

Re-Defining the Role of the Mass Media in Rural Development

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Abstract

The mass media have been blamed for serving elitist audiences since programmes aired and articles published are either linguistically inaccessible to rural audiences or are of little relevance to deprived communities. This study set out to investigate the effectiveness of the mass media in providing information needed to advance the development of the most deprived part of Ghana, Northern Ghana. It aims at establishing the perceptions of media editors on the contribution made by the media towards Northern Ghana's development. It also attempts to determine the extent to which mass media stories on Northern Ghana are development-oriented. Using content analysis of selected radio and television programmes and newspaper publications as well as interviews of media editors, the study revealed that what editors applaud as their contribution to the development of Northern Ghana was simply publishing challenges of the North in their various media outlets. Analyses of media content on agriculture, education, health and the economy of Northern Ghana confirmed the fact that media stories fell short of fulfilling the tenets of development journalism. The study recommends a new approach to the practice of development journalism in order to enhance progress in deprived communities. It proposes the re-orientation of journalists to play development advocacy roles.

Keywords: Mass Media, Rural Development, Northern Ghana, Development & Advocacy Journalism

Introduction

Communication scholars have long established that the mass media play significant roles in advancing development. For instance, the mass media aims to stimulate debate and conscientize people for participatory decision-making as well as the acquisition of new knowledge and skills (Fraiser & Restrepo-Estrada, 1998: 13). In his analysis of the role of communication in the development process, Hornik points out that mass communication could serve as a “low cost loud speaker” for developing countries. Since such countries usually have little money to employ the services of several experts to educate the masses on technological innovations, the mass media have become an extension of the experts’ voice (Hornik, 1989: 9).

Fabrizio (2007: 19) acknowledged the role of the media in reducing poverty through its ability to raise public awareness and debate, and shift public and political opinion. This could lead to policy change such as the World Bank-approved and supported Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) developed to deal with poverty in low income countries.

In spite of the findings of Fabrizio and others, there is evidence which points at the media’s failure to fulfill the development aspirations of Africa. Media researchers have particularly been critical of the mass media’s coverage of deprived parts of the country. For

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instance, Inayatullah (1967: 7) observed that the push for modernization in the developing world, via communication media has proved ineffective in enhancing development. Beltran (1976) corroborated this view. Similarly, Mbindyo (1984: 12) observed that Kenya is heavily dependent on foreign media messages and content much of which is often irrelevant to the needs of majority of the people. It goes on to state that the print media in that country were largely centred in the urban areas and gave coverage to such areas at the expense of rural areas. Such imbalance in media coverage had negative developmental impact for a country where 80 percent of the populace lived in rural areas and engaged in agriculture (Mbindyo, 1984).

Kayode & Jimoh (2009) also showed that the Nigerian media did not do much to educate, enlighten or motivate the public towards the need to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Findings of the study showed that the Nigerian media did not give much attention to some development issues. Environmental sustainability issues were the most frequently reported followed by poverty and hunger. The least reported areas were stories on maternal health, child mortality and universal primary education. Almost a fifth of such stories were carried as straight news rather than features, editorial and opinion pieces (Kayode & Jimoh, 2009: 23).

Like their Nigerian counterparts, Ghana's media have over the years failed to serve the development interest of deprived parts of the country. Since Ghana attained independence, the media have constantly been criticized for their failure to advance the development agenda of the country. Aborampah and Anokwa (1984:107) noted that in Ghana, "the growth of mass media and its use as exemplified by cinema, have not brought any significant changes in the life of the mass people".

With the liberalization of the media industry in 1993, many expected a more active participation of the media in development. However, Asante (1999: 34) regretted that little efforts were made by Ghana's media institutions to accelerate and sustain national development. According to Asante (1999), some scholars are particularly concerned about the media's failure to promote the development of rural communities. Asante (1999) found that circulation of Ghana's state owned and most widely read newspapers, *Daily Graphic* and *Ghanaian Times*, are limited to the major cities to the detriment of rural communities.

Television has even been given a poorer assessment in terms of its contribution to the development of Ghana. Asante (1999) is of the view that television transmission in Ghana only benefits the urban areas and that the programmes are basically entertainment oriented, neglecting the development needs and aspirations of the country.

Also, marginalized groups, including women and rural communities are often neglected in terms of coverage. African Media Barometer Ghana (2008) has also reported the print media's lack of presence in rural communities. According to the research, there is no organized system for newspaper distribution in Ghana (Daily Guide, 2009).

The problem for investigation, therefore, is inadequate development reportage on Northern Ghana. The study set out to investigate the effectiveness of the mass media in providing the information needed to advance the development of the most deprived part of Ghana. Specifically, the study aims at attaining the following objectives:

- To find out the perceptions of media editors on the contribution made by the media towards Northern Ghana's development;
- To determine the extent to which mass media stories on Northern Ghana are development-oriented;
- To establish challenges faced by the mass media in their coverage of Northern Ghana; and
- To propose new approaches to mass media coverage of deprived communities.

Conceptual Framework

This study is informed by the concepts of development journalism and advocacy journalism. Development journalism is related to the concept of development as advanced by the North-South Commission to the effect that development is not just about the transition from poverty to material prosperity but relates to notions of human dignity, security, justice and equality (Kunczik, 1992: 7). Quebral (1975: 23) assigned development journalism the task of emancipating deprived groups including the urban poor, the rural poor and women as well as assisting them to actively participate in the political processes that determine their destinies.

