lead to overestimations of the importance and influence of the media. Data from two recent public opinion polls — the Afrobarometer survey conducted in 1999 and the Department of Political Science, University of Ghana, Legon pre- and post-election survey

32. *The Crusading Guide*, 'UGM laments shortage of logistics', 31 August–6 September 2000, p. 12.

33. Orhin, 'Media will hold gov't accountable — Affenyi-Dadzie'.

conducted in 2000 and 2001 — reveal that a majority of Ghanaians have limited exposure to the media, with some having no contact with the media at all. Furthermore, in many parts of Ghana, if there is access to the media it is limited to a single state-owned newspaper (the *Daily Graphic*) and a single state-owned radio station (GBC).

While the internet continues to expand its reach and role at a rapid pace in many parts of the world, radio stations, television, and newspapers remain the dominant forms of media in Africa. In urban areas newspapers are constantly recycled and often pass through numerous hands; a paper purchased by one person will often be read by a dozen or more people before the end of the day. Newspapers are also displayed at news-stands, and many people pause to read a variety of front pages without ever purchasing a paper. In addition, in Ghana newspapers are valued as much for their alternative uses as for their informative content. For this reason newspapers often enjoy reincarnation as wrappers for various foods and other products, and no doubt they are often scrutinized all over again once the food is finished.

Regrettably, though, such recycling is often a moot point because so much of Ghana's population is illiterate. Shortly before the 2000 elections the English illiteracy rate was estimated by the government to be 53 percent.³⁴ Virtually all Ghanaian newspapers are printed only in English, so even if people are able to get their hands on a newspaper, there is a good chance that they are unable to read it.

Due to the widespread illiteracy, radio becomes an even more important medium in the quest to obtain information. Because there are so many local languages spoken in Ghana, radio stations, unlike newspapers, have the advantage of being able to broadcast in the vernacular. GBC, for example, broadcasts in six Ghanaian languages as well as in English. Also unlike newspapers, which have to be physically delivered to a location, information carried over the airwaves is more accessible and more easily dispersed. Given the abysmal state of Ghana's roads, transporting newspapers to rural areas is sometimes a monumental task, and even when they do get there they do so at least one day after publication, and sometimes much later. Information broadcast on the radio, though, can be dispersed much more quickly. More important, radio broadcasts are free to the listener, whereas the price of newspapers, relative to average per capita income, is quite high, and for many people buying a newspaper is a low priority, given that acquiring food is often a daily struggle.³⁵ State-owned and private radio stations are becoming more widespread throughout Ghana, so in many areas all one

34. *Daily Graphic*, 'Correction', 13 September 2000, p. 16.

35. During the campaign most newspapers cost ₵1,000 (roughly \$0.15), a high price, given that the World Bank estimates that the average Ghanaian earns about ₵7,000 a day.

needs to access an FM signal is a power supply and a radio. In many instances one does not even need to own a radio to benefit from its emissions; wherever there is a radio it is almost always on (usually at very high decibels) and most often there are many people within earshot. This allows for easier dissemination of information.

The two national public opinion surveys conducted over the past three years confirm the dominance of radio. But they also call into question the overall influence of Ghana's media, radio included. They show that, though the media are very important in certain areas and among certain demographics, they are equally inconsequential to a large segment of Ghana's population.

The 1999 Afrobarometer Survey

The Afrobarometer, a series of public opinion surveys recently conducted in more than a dozen African countries, includes several questions that pertain directly to the issue of how the media are consumed.³⁶ Conducted in Ghana in July 1999, the survey included more than 2,000 Ghanaians and was carried out in such a way that every Ghanaian of voting age had roughly an equal chance of being selected to participate.³⁷

The dominance of radio The survey affirms the assertion that radio has by far the widest reach and largest audience of any form of media in Ghana. Respondents were asked, 'How often do you listen to a news bulletin on the radio?' and an impressive 41.4 percent said that they listened to radio news bulletins every day. This was a much higher response rate than the 12.9 percent who read a newspaper daily (discussed in detail below). Furthermore, 15 percent of respondents said that they listened to a radio news bulletin 'several times a week' and 13 percent said they did so 'about once a week'. Only 4.5 percent of respondents listened to a news bulletin 'about once a month' and 5.7 percent 'less than once a month'. One-fifth of the respondents (20.4 percent) said that they 'never listen' to radio news bulletins.

