

## **Covering the Environment in the Ghanaian Media\***

**by Kojo Yankah\*\***

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the coverage of environmental issues in the Ghanaian media, specifically in the two widely-circulated national newspapers, *People's Daily Graphic* and *Ghanaian Times*. The *Graphic* now circulates on the average 100,000 copies a day while the *Times* prints and distributes about 60,000.

Coverage of environmental news for the month of June 1990 was examined in detail. June was selected because it is an active month for Environmental activities. The writer also studied the two newspapers in September 1990 for comparative studies. The study revealed that there seems to be a general concern with environmental hazards, but their importance relative to other issues is yet to be grasped. There is not much publicity given to the impact of population growth and soil erosion on the environment. Reporters have neither special interest nor special skill in reporting on the environment. Most of the features are contributed by UN agencies or foreign news agencies.

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# **Place Accordée à l'Environnement dans les Media Ghanéens**

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## **Résumé**

Cette étude examine le reportage sur des questions environnementales dans les médias ghanéens, surtout dans les deux principaux journaux nationaux, le *People's Daily Graphic* et le *Ghanaian Times*. Le tirage du *Graphic* s'élève aujourd'hui à quelques 100 000 numéros par jour tandis que le *Times* imprime et circule 60 000 exemplaires.

L'étude a examiné en détail les reportages portant sur l'environnement au courant du mois de juin 1990. Ce mois a été choisi du fait que le mois de juin est riche en activités environnementales.

A titre de comparaison, l'auteur a également étudié les deux journaux sur la période septembre 1990. L'étude a découvert qu'il existait un intérêt général pour les catastrophes liées à l'environnement, mais les rapports qui existent entre elles restent encore mal connus. On ne donne pas beaucoup de publicité aux effets de la croissance démographique et de l'érosion des sols sur l'environnement. Les reporters n'ont ni l'intérêt spécial qu'il faudrait ni les connaissances spéciales requises pour produire ces reportages.

La plupart des chroniques sur ce sujet sont fournies ou par des agences de l'ONU ou par d'autres agences de presse.

## Introduction

The environment now occupies an important place on the world's political agenda. Both the developed and developing countries express adequate concern about the rapidly depleting resources which make up the world surface.

According to a study by William Chandler, an energy consultant, an unexpected "hole" found in the earth's ozone layer may portend a global ozone reduction that would expose all life to dangerous levels of ultraviolet radiation. Green house gases such as carbon dioxide rapidly accumulating in the atmosphere threaten to warm the earth's climate, thus flooding coastal cities and shifting rainfall patterns.

It has been predicted by environmental experts that global environmental change may undo decades of material progress and deny development to many of the planet's 5,000 million people. Developing countries have the major task of designing development strategies that do not undermine the environmental foundations of their economies. While the debate rages between the developed and developing countries as to who should bear the burden of funding the halting of the environmental change, governments and non-governmental agencies continue to pay attention to their own local concerns.

Of all the problems associated with the environment, what the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) finds most worrisome is that of deforestation. The FAO assesses that tropical trees are being cut much faster than reforestation or nature are replacing them. For tropical regions as a whole, according to FAO sources, 11.3 million hectares were being cleared annually in the 1980s, while only 1.1 hectares of plantation were established. In other words, 10 hectares were being cleared for every one hectare planted. In Africa, the ratio was 29 hectares to one; in Asia, 5 to 1.

Rapid population growth, inequitable land distribution, ever-increasing demand for agricultural land, economic demand for export of timber and other wood-products, local demand for furniture and domestic fuel—these and many others have led to large-scale deforestation denuding fragile mountains and removing protective vegetation from soils vulnerable to the eroding forces of wind and water.

Facts and figures released by the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) are even more alarming. Of the 33 developing countries currently exporting forest products, only 10 are expected to



be in business by the year 2000. About water, UNEP warns that unequal distribution, contamination and waste threaten future supply, noting that more than 97 percent of the water on the earth is sea water. UNEP also says that irrigation, which accounts for the bulk of agricultural use, is very wasteful—often, the experts say, more than 70 percent of the water used for irrigation never reaches the crops.

These facts and figures are definitely worrying and should provide justifiable reason why the mass media should pay particular attention to environmental issues.

The traditional functions of the mass media—to inform, educate, entertain and agitate (in some cases)—are intensely challenged by these ominous trends in development.

Development has been defined by Everett Rogers (1976) as a widely participating process of social change in a society, intended to bring about both social and material advancement for the majority of the people through their gaining control over their environment.

As an agent of social change and as support to development, the mass media are entitled to use their skills to join the consciousness-raising effort. It is in the light of this that I wish to examine the coverage of environmental issues in the Ghanaian media, specifically in the two widely-circulated national newspapers, the *People's Daily Graphic* and the *Ghanaian Times*.

