

# **Some Perspectives on the Mass Media under a Military Government: A case Study of the Mass Media under Ghana's PNDC**

**by Kweku Rockson\***

## **Abstract**

This descriptive paper throws the searchlight on the mass media under the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) from certain theoretical perspectives. After giving a brief background to the mass media from pre-independence times to the advent of the PNDC, the paper interpretes the activities of the media in relation to the dominant political forces in the country, and how this has affected the media's performance. While the press displays some of the classical attributes of the media of the Third World, the ideology of the present government undoubtedly shows a powerful influence on the present Ghana media.

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# Quelques perspectives sur les masses-médias sous un gouvernement militaire: les masses-médias au Ghana sous le régime du PNDC

## Résumé

Cet article descriptif jette plus de lumière sur les masses-médias sous le régime du Conseil de Défense Nationale Provisoire (PNDC) à partir de certaines perspectives théoriques. L'article donne une interprétation des activités des médias eu égard aux forces politiques dominantes dans le pays, et comment celles-ci ont influencé la performance des médias, après avoir fait une synthèse du passé des masses-médias dès l'époque pré-coloniale.

Alors que la presse exhibe quelques attributs classiques des médias du Tiers-Monde, l'idéologie du gouvernement actuel clairement exerce une influence importante sur les médias actuels du Ghana.



## Introduction

The mass media, as rightly acknowledged, are a sub-system of the broad political and socio-economic system of any country. Without belabouring the point, one can justifiably add that, changes in the political system would affect the fortunes of the mass media, especially the type in a developing country.

The media infrastructure in Ghana under the ruling Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) went through some interesting phases, after the democratically-elected People's National Party (PNP) government was overthrown by the military, the constitution suspended and the Ghana Press Commission abolished.

In the absence of a comprehensive communication policy, this paper will be relying on certain specific actions, speeches of government officials, and the performance of the press, to describe the press. This analysis will unfortunately exclude topical and fashionable concepts like 'press freedom', 'credibility of the media', 'and people's perceptions of the press and journalists,' not only because they have been adequately treated by several 'communicologists', but perhaps more importantly because some of the 'concepts' are hard to conceptualise and operationalise in a universal sense.

The mass media, for the purposes of definition, will refer conceptually to organisations or smaller units, government or privately-owned, which provide information through the use of advanced technology to a large heterogenous and geographically-spread audience, with little, delayed or no feedback. Operationally, the concept will refer to the numerous non-government print productions (weeklies, monthlies, periodicals) and government-owned media like the *Ghana News Agency*, Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (radio and television), and the government print units like the Graphic Corporation (*The People's Daily Graphic*, *The Mirror*, *Graphic Sports*) and New Times Corporation (*Ghanaian Times*, *Weekly Spectator*, *Sporting Times*).

## Background

### Pre-Independence

During the colonial rule, the mass media were linked to the developments and the interests of the colonial masters and the elite corps of privileged native and alien settlers, mainly living in the coastal areas. The newspaper was the first mass medium, and the earliest one was the *West African Herald*, which was established in 1858. The early newspapers (religious, social and political) defended the *status quo* and churned out news to suit the tastes of their select audience.<sup>1</sup> The religious papers concentrated on

using their media for spreading formal western education and religion among the natives, while reinforcing the religious beliefs of the 'believers'. By 1912 *Reuters* had established itself on the continent and operated from Ghana and other African countries, laying the foundation for a global linkage of the continent with the other continents.<sup>2</sup> The period preceding independence saw the emergence of newspapers which were produced by local citizens, geared toward the struggle for emancipation from colonial rule. The papers which were owned by the citizens assumed a more radical stance because of the vanguard role they wanted to play in the fight against British imperialism. Broadcasting started in 1935 with the establishment of a radio station in Accra, which for years relayed BBC news.

## Post-Independence

Ghana has had three civilian governments (1957-1966, 1969-1972, 1979-1981). In between these periods, Ghana was and today is ruled by a military regime. The first government operated under the Westminster-type democracy and ended as a socialist single party based on the Soviet model. Due to the long-term political goals of the ruling party, the government did not only invest in the mass media, it also took over the most prominent and alien-owned Graphic Corporation, publishers of *The Daily Graphic* and *The Mirror*. This Government also owned party papers, but did not discourage the private press, especially the non-political ones.

Although the military government which took over was ideologically against government ownership, and divested itself of many state-owned enterprises, no attempt was made to sell the two major publishing houses — a trend which has continued to this day.

## Legal Restraints

For the press, laws serve mainly as normative instruments and at times as punitive mechanisms to restrain journalists from infringing on the rights of the individual, social units or the state. While Ghana's legal system is in essence an inheritance from English Law, several legislative instruments have been passed either in parliament, or in the form of decrees by military regimes.