Fleury (2008) argued that the development journalist is one who is industrious enough to look beyond the polished news releases and briefings put out by well endowed foreign organizations, and curious enough to find local sources of expertise. Such a journalist must be brave enough to present home-grown solutions to pressing development problems. Development journalists travel to remote areas to report on happenings there. This type of journalism acts as a tool for social justice, speaking for the voiceless, looking at the strengths and weaknesses of a country and in so doing identifying ways in which the nation can be helped. It also serves as a tool for empowerment (Smith, 2008: 6). Additionally, development journalism focuses on the needs of the poor, deprived and marginalized and ensures their effective participation in developmental planning. It advocates the interests of the marginalized in place of the views of the policy makers and the government (Namra, 2004: 9).

Where development journalism as practiced in the mainstream media fails in providing the information needed for the development of deprived communities, a more radical approach to development communication, advocacy journalism, might prove more useful in addressing the information needs of such communities.

Advocacy journalism refers to reportage aimed at promoting a specific political or social cause. It is that genre of journalism which, unlike propaganda, is fact-based, but supports a specific point of view on an issue. This style of journalism, which gained popularity in the United States of America during the second half of the 20th century, contrasts with earlier journalistic practice of objectivity. Thus, most advocacy journalists reject the objectivity of the mainstream press as practically impossible (Berman, 2004: 23).

Berman (2004: 23) argued that the long held journalistic practice of objectivity and neutrality are antiquated principles which are no longer universally observed. According to her, advocacy journalism will be the single most crucial element which ensures change in the world. She stated that when writing news stories, there will always be some form of implicit bias, whether political, personal, or metaphysical, intentional or subconscious. For Berman (2004: 25), this is not necessarily a rejection of the existence of an objective reality, merely a statement about journalists' inability to report in a value-free fashion.

Advocacy journalists argue that media sources claiming to be free of bias often advance certain political ideas which are disguised in a so-called objective viewpoint. They contend that the mainstream media reinforce majority-held ideas, marginalizing dissent and retarding political and cultural discourse. The critics propose that it is better to make biases explicit, with the intention of promoting transparency and self-awareness that better serves media consumers. Advocacy journalists also assume that their audiences will share their biases or will at least be conscious of such prejudices while evaluating what are supposed to be well-researched and persuasive arguments (Berman, 2004).

For Careless (2000:4), advocacy journals which are also referred to as alternative publications, have a declared bias, a publicly acknowledged editorial point of view, and are unambiguous regarding their editorial position even on their masthead. According to Careless (2000:5), in cases when the mainstream media ignores, trivializes or seriously distorts

happenings within a community, such a community needs its own media. In the view of Careless when a group of people are never quoted or are quoted inaccurately, if they are stereotyped or misinformation is spread about them, then they need their own face and voice.

Advancing arguments for the establishment of advocacy journals, Careless (2000:5) stated that most mainstream media have vested interest on issues related to development and cannot be trusted to advance the cause of the disadvantaged in society who desperately need more social services. According to her, the disadvantaged community believes that a journal advocating on their behalf understands their needs. That aside, the whole story is not often being told in the major media. Since society is made up of various communities of varying interests and the mass media aims at the whole pool, such media skims the surface of or totally ignores the needs of smaller communities. The advocacy media is targeted at a smaller audience and can delve deeper into the concerns of marginalized communities. Again, editors of the advocacy media assume their readers are also reading mainstream publications. Therefore, advocacy media often try to answer, clarify, balance or refute unfair publications in the mainstream media (Berman, 2004).

Therefore, the main variables of the concept of development journalism which inform this study are:

- Explicitly showing bias in coverage of deprived communities in allocating more airtime or space to such communities and focusing on development issues emanating from the communities;
- The advocacy media must answer, clarify, balance or refute unfair publications in the mainstream media;
- Constructive and positive reportage to facilitate development:- News stories that focus on this style of reportage should concentrate less on day-to-day events and give priority to long term development issues. Such news items must also focus on development activities which lead towards progress in the lives of Northern Ghanaians rather than stories which catalogue the people's development challenges;
- Media reports should look beyond press conferences and polished news releases from government and political actors and find local sources of expertise, as in residents of deprived communities, both educated and uneducated, who have expertise and knowledge in development challenges confronting the area;
- News reports need also present home-grown solutions to pressing development problems, as against merely presenting challenges without proffering solutions, or merely proposing international donor or government support to alleviate the plight of Northerners. Journalists must think outside the box in coming up with endogenous knowledge and value systems that can alleviate people's plight; and
- Also, media stories must critically examine and evaluate the relevance of a development project to the needs of residents of Northern Ghana, the difference between a planned scheme and its actual implementation, and the difference between a project's impact on people as claimed by government officials and as it actually is. Thus, beyond reporting the commissioning of projects by government, journalists must publish follow-up stories to assess the impact of projects on the lives of Northerners.

Methodology

Content analysis and in-depth interviews were used for this study. Content analysis was used to examine the theme of messages produced by the media in their task of reporting and analyzing the poverty situation in Northern Ghana. Content analysis assisted in measuring the importance that both print and electronic media attached to news on Northern

Ghana as well as the intensity and frequency with which they published stories from that part of the country. That aside, in depth interviews were conducted with media gatekeepers to establish their views on the role of the media in the development efforts of Northern Ghana.