### ***The Graphic and The Times***

The *Peoples Daily Graphic* was founded in the early fifties by a British newspaper entrepreneur. In 1958, a year after Ghana's independence, the Graphic was sold to the Ghana Government. At about the same time, the New Times Corporation (originally the Guinea Press) was established by Government to publish first the *Ghanaian Times* and later the *Weekly Spectator*.

The two dailies are the most widely-circulated newspapers in Ghana, distributed in all the ten regions of the country. The *Graphic* now circulates on the average 100,000 copies a day while the *Times* prints and distributes about 60,000.

The two papers are both state-owned, with editors appointed by the Ministry of Information. Currently, the *Graphic* appears in 16 pages while the *Times* does 8 pages only. Both papers use their front pages for major news items, and back pages for news of self-help developmental nature. The second page of both papers is devoted to foreign news, with space for the days editorial opinion. The *Ghanaian Times* uses Page 3 also for spot news while the *Graphic* uses the centre

pages, 8 and 9.

Both the *Graphic* and the *Times* have journalists, majority of whom have been trained in recognized institutes of Journalism. Like in all news media houses, the traits of the journalists include curiosity, commitment, integrity, accuracy, dependability and discipline. They are normally guided by the three basic determinants of news, namely Impact, the Unusual and Prominence. Other determinants named by the editors include conflict, proximity, timeliness and currency.

According to news editors of both papers, news on the Environment are "so basic that everybody would like to read about them".

## **Determinants of News on Environment**

The two newspapers, which publish six out of seven days a week, would normally send reporters to all functions related to the environment. Feature articles on the Environment are "not solicited for", but contributions from columnists and readers are welcome. Occasionally, United Nations agencies and Non-governmental organizations also send press releases and feature articles for publication. These are normally used as soon as space would allow".

The general impression I had talking to news editors is that though it is not a policy to print all articles on the environment, they view it as a "social responsibility" to contribute to the creation of awareness among the general population about the dangers posed by environmental degradation.

## **Environmental Issues**

Environmental issues span areas such as deforestation, soil erosion, land degradation, air pollution, salinization, improper waste management, lack sanitation, depletion of fishery resources, water loss, nuclear waste, global warming and depletion of the ozone layer.

Any activities therefore which express concern about or take steps to arrest these concerns are "prominent" enough to pass for news in the two Ghanaian newspapers. That is not to say that any news is news, says one editor. The story must qualify to have an impact", he adds.

## **Areas of Investigation**

I chose to examine the coverage of environmental news for the month



of June, 1990 in detail. The choice was dictated by two considerations:

June 4 has been declared a CDR Day, i.e. the Day for the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution. This day is normally set aside for clean-up campaigns in all communities, villages and towns throughout the country.

Secondly, June 5 is World Environmental Day, the date set aside by the United Nations to create awareness about dangers facing the Environment.

June being an active month for Environmental activities, I also decided to study the two newspapers published in September of the same year to compare the trends.

For further purposes of determining the story-count, I counted the number of articles published in both July and August of the same year. My investigation was related to the following details:

- a) Dates of publication of news on the environment
- b) Category of story: Spot news, feature, picture-story, press release, editorial
- c) Prominence given
- d) Length of stories
- e) Aspect of environment treated.

## Findings

1. Both the *Graphic* and *Times* published 25 stories in all in July, 1990, directly related to the environment.
2. In August, both the *Graphic* and *Times* published 53 stories, 31 in *Graphic*; 22 in *Times*.
3. In September, 1990, there were only 19 stories published.
  - *Graphic* carried 12 stories made up of 5 spot-news, 5 feature articles, 2 picture-stories.
  - *Times* carried 7 items, made up of 5 spot-news and 2 features.
  - Of the 7 Feature stories, the *Graphic* published out of the 5, two pieces from PANA and FAO. *Times* used one feature story from SPORE.  
FAO submitted one Picture-story for publication in the *Graphic*.
4. In June, 1990, both dailies carried a total of 99 items on the Environment.
  - The *Graphic* carried 57, and the *Times* 42. Other details are as follows
  - there were 72 Spot-news, 14 Features, 7 Press Releases or Reports, 5 Picture-stories and one Editorial.