Broken down and analyzed according to several demographic categories, the survey reveals some interesting variations in Ghanaians' reliance on radio. The regional breakdown shows that radio bulletins are widely listened to in the heavily urbanized Greater Accra region, with only 6.6 percent of

36. For further details on and other findings from the Afrobarometer study in Ghana, see Michael Bratton, Peter Lewis, and E. Gyimah-Boadi, 'Constituencies for reform in Ghana', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 39 (2001), pp. 231-59.

37. The 1999 Ghana Afrobarometer survey was directed by Michael Bratton, E. Gyimah-Boadi and Robert Mattes and was conducted by the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana).

respondents there saying that they never listened and 54.6 percent saying that they listened every day. The highest percentages of people who never listen to radio bulletins were found in the Central Region (36 percent) and the Northern Region (32.4 percent), while the very rural Upper East and Upper West Regions also had high percentages (23.8 percent each). As this regional breakdown suggests, people living in or close to urban areas are more likely to listen to radio bulletins with greater frequency, which reflects the fact that they have greater access to radios and radio stations than people in more rural areas. Only 8.7 percent of urban dwellers said that they never listened to radio bulletins, compared with 26.8 percent of rural inhabitants. The numbers for the intermediate categories are relatively even, but 55.6 percent of people in urban areas said that they listened to a radio bulletin every day, compared with only 33.5 percent in rural areas.

A finding that goes a long way towards accounting for the prominence of radio relative to other forms of media is that a significant percentage of people who do not understand English often listen to radio bulletins. As might be expected, 41.3 percent of people who do not understand English said they never listened to bulletins, compared with 8.7 percent of people who understand English. However, 14.9 percent of people who do not understand English still claimed to listen to news bulletins 'about once a week', 11.5 percent of those not understanding English listened to news bulletins 'several times a week', and a considerable 19.2 percent said they listened to radio bulletins daily. These figures probably reflect the recent proliferation of radio stations broadcasting in the vernacular, and they are a credit to the effort to make radio accessible to non-English speakers, who accounted for nearly 36 percent of respondents in the survey. Meanwhile, of those respondents who understand English, 11.9 percent said they listened to bulletins 'about once a week', 17 percent 'several times a week', and a majority (53.7 percent) claimed to listen to radio bulletins every day.

Not surprisingly, people with more education showed a strong tendency to listen to radio bulletins with greater frequency than others. A sizeable 46.3 percent of respondents with no education said that they never listened to bulletins, compared with only 18.5 percent of people with up to ten years of education and 4 percent of people with more than ten years of education. But we see an even greater disparity in the percentages of people listening to a radio bulletin every day; only 17.8 percent of people with no education said they did so, compared with 36.9 percent of people with up to ten years of education and 66 percent of respondents with more than ten years of education.

Finally, the tendency to listen to news bulletins has a partisan dimension. Respondents were asked, 'If you feel close to any political party, which one?' and those who said that they were close to the NPP were more likely to listen to radio bulletins than people close to the NDC. A sizeable 22.5

percent of NDC supporters said that they never listened to bulletins, compared with 15.2 percent of NPP supporters. Meanwhile, 47.1 percent of NPP followers said they listened to a bulletin every day, compared with only 37.3 percent of NDC followers.

Limited readership of newspapers In order to gauge the influence of newspapers in Ghana, the Afrobarometer asked respondents, 'How often do you read a newspaper?' In sharp contrast to the findings concerning the reach of radio, a majority of respondents (57.9 percent) said they never read a newspaper, and an additional 5.0 percent said they read a paper 'less than once a month'. Meanwhile, 5.8 percent of respondents said they read a paper 'about once a month' and another 10.6 percent claimed to do so 'about once a week'. A meagre 7.7 percent said they read a paper 'several times a week' and only 12.9 percent claimed to do so 'every day'.