Two state-owned dailies, *Daily Graphic* and *Ghanaian Times*, were purposively sampled for the study. As state-owned newspapers, these print media have a major responsibility to assist in the development efforts of deprived areas like Northern Ghana. The two papers also have offices and journalists in all ten regions of the country. Aside the state-owned papers, two privately owned newspapers, *Ghanaian Chronicle* and *Public Agenda*, were purposively sampled. *Chronicle* had consistently been adjudged the most widely read private newspaper and was the only private paper which had an office and a correspondent in the Northern Region. *Public Agenda*, on the other hand, is a newspaper which is sponsored by a non-governmental organization with a focus on development of vulnerable communities.

With regards to broadcast media, the state-owned *Ghana Television* and *GBC Radio* were purposively sampled since they are state-owned media houses with a mandate to use broadcasting for promoting development. These stations are also appropriate for the study since they have national coverage. Additionally, one privately owned television station, *Metro TV*, was selected for the sole reason that it was the only privately owned station whose coverage extended to Northern Ghana. Since broadcast programme scheduling is the same every week, simple random sampling was employed to select and analyze print and broadcast news and programmes for one week every month from July, 2008 to June, 2009. For each of the selected months, the lottery method was used to select one week for data collection.

Every page of selected newspapers was studied to identify stories emanating from Northern Ghana. The selected stories were then coded. For radio and television programmes, news was purposely sampled. The 6:00 a.m., 1:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. news bulletins were selected on *GBC Radio* for the simple reason that these constitute the major news bulletins on the station. For *GTV* and *Metro TV*, their 7:00pm and 7.30pm news bulletins respectively were purposely sampled since these were the major bulletins for the two stations.

The editors of all media organizations which formed part of the study were also purposively sampled and interviewed. As gatekeepers of state-owned and major privately-owned media, the editors were expected to have much insight into the role that the media has played in developing Northern Ghana.

In analyzing media content, stories published on three key areas of development namely agriculture, education, healthcare and economic issues were prioritized. The selection of these four sectors of development was based on the fact that the Centre for Democratic Governance (2011) found agriculture, education, healthcare and the economy areas of prime concern for most Ghanaians. Also, stories were analyzed as either being favourable, unfavourable or neutral. Favourable stories were those which reported some positive development within Northern Ghana while unfavourable stories presented negative happenings in the area without either advocating for support or presenting possible ways of resolving such challenges.

Findings

This section analyses the content of selected media organizations to show the effectiveness or otherwise with which they handled development news. It looks at the views of media editors on the media's role in development as well as challenges they face in reporting from Northern Ghana.

Inadequate coverage of Northern Ghana's development issues

The study showed that less than half (44.7%) of newspaper articles on Northern Ghana were development-oriented, as against 55.3% which constituted non-development stories. Also, when the media covered development news they often accorded such news little prominence. For instance, only 2.2 percent of press publications on Northern Ghana were front page stories as against 85.6 percent of the stories which were placed in less read inside pages of the newspapers. The prioritized inside pages of the papers – the centre spread – attracted just 8.4 percent of Northern development stories whereas the back pages, which come second in terms of page prioritization, got 3.8 percent of the stories.

Similar to the print media, the broadcast media gave little attention to development news from Northern Ghana. Slightly more than a quarter (26.1%) of Northern development news made headlines on radio and television as against almost 74 percent (73.9%) of such news which were non-headline news. Since headline news and front page stories usually catch the attention of audiences and, therefore, make more impact than non-headline and non-front page news, the fact that few stories made the headlines and front pages meant that editors of the selected stations did not place much priority on stories from that part of the country. This fact notwithstanding, editors of the various media houses praised the mass media's contribution to the development of Northern Ghana.

Media editors' views on role of the media in development of Northern Ghana

The Deputy Editor of *Chronicle* indicated that the paper plays a major role in promoting the development of Northern Ghana. "Chronicle has reported extensively on challenges facing agriculture in the North. We have projected the cotton industry in that part of Ghana. When cotton farmers were neglected by government, the paper articulated the plight of the farmers until government responded to their grievances", he said.

In the area of health, the *Ghanaian Chronicle* has published stories extensively on communities within Northern Ghana which do not have access to healthcare delivery. The paper also contributed to education by exposing shortcomings like pupils sitting under trees, lack of schools for some communities where pupils have to walk long distances to attend schools, as well as lack of facilities for the University for Development Studies. According to the Chronicle's Assistant Editor, the paper has constantly brought to the fore infrastructural inadequacies like poor road and telecommunication network within Northern Ghana. Again, environmental stories of the paper focused on deforestation and bush burning.

Public Agenda also contributes to the development of Northern Ghana by bringing the attention of policy makers to the plight of the North. The Deputy Editor of the paper stated: "Though the paper does not have a specific page devoted to coverage of the North, it works with NGOs which have an interest in the development of that part of Ghana to publish many stories from the North". He criticized other privately-owned newspapers as having overriding commercial interests that make them pay little attention to the North, since that area offers little financial benefits for press houses. The Deputy Editor was of the view that *Public Agenda* has, through its coverage, contributed to bridging the development gap between the North and the South by exposing development challenges of Northern Ghana and advocating for governments' assistance towards ameliorating the plight of residents of the area.

Similarly, *Daily Graphic* Editor was of the view that the paper has contributed substantially to the development of the North owing to its coverage of development issues emanating from that part of Ghana. According to him, *Graphic* has a regional file column where every 10 days one region of Ghana gets the spotlight. The three regions of the North also benefit from the regional file page.