- *Graphic* published 39 and *Times* 33 of the 72 Spot-news.
- Out of the 14 Feature stories, *Graphic* carried 12 and *Times* 2. Out of the same 14 Feature stories, 10 were written by Ghanaian contributors and the 4 submitted by UNICEF, UNFPA, FAO and APN. There were 7 press reports/statements from UN agencies, 3 of which were used in the *Ghanaian Times* and 4 in the *People's Daily Graphic*. Picture-stories were 5, 4 carried by *Ghanaian Times* and 1 by *Graphic*. The *Graphic* carried the only editorial which commemorated the World Environmental Day, June 5

## Other Findings

1. The *Graphic* carried more stories due to its number of pages (16) as against 8 of the *Times*. The *Times* editor mentioned lack of space as one of their problems.
2. There were more articles on the Environment in June 1990 than in any other month.
3. In June, out of 26 publication days, the *Graphic* published items on Environmental issues on 23 days; and the *Times* 21 days. These figures illustrate the frequency with which activities about the Environment attracted the press.
4. Out of the 72 Spot-news that appeared in the two dailies, 21 caught Front page headline. The editors were in agreement that it was the IMPACT of the stories that earned them the front page prominence rather than the fact that June was an Environment Day month.
5. The following aspects of the Environment were covered by the 99 items carried in both dailies in June 1990.
 

• Deforestation	44 articles
• General Environment	11
• Pollution (industrial & nuclear)	9
• Clean-up campaigns	5
• Water/wells issues	5
• Land degradation	4
• Bush fires	3
• Global warming/ozone layer	3
• Mining hazards	2
• Energy sources	2
• Fisheries	2
• Population growth	1
• Toxic waste	1
• Wildlife conservation	1
• Soil protection	1



6. Comparatively, figures and environmental aspects for September, 1990 were as follows:

* Deforestation	14
* Land Degradation	3
* Plant Communication	1
* Eco-system	1

Number of items = 19

## Observations

1. The large number of articles relating to the forests confirm the assertion that the massive clearing of trees to expand food production or to meet other economic demands and the harvesting of forest products in recent years have begun to impinge directly on the economic and environmental health of several nations, particularly in the Third World (Postel and Herse).
2. Not much publicity has been given to the impact of population growth and soil erosion on the environment.
3. Interviews conducted with editors and reporters revealed that the choice of a reporter to cover an assignment on the Environment was not dictated by the reporters special interest.
4. No special skills in reporting on the environment have been introduced to editorial rooms.
5. Apart from one columnist in the *Peoples Daily Graphic* who works as public relations officer of the Environmental Protection Council and one regular contributor in the *Ghanaian Times* who works for the Forestry Departments most of the features are contributed by UN agencies or News Agencies.
6. The comparatively large number of articles published in June alone relative to other months suggests the lack of any planned strategy to communicate environment issues through the newspapers.

## Recommendations

1. Editors need to be sensitized even more to properly appreciate the enormity of the problems related to environment. There seems to be a general concern with environmental hazards, but their importance relative to other issues is yet to be grasped. A special seminar for editors and sub-editors is highly recommended.
2. For newspapers, particularly state-owned ones, to give due attention



to Environment issues, environment has to be given priority recognition in national development. Calls for "sustainable development" have to be given a closer look.

3. There will need to be established Environmental desks in all newspaper rooms to provide adequate research and background to stories.
4. Periodic workshops for journalists solely devoted to Environment issues would help sharpen the skills so badly needed to mobilise the people and change behaviour patterns.
5. U.N. agencies and other NGOs need to give the press more support in the drive to activate interest in the Environment among the general populace.
6. Newspapers will need to generate their own stories and commission more writers instead of always waiting to be invited to cover activities or process press releases.

## Conclusion

The environment occupies an important place in the Ghanaian newspaper; but such prominence is only alive when activities on the Environment are organised. The emphasis on efforts to check deforestation is in the right direction. However, if the media are to perform their role as social agents to bring about social and material advancement for the majority of the people, it will be necessary to critically develop more interest in the environment. Specialization is recommended for journalists whose interest in the Environment goes beyond covering general assignments.

If the future of our countries depends to a large extent on how we protect the environment, there could not be a better pre-occupation for journalists now than to equip themselves adequately with the skills to bring the realities to the fore.

## Notes

1. Articles from *Economics of Environmental Protection*
  - a) Sandra Postel and Lori Herse. "Reforestation of the Earth".
  - b) William Chandler. "Development and Environmental Change".
  - c) Charles S. Pearson. "Industrial Relocation" and "Pollution Havens".
  - d) Kathryn S. Fuller. "Debt-for-Nature Swap: A New Conservation Tool".
  - e) Walter Reid. "Sustainable Development: Lessons from Success."

- f) Robert Fri. "Energy and Environment: A Coming Collision".
  - g) Gunther Handl. "Law and Protection of the Atmosphere".
  - h) UNEP Fact Sheets: The Disappearing Forests; Sands of Change; Safe-guarding the World's Water.
2. Everett M. Rogers. "Perspective on Development Communication".
  3. Wilbur Schramm. *Communication and Change. A Third Look at the Landscape.*