There are laws that prevent the publication of seditious, defamatory, obscene stories, or any news which will infringe against the Official Secrets Act. Apart from these, specific governments have passed laws



which depict their attitude to the practice of journalism. For example, during the First Republic the Criminal Code Act 29, 1960 was passed. Under Section 183, Subsection 2, the President could pass an executive instrument requesting that newspapers, books or documents be submitted for vetting before publication.<sup>3</sup> The newspaper Licensing Act 1963 (Act 189) and the Newspaper Licensing Decree NRCD 16, ten years later required a publisher to apply for a licence which was renewable every year, before publishing a newspaper or magazine. A notable case of an ideological response to a law of another government was the enactment of NLC Decree 226, 1968, by the National Liberation Council, after it had repealed the Instrument of Incorporation of GBC, Legislative instrument 472, 1965, to among other things, make the media organisations serve as a platform for the propagation of plural views on topical issues.

### **Training and Research**

The bulk of the media executives is locally-produced professionals, and most of these personnel are products of the Ghana Institute of Journalism, which is under the Ministry of Information. This institution offers a two-year diploma course in journalism in the morning and a two-year diploma course in public relations and advertising in the evening. Another institution is the School of Communication Studies of the University of Ghana. This school offers a post-graduate diploma to university degree holders or media professionals with diplomas in journalism; and a one-calendar year masters programme. In addition, the two institutions, sometimes in collaboration with the Ministry of Information or other media institutions, organise seminars and short-term courses for practitioners, prospective practitioners and the public. The two also engage in research.

### **The Mass Media as an Ideological State Apparatus<sup>4</sup> (ISA)**

The mass media under the PNDC are an ideological state apparatus (ISA), and as social institutions they package and produce social reality in the form of news, to suit the prevailing ideology. It is pertinent to distinguish between the media which mainly provide political and economic news and those that produce social, cultural, sports or lotteries news. The two distinctions made in describing the media by certain scholars will be relevant: the mass manipulative and the commercial *laissez-faire* models.<sup>5</sup> The main media which are mostly government-owned fall under the mass manipulative category.<sup>6</sup> The audience for such media is perceived as an 'atomised mass', virtually passive receptacles of political and economic messages initiated by the media. News in this

situation is an ideologically-constructed portrayal of reality. The media serve as a means of socialisation, social control and political propaganda. If we may be permitted to substitute Karl Marx's idea of a class with the ruling forces in Ghana today, then we can agree with Marx when he says

The idea of the ruling class in every epoch is the ruling ideas, that is, the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production.<sup>7</sup>

The effectiveness of the media as an ideological state apparatus is reinforced by the professional socialisation of media executives both internally (through an inculcation of the housestyle concept of news or newsworthiness) and externally by specific ideological lectures and seminars for both junior and senior media executives. While some of these workshops provide technical information, others become platforms for the spread of ideological information.

## **Consensual Paradigm<sup>8</sup>**

### **Local News**

It follows from the preceding arguments therefore that the mass media, which deal with political and economic news, fall under the framework of the consensual paradigm. Several illustrations can be given to explain the operation of this paradigm. A students' protest or demonstration, or a TUC agitation for more pay or fringe benefits, or any anti-government action is always contextualised in terms of a frame of reference which is hinged on a supposed idea of national interest. In such circumstances, the media through news stories, editorials, features, commentaries and even letters to the editor, provide packaged knowledge and the context to the readers. The perception of the audience which generally does not have access to any alternative interpretation of the issue or even neutral background information on the immediate and remote causes is always shaped in a direction favourable to the government. Ideology and reality become one.

The media always legitimise the rule of the PNDC by

- a. diverting attention from specific political issues: those inconsistent with the existing dominant political thinking by ignoring those issues;
- b. establishing a favourable image of PNDC officials, especially the Head of State, by giving them maximum favourable exposure. In most cases 'redundancy' of exposure occurs.<sup>9</sup>
- c. labelling critics and political deviants as unpatriotic, anti-



revolutionary, etc.

As state ideological apparatus, they engage in symbolic annihilation by condemning, trivialising and, in some cases, distorting or exaggerating certain news reports, in order to portray a negative image of such personalities, leaders, groups or institutions and their causes, to serve the ideological goals of the government.

## Foreign News

A lot has been produced in the communication literature on the dominance of news flow by external news agencies at the expense of (Africa) news interests. Some authors even distinguish between the 'western' agencies like *Agence-France Presse* (AFP), *Associated Press* (AP), *United Press International* (UPI) and *Reuters*, and the 'eastern' ones, *Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union* (TASS), *Hsin Hua*, etc.

The situation in Ghana does not display the alarming situation painted by radical advocates for the new world information order, who present the spectre of helpless Third World media systems, which are perpetually at the mercy of 'western' agencies. The situation is a curious one. It is in a controlled form, mainly arising out of the inability of the national wire service, and the major publishing houses to maintain correspondents abroad. The national wire service obtains its news from several sources ('eastern' and 'western') and utilises news items it finds ideologically suitable within its own 'consensual paradigm'. At particular times, the dominating political ideological position determines the way certain countries are portrayed in the Ghanaian media. An example is the United States or the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), as opposed to the attempt to portray more neutral and favourable image of 'progressive' countries in the Third World, or the USSR, etc. In some of these cases news items which appear in the newspapers have sources like *Reuters*/GNA to show an editorial and definitely ideological input by the local agency. GBC also may use lots of items from BBC, but it is news it finds consistent with the dictates of the 'consensual paradigm'.