Editors of the electronic media also applauded their contribution to the development of Ghana's poorest regions. The Head of News of GBC Radio was of the view that the media

is making significant contribution to the political, social and economic development of Northern Ghana. The GBC's Head of News drew attention to the educational role of the mass media. He cited the three regional FM stations in Northern Ghana – Radio Upper West, URA Radio and Radio Savannah – as having done exceptionally well in educating ordinary residents of Northern Ghana to eradicate guinea worm and prevent the spread of HIV/Aids. "GBC's regional FM stations also champion girl-child education in Northern Ghana and constantly inform inhabitants of the area on government policies. For instance, on 17th February, 2009, GBC Radio did a story to the effect that there was no single pathologist in Northern Ghana. The station did an update on the story the following day by interviewing stakeholders in health on the issue", he stated.

The Head of News emphasized that GBC has contributed towards bridging the development gap between the North and the South through coverage of vulnerable groups like the young women who travel from Northern Ghana to Southern Ghana in search of greener pastures. The state broadcaster also highlights educational programmes and the work of non-governmental organizations within Northern Ghana. The Station's Head of Radio News indicated that each time government delays in paying feeding grants for northern second cycle institutions, GBC takes up the issue and advocates for payment of the grants.

On his part, the Producer of News at *Metro TV* said the station's coverage brings to the attention of duty bearers the development challenges faced by Northerners. He was of the view that beyond presenting development challenges, the station celebrates successes chalked by ordinary residents of Northern Ghana. The station has also covered stories on the prospects of sheabutter processing, the potential of *kapaala* (a variety of sorghum), the use of poverty alleviation funds in Northern Ghana, smock weaving in Upper East and the tourist potential of Yezutang in the Upper West Region.

The roles the Ghanaian media have played in developing Northern Ghana, as indicated by the media gatekeepers, fell short of the tenets of development reporting much less advocacy journalism. The mainstream media merely catalogued development challenges without assisting the people with proposed solutions to such challenges. The media were probably oblivious of the fact that constantly reminding people of their challenges could dampen the spirits of such people rather than motivating them to take development into their own hands. Contrary to the tenets of advocacy journalism, the media did not explicitly show bias in coverage of Northern Ghana. All editors who were interviewed indicated that they did not devote any special space or airtime to the concerns of Ghana's most deprived regions. Also, media stories failed to analyze political, economic and environmental issues to enable rural people appreciate such issues better and make informed political and economic decisions.

Content of Media Stories

Aside sampling the views of media gatekeepers on the role their various organizations played in developing Northern Ghana, this study analyzed the content of selected media houses to find out how stories on agriculture, education, health and the economy were reported on. While some of such stories carried a favourable image of Northern Ghana, others were reported in a manner that gives the area a negative image.

Agriculture

In the area of agriculture, some favourable stories announced Government policies or assistance packages which were expected to impact positively on agricultural development within the study area. For instance, on 17th March, 2009, *Radio Ghana*'s 1:00 pm and 6:00 pm news bulletins reported that owing to an intervention by the Vice President of Ghana, a factory in Tema had agreed to buy all tomatoes produced in the Upper East Region to avert a

glut of the crop. In February, 2009, tomato farmers within the Upper East Region had complained of lack market for their produce since “Market Queens” from Accra preferred to purchase an improved variety of the crop from Burkina Faso. Media reports of the farmers’ woes notched government into negotiating market for the farmers’ crop.

Having elicited government’s response to the farmers’ plight, development journalism practice entails following up the story to ensure that government lived by its promise and that the farmers’ plight is addressed. However, there was no follow up to the story. Aside bringing the challenges of the tomato farmers to the fore, journalists also failed to come up with proposed solutions to the farmers’ plight, contrary to the admonition of Smith (2008) that the development journalist goes beyond cataloguing problems of deprived communities to offering solutions.

The *Ghanaian Times* of 7th April, 2009 also published a story titled “FASCOM Coming Back” which outlined Government’s intention to reintroduce the Farmers’ Service Centre (FASCOM) as a means of enhancing agriculture under the Savanna Accelerated Development Authority (SADA). On 11th November, 2008, *Ghanaian Times* published the story of a Farmers’ Day ceremony which was held at Sandema in the Upper East Region during which many farmers were honoured. At the ceremony, the Vice President promised to use SADA as a means of promoting agriculture within Northern Ghana. Also, *Public Agenda* reported in its 16th March, 2009 issue that the Vice President, His Excellency John Mahama, announced to farmers at Navrongo in the Upper East Region that the School Feeding Programme would target locally produced rice rather than imported foodstuff. In a similar vein, the *Ghanaian Times* of 5th May, 2009 featured the Upper East Regional Minister who pledged government’s support to revitalize agriculture within the three Northern regions. Moreover, *Radio Ghana* broadcasted during its 1:00pm and 6:00pm news bulletins on 15th September, 2008 that a long-term strategic development plan for the development of agriculture was unveiled by the Northern Development Fund.