As should be expected, breaking down these numbers reveals that newspapers are read most often in Greater Accra (29.3 percent of respondents there said they read a paper 'every day' and only 31.5 percent said they never did), but, somewhat surprisingly, neither the Ashanti nor the Eastern Region was second in newspaper readership. Rather, the rural Volta Region had the second highest newspaper readership after Greater Accra, as 14.5 percent of people there said that they read a paper 'every day', although 40.6 percent said they never read a paper. In the remaining eight regions the percentage of people who said that they 'never' read a newspaper was above 60.0 percent, and virtually across the board the lowest readership numbers are found in the three northern regions (Northern, Upper East and Upper West).

Along these lines is the finding that people in urban areas are much more inclined to read newspapers than rural inhabitants, perhaps because they have greater access to them and tend to be wealthier and better educated. A majority of people (67.8 percent) living in rural areas said they never read a newspaper, while only 39.9 percent of people living in urban areas claimed never to do so. Meanwhile, 12.2 percent of urban dwellers claimed to read a paper 'several times a week' compared with only 5.2 percent of rural inhabitants, and 25.6 percent of people in urban areas responded that they read a paper every day, as opposed to only 5.9 percent of people in rural areas.

Given that all major Ghanaian newspapers are printed in English, it is not surprising that 96.2 percent of respondents who do not understand English said they never read a newspaper. Of respondents who understand English the numbers, as expected, shift dramatically. Only 36.4 percent of these people said they never read a paper, 11.6 percent of them said they did so 'several times a week', and 20.0 percent claimed to read a newspaper 'every day'. Correlated to these results is the finding that people with more education tend to read newspapers more often; of people with no education, 98.7 percent said they never read a newspaper. Of people with up

to ten years of education, 67 percent still said that they never read a newspaper, while 5.1 percent of them said they did so 'several times a week' and 5.4 percent claimed to do so every day. In contrast, only 13.4 percent of people with more than ten years of education said they never read a paper, while 17 percent did so several times a week and 34 percent claimed to do so every day.

Finally, the survey indicates that people close to the NPP tend to read newspapers more often than those close to the NDC. Of respondents identifying with the NPP, 51.4 percent said they never read a paper, compared with 63 percent of NDC supporters. Meanwhile, 10.5 percent of NPP supporters said they read a newspaper 'several times a week' and another 17.5 percent claimed to read one every day, compared with only 5.3 percent and 9.5 percent of NDC supporters, respectively.

Influence of state-owned versus private newspapers Further breaking down the question of newspaper influence, the survey asked respondents which newspapers they read, allowing individuals to identify up to three papers. Of respondents who identified at least one paper, 82.3 percent cited the state-owned *Daily Graphic*. Less than one in ten respondents (8.1 percent) who claimed to read newspapers named the state-owned *Ghanaian Times* as their first option, and only 4.1 percent named the privately owned *Ghanaian Chronicle*.

The *Daily Graphic* dominates both urban and rural areas. Close to four out of five respondents (79.5 percent) in urban areas named the *Graphic* as their first choice, with even more rural respondents (85.6 percent) citing the paper. *The Ghanaian Times* was more popular with rural than urban readers, with 10.1 percent of rural and 5.9 percent of urban respondents putting the paper first. Of people living in urban areas, 6.4 percent named the *Ghanaian Chronicle* as their preferred paper, compared with only 1.5 percent of those in rural areas. Meanwhile, the variable for education produced the expected relationship, as the survey showed that the higher the education level the more likely the respondent was to name a paper other than the state-owned *Daily Graphic* or *The Ghanaian Times*. For example, 4.9 percent of those with more than ten years education cited the *Ghanaian Chronicle* first, compared with only 2.8 percent of those with less than ten years education, and zero percent for those with no education.

Finally, the Afrobarometer survey revealed that there is a clear partisan dimension to newspaper readership, as people close to the NPP are much more likely to read private papers than their NDC counterparts. Of NPP supporters, 7.9 percent named the *Ghanaian Chronicle* as their first choice, compared with only 1.1 percent of NDC supporters. In contrast, 86.7 percent of NDC supporters cited the *Daily Graphic* first, compared with only 77.2 percent of NPP supporters.

The 2000 Department of Political Science, University of Ghana, Legon Survey

A nationwide survey of 4,000 Ghanaians conducted prior to the elections by the Department of Political Science at the University of Ghana, Legon sheds additional light on how Ghanaians consume the media.³⁸ Overall, the results suggest that the media are well respected and quite influential in shaping the attitudes of the electorate. When disaggregated, however, the data reveal substantial disparities across the Ghanaian public.