Government also provided seven (7) farming communities in the Bole District with water pumping machines. This favourable news item was aired by *Radio Ghana* on 27th October, 2008 during its 6:00am news. Both *Metro TV* and *GTV* also announced government initiatives aimed at enhancing agricultural production. For instance, *Metro TV* carried a story on 31st July, 2008 to the effect that some farmers in the Upper East Region had benefited from fertilizer subsidies, and another story on 7th April, 2009 reported of a workshop organized for livestock breeders in Tamale to enhance productivity. *GTV* aired two favourable news items on agriculture in Northern Ghana. The first, aired on 6th April, 2009, reported of the inauguration of a dam at Fusegu in the Northern Region during which the Minister for Food and Agriculture announced that government would strengthen agricultural mechanization to make farming more attractive. The second story covered the launch by the Northern Regional Minister of a sheabutter processing factory.

While such stories were attempts by the media to showcase positive developments in agriculture within Northern Ghana, the stories did not go far enough in analyzing the potential impact of such positive initiatives. Moreover, development journalism prescribes that news coverage should go beyond focusing on the planned events which the media houses covered to deal with initiatives by Northern farmers which were producing positive results. Such initiatives could then serve as examples to show the way to successful agricultural production for other farmers. It is not enough for the development journalist to merely outline government’s promises of support for communities as the stories published above did. What the journalists who reported on pledges to use the Savanna Accelerated Development Authority (SADA) to improve agriculture and to bring back the Farmers’ Service Centre (FASCOM) failed to appreciate was that, “The journalist’s job on a development newsbeat is critically to examine, evaluate and report the relevance of a development project to national

and local needs ...” (Aggarwala, 1978 cited in Kunczik, 1992:13). However, there was neither analysis from the media on the proposed agricultural policies and programmes for Northern Ghana nor were there follow up stories to find out whether government made good its promises for the people.

Unfavourable stories on agriculture took the form of natural and manmade disasters, lack of market for farm produce and lack of conducive environment for agricultural production. The *Ghanaian Times* of 20th January, 2009, carried a story headlined, “Fire razes 10 acre mango farm”. The unfortunate incident took place at the Savlugu/Nanton District of the Northern Region. A similar story was published by the same paper on 21st August, 2008 titled, “Cattle destroy farms at Gbiligu”. The story reported how large tracts of cultivated fields were destroyed by cattle headed by Fulani men at Gbiligu in the Northern Region. Destruction of farms by cattle also caught the attention of *Radio Ghana* during its 6:00pm news on 19th March, 2009.

The Economics of tomato marketing was not left out of media reportage. The 5th November, 2008 issue of *Ghanaian Times* reported that the refurbished Northern Tomato Factory could not operate since there was disagreement between farmers and the factory management in pricing tomatoes. Thus, the farmers preferred selling to market queens who bought the crop at a higher price. This story was captioned, “Tomato farmers prefer selling to market queens”.

Such stories were deemed unfavourable for the simple reason that having brought challenges facing agriculture to the fore, the stories neither proposed solutions nor did they advocate for intervention to alleviate the people’s plight.

Education

Like stories on agriculture, more than half (54.3%) of the print stories portrayed a favourable image of education in Northern Ghana, while only 29.4 percent of broadcast stories did the same. Many of the favourable stories reported some progress made in education or some forms of support given to educational institutions within Northern Ghana. In “Kassena – Nankana West District in focus”, the *Ghanaian Chronicle* edition of 16th February, 2009 dilates on educational progress within the district, focusing mainly on the development of educational infrastructure. Another district which was praised for implementing educational policies was the Sissala West District of the Upper West Region. The *Ghanaian Chronicle* edition of 25th August, 2008 carried a story with the title, “Enrolment figures jump in Sissala West”, in which the Ghana Education Service (GES) District Director applauded government and NGOs for their role in the enhancement of enrolment within the district. A *Radio Ghana* story of 16th September, 2008 also spoke of an enrolment figure of 282 pupils into Primary One in the Upper West Region. This came to light during the Regional Minister’s visit to some schools on the occasion of “My First Day in School”. The Talensi-Nabdam District of the Upper East Region was equally concerned about enrolment of children in school. Thus, the Assembly enacted a bye-law to ensure that parents send their children to school. This was reported in the 19th June, 2009 edition of *Daily Graphic*.

Regarding the contents of unfavourable educational stories, 47.1 percent of broadcast stories on education were negative as against 16.1 percent of newspaper publications on the area which were unfavourable coverage of educational issues within Northern Ghana. Less than a quarter (23.5%) of broadcast stories was neutral as against 29.6 percent of print media stories which were neutral. Most unfavourable education stories merely catalogued educational challenges within Northern Ghana without attempting to show the way forward. Notable among such stories was a feature story in the 19th September, 2008 edition of the *Ghanaian Chronicle* under the headline “New Education Reform, Challenges of Upper East

Schools”. This full page story merely mentioned the well-known challenges in education – inadequate classroom accommodation, lack of furniture, insufficient textbooks and syllabi etc. Similar to this story was a *Ghanaian Chronicle* story of 16th June, 2009, which was titled, “Most children in Bongo district attend school late – research”. The news item, which mentioned many educational challenges within the Bongo District of the Upper East Region, was based on research carried out by some civil society groups.

The fact that the above stories conveyed news of challenges within the educational sector of Northern Ghana is not itself a negative reportage. The style of reportage is what makes such stories unfavourable in terms of the development aspirations of the Northern communities which formed the subject matter of such stories. All that such news stories did was to enumerate the educational challenges without indulging in campaigns to ensure that such challenges are addressed. Such reportage might only end up demoralizing the community members since constantly being exposed to their many problems could make them throw up their arms in despair. The media could go beyond the simplistic act of presenting such challenges to mobilizing the people for action, advocating for support for the communities concerned and proposing credible options for tackling such challenges.

Health

With regards to stories on health, half of the electronic media stories was adjudged unfavourable as against 37.5 percent which was favourable, with neutral stories accounting for 12.5 percent. On the other hand, favourable stories (43.9%) outnumbered unfavourable (42.1%) and neutral stories (14.0%) for the print media houses. Many of the favourable health stories published on Northern Ghana reported of assistance packages from donors, philanthropists and government agencies to healthcare institutions in the North. Under the headline, “NGO collaborates with GHS ... to address health issues in Upper East”, the *Ghanaian Chronicle* of 9th December, 2008 reported that Grassroots Africa and the Ghana Health Service were working towards eliminating negative cultural practices which hinder healthcare delivery in the Upper East Region. The 17th February, 2009 issue of *Daily Graphic* also reported that the Christian Children’s Fund of Canada, an NGO donated one thousand, five hundred Ghana cedis (GH¢ 1,500.00) and drugs to people living with HIV/Aids in Tamale, while the 19th March, 2009 issue of the same paper reported of a de-worming exercise for 17,000 basic school pupils in the Saboba District of the Northern Region.

Unfavourable health stories published in the press covered areas such as lack of health personnel, poor health facilities, common ailments which constitute health challenges to Northern Ghana and cultural practices that are inimical to the health status of Northerners. Bad cultural practices were the subject of *Chronicle*’s story of 11th December, 2008 edition headlined “Bad cultural practices killing pregnant women” and *Public Agenda*’s story of 12th December, 2008, titled “Pregnant women die as a result of negative cultural practices”. Both stories resulted from the coverage of a forum organized by a civil society organization during which a District Director of Health Services complained that some communities within the Upper East Region were not allowing pregnant women to attend antenatal care at clinics. Cultural practices impeding good healthcare was also the subject matter of “We smell a communication challenge”, a *Ghanaian Times* story of 17th November, 2008 which intimated that pregnant women in some Northern communities were refusing to use mosquito nets provided by health personnel. On 8th May, 2009, a similar story was published in the same paper headlined, “Anti-malaria drugs don’t cause abortion”.

It may be observed that both the favourable and unfavourable health stories lacked critical analysis. The media did not undertake the health campaigns that Namra (2004) recommends for tackling health care problems in developing countries. What the media did,

instead, was to report on events which happened related to health. This means that they reneged on their core duty as the fourth estate of the realm which is to educate audiences. The media's attempt at informing audiences on health issues within Northern Ghana was also poorly executed. Rather than using research and interviews to gather comprehensive information to educate Northerners on health issues, the media merely attended organized events and functions where they obtained and published speeches of politicians and management of health service providers. This has proved insufficient in catering for the health information needs of Northerners.

Economy

For both the print and broadcast media, majority of the stories portrayed a favourable image of the economy of Northern Ghana. The print media published 64.3 percent of favourable stories and the broadcast media 66.7 percent, as against 33.3 percent unfavourable broadcast news and 7.1 percent unfavourable print news. More than a quarter (28.6%) of newspaper stories was adjudged neutral, whereas broadcast media did not have a single neutral story. Some favourable stories pointed at improved economic activity in Northern Ghana or prospects for better standards of living.

In "Bolga Exhibits made in Africa products", a *Ghanaian Times* story of 20th August, 2008, the writer gave a detailed account of a five-day exhibition of made-in-Africa products organized in the Upper East Regional capital, Bolgatanga, to showcase the economic potentials of the Northern, Upper East and West Regions. Similarly, *Metro TV*, on 6th May, 2009, aired a news item on the Bolgatanga Crafts Village showcasing the economic potential of the Village. Still within the Upper East Region, *GTV*, on 21st February, 2009, highlighted the economic potential of the Dog Market in Bolgatanga. *Radio Ghana* also conveyed some positive economic news on the North. As a means of alleviating poverty within Northern Ghana, government secured funding for the Northern Rural Growth Programme. *Radio Ghana's* 6:00am bulletin of 18th June, 2009 aired this news. As an indication that business was growing in Northern Ghana, *Radio Ghana*, on 29th October, 2008, again amplified the voice of the President of the North-Eastern Chapter of Rural Banks Association who indicated at Bolgatanga that rural banks had advanced GH¢8.5 million to businesses within Northern and Upper East Regions.

All unfavourable print stories on the economy were published by the *Daily Graphic*. One such story was published on 16th September, 2008 bearing the title, "Woes of loan seekers in Tamale". Another had earlier on the 26th August, 2008 featured in the paper headlined, "Foreigners capture Tamale market", while the third story of 16th September, 2008 which bore the heading "Food joints on holiday", lamented that restaurants in Tamale had closed down owing to the Ramadan fasting. Only two unfavourable broadcast stories on the economy were featured in the news, one each on *Metro TV* network and *Radio Ghana*. The *Metro TV* story of 6th May, 2009 brought to the fore the deplorable state of the Bolgatanga Crafts Village and the traders' call on government to complete it. The *Radio Ghana's* 1:00pm story of 20th March, 2009, on the other hand, featured the Ghana Trade and Livelihood Coalition which questioned the closure of the Bolgatanga Tomato Factory.