According to the survey, a sizeable number of Ghanaians claimed to follow political developments in the media. When asked 'Do you follow political parties' activities in the news media?' a vast majority (81.1 percent) of respondents said 'yes'. The two regions with the largest metropolitan populations, Greater Accra and Kumasi, registered high percentages of people claiming to do so. In addition, there is a strong correlation between education and the likelihood of people following the parties in the media, and people with more personal income are more likely to do so.

The survey clearly shows that Ghanaians think radio is the most useful medium in determining how to vote. When asked, 'Which source have you found to be the most useful in deciding who to vote for in your constituency?' nearly half (47.3 percent) of respondents cited radio. Television trailed far behind (19.6 percent), and newspapers were cited by only 4.2 percent of respondents, ranking them behind such sources as posters and fliers (4.9 percent). Respondents from Eastern, Greater Accra and Ashanti Regions found newspapers relatively useful as compared with respondents from other regions. These are the three regions in which they are likely to be most widely available. Radio was found to be particularly useful to people living in Ashanti, Central and Greater Accra, three regions with vibrant private FM stations. The survey also suggests that better educated and wealthier people are more likely to identify newspapers as their most useful source of information.

One possible explanation for radio's status as the most useful source of information, according to those surveyed, is that it is among the most trusted media. When asked, 'In general, which source of media information do you trust most to tell the truth?' 28.3 percent of respondents cited private radio and 14.5 percent state-owned radio. State-owned television was named by 20.2 percent of respondents. Newspapers are not very widely trusted by Ghanaians; 7.6 percent of respondents cited private newspapers as their most trusted source, and only 4.5 percent named state-owned newspapers.

Regional breakdowns reveal that private radio was much more trusted in the more urbanized regions, including Greater Accra, Ashanti and Eastern

38. For further details on the Department of Political Science, University of Ghana survey, see Joseph R. A. Ayee, 'Introduction', in Ayee, *Deepening Democracy in Ghana*, Vol. 1.

Regions, than elsewhere. Meanwhile, state-owned radio was trusted most often by people living in Volta Region, followed by Northern and Upper East Regions. It should come as no surprise that a majority of people living in these three regions voted for the incumbent NDC in the first round. While there are certainly many other independent variables that help explain the outcome of the presidential vote, UGM flag-bearer Dr Wereko-Brobby noted on a private radio station following the 7 December elections that these three regions all voted for the NDC, and they are the only three regions in Ghana without a single private FM radio station.³⁹ (Despite his insightful comments on the media, Wereko-Brobby fared very poorly in the election, garnering just 0.3 percent of the presidential vote.)⁴⁰ In addition, there was clearly much more trust in the state-owned media among people leaning towards the NDC than among those leaning towards the NPP. Conversely, many more NPP sympathizers said that they trusted private media outlets. A stunning 46.6 percent of NPP followers named private radio as their most trusted source, compared with only 16.5 percent of respondents with NDC inclinations.

Conclusion

In a *New York Times* editorial reprinted in *The Accra Mail*, a private newspaper, foreign affairs columnist Thomas L. Friedman praised Ghana's 'Low-tech democracy', a reference to the country's FM radio stations and the contribution they made to the electoral success. Friedman writes:

For Ghana's poor, illiterate masses, being able to call the radio, or be interviewed in the market by a radio reporter with a tape recorder, has given them a chance to participate in politics as never before. It was this national conversation, conducted over FM radio, that was critical in enabling J.A. Kufuor, a free-market democrat, to defeat Mr. Rawlings's tired, floundering party, which has run Ghana into the ground during 20 years in office.⁴¹

It is this kind of romanticizing of the role of the media in electoral politics that the survey results presented here call into question. Friedman is not alone in glorifying the media's role; many donor agencies focus on (and heavily fund) activities related to the media in developing democracies, including the foreign sponsorship of the CDD-Ghana project and the similar project run by the National Media Commission. The media played a pivotal role in Ghana's most recent election — that is beyond dispute.

39. It should be noted that the Upper West capital, Wa, has a small private FM station, Radio Progress, that is tacitly underwritten by the Catholic Church, and that Northern Region has one private community station outside Tamale, but it does not have its own transmitter.