These stories are deemed favourable because they portray positive economic development in Northern Ghana, while other stories advertised the economic potential of that part of the country. However, media coverage of development issues from the North failed to contribute effectively to the economic development of Northern Ghana. On the contrary, stories which portrayed a negative picture of the economy of Northern Ghana could scare away investors and dampen the spirit of the Northern businessperson.

Challenges to media coverage of Northern Ghana

To enable the researcher gain insight into reasons why the media do not give adequate coverage to Northern Ghana, the author asked media gatekeepers the challenges involved in extending sufficient coverage to the North. The Assistant Editor of *Chronicle* identified various challenges which inhibit coverage of Northern Ghana. According to him, many parts of the North are not easily accessible owing to bad roads and lack of vehicles plying some roads. Therefore, journalists found it difficult covering events in that part of the country. The Deputy Editor of *Chronicle* further noted that, there were inadequate internet access and postal services in the North, and this made the work of journalists difficult.

He concluded that it was expensive sending journalists to Northern Ghana. This explained why the paper had inadequate human resource presence in the North. It had no office within the Upper West Region and hardly got stories from that Region. Though it had offices in the Northern Regional capital, Tamale, and Bolgatanga, the Upper East Regional capital, such offices were poorly furnished and resourced. The Tamale office, manned by one trained journalist, had only one computer, no internet facility and no means of transportation. The Bolgatanga office was even worse off with neither a computer, nor an internet facility or means of transportation. Only one trained journalist also worked for the newspaper within the Upper East Region.

Public Agenda's Deputy Editor also cited inadequate internet access, bad road network and lack of electricity in Northern Ghana as major hindrances to media coverage of that part of the country. According to him, the unwillingness of officialdom in the North to give information also made the work of journalists difficult in that part of the country. Similarly, the Editor of *Daily Graphic* mentioned difficulty in accessing information because of traditional beliefs as a major challenge to accessing information from the North. He said:

Negative practices such as female genital mutilation and witchcraft are not reported since the reporter risks being lynched should he / she attempt exposing such practices.

Also, lack of access to some parts of the North and unwillingness to accept postings to the North constitute major challenges to media practice in the North.

Daily Graphic, the Editor stated, often had to employ the services of stringers since qualified journalists were unwilling to serve in the North. The Editor indicated that though the paper had offices in all three regional capitals of Northern Ghana, the offices were neither well-staffed nor were they well-equipped. Each region of the North had two journalists, while the offices were only provided computers and fax machines. None of the three offices had either a vehicle or internet facilities.

For the Head of GBC Radio News, the media's lack of sensitivity to problems of Northern Ghana was the major challenge to providing accurate coverage of the area. He indicated that most reporters had not been exposed to the development challenges of the North. According to him, his negative perception of Northern Ghana changed only upon his return from a visit to that part of the country. He mentioned bad roads and inadequate vehicles for journalists as significant challenges to reporting from Northern Ghana. On the other hand, the Producer of News at *Metro TV* stated:

Reporters and editors may give negative coverage to Northern Ghana owing to their genuine ignorance of happenings there rather than an exhibition of any malicious intent to denigrate the people. This is because most reporters and editors face genuine language difficulties, while others lack an appreciation of the people's culture.

He observed that *Metro TV* did not have its own reporters based in Northern Ghana. The station depended on stringers to cover the North. For him, the vast nature of Northern Region was a challenge to its coverage since no single stringer could cover the entire Region. Additionally, stringers who covered the area were not provided cameras. They had to acquire cameras on their own. This often affected quality of the video footage, and ultimately, the

quality of the news stories. Besides, stringers faced logistical constraints as well as difficulties in accessing transportation to some remote parts of the North. For instance, “the stringer for the Upper West Region was swept away by flood waters while going to cover a story and almost got drowned”, the Producer stated, adding that *Metro TV* had no single office of its own in the North.

Reconceptualizing development journalism

Results of the study showed that Ghanaian journalists do not engage in development reporting for the benefit of Northern Ghana. Journalists failed to adhere to the tenets of development journalism namely, engaging in constructive and positive reportage to facilitate development, conscientizing deprived communities to enhance political participation and using local sources of expertise to identify home-grown solutions to development challenges. In violation of the tenets of development journalism, majority of stories reported on Northern Ghana were based on coverage of planned, day-to-day events rather than giving priority to long term development issues. This tenet of development journalism falls in line with the sustainable development approach which argues for long-term utilization of natural resources.

Smith (2008) recommended that development journalists should focus on progress being made by deprived communities rather than cataloguing people’s development challenges. This is contrary to the results of this study which showed that many broadcast media stories presented development challenges without making any attempt to propose a way forward for Northern Ghana. When a group of people are constantly reminded of their deplorable living circumstances without any attempt to give them hope of overcoming their deprivation, such people easily resign to their fate and are unable to initiate action towards bettering their situation.

More so, media coverage of Northern Ghana shows a disregard for the recommendation of Dare (2000) that development reporters must look beyond press conferences and polished news releases from government and political actors and find local sources of expertise. Dare (2000) also indicated that the development reporter must critically examine, evaluate and report the relevance of development projects to communities, and monitor the implementation of such projects to ensure that community members benefit from development initiatives. The stories in this study did not go beyond reporting the commissioning of projects by government. Journalists failed to publish follow-up stories on development projects to enable them assess the impact of projects on the lives of Northerners.