40. Smith, 'Ghana's 2000 elections: consolidating multi-party democracy', p. 522.

41. Thomas L. Friedman, 'Low-tech democracy', *The Accra Mail*, 3 May 2001, p. 2.

But evidence from the two public opinion surveys presented above suggests that the impact of the media at the grassroots level, which Friedman and other media practitioners celebrate, is minimal.

So what conclusions can be drawn from our principal findings — that the media performed admirably in the 2000 elections, but that media outlets are consumed very differently across the country? It should be stressed that Ghana's media have a significant effect on a particular class of Ghanaians: the urban elites, the country's decision-makers. In other words, the media have their strongest presence 'where it counts', namely, in Ghana's large metropolitan cities, Accra and Kumasi. Accra is the capital city and the seat of the national government, so it has a high concentration of politicians, opinion leaders, and other political and economic decision-makers. Given the poor state of the transportation network, it is difficult and time-consuming for many parliamentarians representing more remote areas to return to their constituencies; thus many end up spending large portions of their time in Accra. Certainly, these decision-makers devote significant attention to the media. It is this aspect of the media — influencing people in important positions — that might be the most powerful. Ghana's other metropolis, Kumasi, is a bastion of NPP support, and its strong privately-owned media were important factors in producing the high voter turnout and overwhelming support shown for the NPP on both election days. As long as the media are vibrant in these large cities, they will continue to play major roles in national events, as was the case during the 2000 elections.

It should also be noted that, relative both to Ghana's recent past and to other sub-Saharan African countries, the media in Ghana are flourishing today. As we have described, the history of the media in Ghana's Fourth Republic has been turbulent (as was the case in Ghana's previous Republics), but the media have never enjoyed more freedom or respect than they do now. Likewise, on the African continent, where media repression and intimidation remain all too common, Ghana (along with perhaps Senegal) stands out as an exemplar of media freedom and democratic development. While there are countries with more mature state-owned and private media, such as Nigeria and South Africa, Ghana's media, by virtue of their performance during the 2000 elections, have shown that they have the potential to match the contributions of those in other sub-Saharan African countries.

Yet our overall assessment of the role of the media in the 2000 Ghanaian elections remains decidedly mixed. As the survey data reveal, it is clear that the media's reach and impact are limited by a number of factors. Foremost is the fact that the media are largely inaccessible to people living in Ghana's more remote and rural areas. Many of the people living beyond Greater Accra and parts of Ashanti, Eastern, Central and Western Regions remain essentially unaffected by the media, private as well as state-owned. This is

particularly true with regard to newspapers, as one of the most revealing findings of the surveys is just how limited access to newspapers is in most of the regions. State-owned newspapers are hard enough to find outside the major cities; private newspapers are virtually non-existent in these parts. Even radio, which is shown to be significantly more influential than newspapers in disseminating information, is difficult to receive in certain parts of the country. As we have noted, for all intents and purposes, three of Ghana's ten regions do not even have a single private FM station.

With the change in administration the media, particularly private outlets, find themselves in a peculiar position. Many of these private outlets defined themselves by their opposition to NDC rule. Now that the NDC is out of office and the NPP is in charge, will they continue to focus on critique of the NDC, or might they turn on the NPP, the party that most private outlets supported prior to the election? Furthermore, as anti-NDC stories become more difficult to dig up, will they be forced to turn on the NPP in order to maintain revenue flows? The early indications are that these private media outlets are increasingly willing to criticize the governing NPP but that they continue to disparage the NDC. Similar questions pertain to the state-owned media: will their allegiance shift to the NPP now that it controls the government coffers? Or might some loyalty to Rawlings and the NDC remain?

Ghana's media, while maturing, are not yet developed. Some media experts have argued that the effect of the media on citizens is not going to be very significant if a society does not have a *lingua franca*, a high literacy rate, a widespread communications network, legal protections on free speech and expression, and living conditions that can support private media. It is debatable whether any of these conditions fully exist in Ghana. Rather than continually extolling the positive role of the media during the 2000 elections, government officials, civil society groups, and especially media practitioners should begin to focus on how Ghana can overcome these structural impediments to the development of the media so as to ensure that the state-owned and private media can deliver more effective and equitable electoral coverage in the future.