This study also showed that journalists failed to think outside the box in coming up with indigenous solutions to alleviate Northern Ghana’s plight. Against the advice of Fleury (2008), stories on Northern Ghana did not attempt to present home-grown solutions to pressing development challenges. Development journalists have the tendency of sitting at their editorial desks to proffer solutions to the development of communities which they have hardly ever visited, or using the views of development theorists as panacea to the progress of deprived communities. Such information need not come from foreign development experts. Using participatory communication methods as espoused in the community radio concept, development journalists can arrive at home-grown solutions to development challenges.

In effect, the media did not live up to the expectation of development reporting as a tool for social justice and empowerment as well as a voice for the voiceless (Smith, 2008). Rather than speak for the marginalized, the media merely articulated the views of policy makers and the government. Journalists acted as propagandists and public relations tools for governments and corporate organizations instead of pursuing development objectives. This is partly a result of commercial interests being pursued by individual journalists and the media houses. Gadzekpo (2008) revealed that media men and women practice “soli”, a situation

where they collect monies from highly-placed individuals or organizations to give publicity to such people or organizations.

Viewed from the background of the fact that Smith (2008) found adherence to the principles of development journalism as the most effective means of using the mass media for development of deprived areas, the Ghanaian media's inability to abide by development journalistic practices testifies to their ineffectiveness as development partners. Therefore, a more vibrant and radical approach to development communication, advocacy journalism, is required to bring Northern Ghana's development issues to the attention of the country's development partners.

Careless (2000) laid the ground rule for advocacy journalism by stating that when the mainstream media ignores, trivializes or seriously distorts happenings within a community, such a community needs its own media. This study has established that news on Northern Ghana was not given much priority by both the print and electronic media. It emerged that only 2.2 percent of press publications on Northern Ghana made it to the front pages, while 26.1 percent of broadcast stories on Northern Ghana were headline news. Also, majority of press stories on Northern Ghana were less than a quarter page long and lacked enhancements with photographs.

Berman (2004) argued that since society is made up of various communities of varying interests and the mass media aims at the whole pool, the needs of smaller communities are often ignored. The advocacy media is targeted at a smaller audience and can delve deeper into the concerns of marginalized communities. This explains why, as the results of the present study testifies, the development needs of Northern Ghana were not adequately discussed by the mainstream media. Advocacy media is required to focus attention on the development priorities of Northern Ghana and to answer, clarify, balance or refute unfair publications about Northern Ghana in the mainstream media. Advocacy journalists would have to be further trained to have the humility to listen carefully and accurately to residents of the area voicing out their development challenges. Media men and women would also be expected to offer leadership, promote new norms and practices aimed at advancing the development of Northern Ghana rather than simply reporting on events.

As part of advocacy journalism, media persons ought to also indulge in campaigns aimed at drawing the attention of government and non-governmental organizations to challenges faced by residents of Northern Ghana. Advocacy journalism also requires constructive and positive reportage to facilitate development with less focus on day-to-day events and an emphasis on stories that promote long term development of Northern Ghana. To achieve this, there is the need for Ghanaian journalists to change their perception of news from the western concept of news being regarded as a saleable commodity (Ansah, 1990). News must be seen as a means of strengthening the cultural values of communities and presenting home-grown solutions to challenges which slow down development.

Working within the mainstream media environment and guided by the commercial orientation of the mainstream media, it is difficult for the advocacy journalist to achieve development objectives. The philosophy of community radios makes them more effective channels for advocacy journalism. Since community radios are usually owned by members of a community and are non-profit making entities, commercial interests cannot stand in the way of development advocacy. Additionally, the participatory nature of community radios offers community members fora to debate and reach consensus on their development process.

Conclusion

The Ghanaian media is not abiding by either the tenets of development journalism or those of advocacy journalism. Therefore, much as editors claim to have contributed significantly to the development of Northern Ghana, media stories failed to make the level of

impact needed to speed up the development of Northern Ghana. This results from the fact that the media had no consistent plans aimed at using communication for development support particularly of deprived parts of Ghana. Also, though majority of stories analyzed portrayed positive development within Northern Ghana, the media failed to analyze the implications of the stories or to follow up pledges made by politicians to implement specific development programmes within Ghana's poorest regions. The media, instead, concentrated on coverage of planned events which yielded routine news reports articulating the views of persons in authority.

Recommendations

To enhance media coverage of Northern Ghana, it is worth considering the following suggestions:

- Media managers should accord some prominence to Northern Ghana by dedicating at least one page in each issue of their papers to Northern issues. Media personnel should constantly interview Northern Members of Parliament to abreast themselves with challenges of the area which could be brought to the notice of development partners;
- Regional Coordinating Councils, municipal and district assemblies in Northern Ghana should partner the media in coming out with a policy for the coverage of development issues from Northern Ghana;
- Insufficient development news on the North has also been blamed on the presence of few trained journalists in that part of the country. To enhance coverage of Northern Ghana, managers of media houses should assign more reporters cover stories within Northern Ghana. Besides, the Department of African and General Studies of the University for Development Studies should collaborate with the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ) to train journalists who appreciate the culture of the North;
- Additionally, district assemblies in the North could sponsor the training of some indigenes and bond them, on completion of their training programmes, to practice development journalism within the districts where they benefited from such sponsorships.
- Proximity of the media to their sources of news is an important consideration on the amount of news hole devoted a particular area. Therefore, metropolitan, municipal and district assemblies must establish more media houses, particularly television stations, within northern Ghana.

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