## Development Journalism as an Ideology of the Media

This concept basically sees journalism as a vehicle for national development. The media play an intrinsic part in fulfilling national goals as determined by the government, which is the main agency for development. The media should not only provide information on government policies, they should also engender national political stability and integration. An intrinsic part of this ideology is the absence of opposing news or positions on the basic political or ideological direction as dictated by the government. In the 'noble' pursuit of such

seemingly elevated national goals, individual rights can be trampled upon, especially where such rights clash with the government's acclaimed objectives. This ideology is even reinforced by evidence of low income and standard of living, disease, inadequate social and educational facilities for the bulk of the population. In the face of such overwhelming constraints, the 'free market place of ideas' concept as advocated by liberal theorists, like John Milton, has no place.

The major newspapers, the GNA, radio and television devote a substantial amount of space or airtime to news on government programmes and development activities, by towns, villages and districts. Major speeches and policies are carried in full, no matter their 'newsworthiness'. The media are used to create and sustain personality cults of major political figures.

Development journalism as a concept, in itself, has two entirely different interpretations: the 'authoritarian' and the 'libertarian' positions. The former stance eschews all forms of politically opposing views, and expects the journalist to be a partner in the development process by acting as an "information officer" for all development efforts of the government. The latter position sees development news as information which strives to critically analyse all development programmes and to objectively show the extent to which development goals are being vigorously pursued by development agents, agencies and the government.<sup>10</sup>

A journalist whose approach falls within the latter category is akin to the 'western investigative journalist', a 'watchdog', as opposed to the 'government-say-so journalist'. It is on record that under the PNDC, the Ghanaian journalist is not expected to be an 'investigative journalist' in the classical sense. As far as the then Secretary for Information, Mr. Kofi Totobi Quakyi, is concerned: 'What we need in Ghana today is the type of journalist who sees himself as a contributor to national development. This country does not need watchdogs over the *status quo*'.<sup>11</sup>

## Ownership and Control

The major philosophy of ownership and control of the major media for socio-economic and political news which was institutionalised at post-independence under the first republic has not changed in essence. No government, even the most 'liberal' has attempted to divest itself of the control of the means of such news production units, because of the strategic importance of news. The notable exception was the establishment of an independent and competent body to oversee the activities of the media — an instrument whose existence is called for in a media environment under liberal democracies in accordance with the social responsibility theory.<sup>12</sup>



This body, the Ghana Press Commission, served as an outfit to preside over disputes where they arose, to guarantee performance outside government control. Apart from this, diverse political opinions were allowed in the major media which were state-owned. It was a period in which press licensing and censorship were abolished. All the gains made under the constitution were reversed with the suspension of the third republican constitution and the abolition of this commission, when the present government came to power.

Under the PNDC, editors and senior editorial personnel were removed in most of the major media houses.<sup>13</sup> The government also enacted Law 6, (1982), which abolished the boards of directors of organisations, including state-owned media and established the Interim Management Committees (IMC).<sup>14</sup> While there is a predominance of government ownership and control of the media apparatus, there is also a private sector which controls certain sections of the media, mainly sports, human interest and entertainment, cultural, music, religious and lotto, etc, and a few socio-economic and political newspapers by private organisations or individuals. They are owned by sole proprietorships, partnerships or limited liability publishing houses.

One aspect of the control of the media, especially the private newspapers, is through the supply of newsprint by a government procurement agency, the Ghana National Procurement Agency (GNPA), with the initial approval of the Ministry of Information. These days, with the trade liberalisation policy pursued by the government, under the Economic Recovery Programme (ERP), individuals or organisations may import or sell newsprint, or special printing papers to all publishers.

The 'Newspaper Licensing Act' was recently used as an instrument of control in the case of the *Catholic Standard* whose licence was withdrawn when it became a major channel for the publication of news which was politically unfavourable to the PNDC.

The most recent series of laws which have generated a lot of 'private' discussions has been two laws on the licensing of papers published in March 1989.<sup>15</sup> The Newspaper Licensing Law 1989 (PNDC Law 211) and a Legislative Instrument (L 11417), Newspaper Licensing Registration 1989, Section 1 (1) of Law 211, state that no person shall print, publish or circulate any newspaper except under and in accordance with a licence granted to the publisher by the Information Secretary.

## Technological Development of the Media

Not much change has occurred in terms of technology for the media. The level of development of the media is a reflection of the country's general socio-economic and technological development over the years. Basically, nearly all the 'hardware' used by the mass media is imported. One recent

development was the switch to colour by the television service, although most sets are black and white. Most newspapers use web-offset and modern typesetting equipment. A few press houses use word processors or computers, and in a few cases, IBM electric typewriters for typesetting. Computerised page planning and the use of computers in news rooms has not started yet. In global comparative terms, media technology is far from advanced in Ghana.

## Access to the Media

The issue of access to the media can be looked at in three dimensions from the Ghanaian perspective:

- a. Ownership and control of editorial material (software) and the control of newsprint, printing facilities, legal restraints, etc., as they affect the media.
- b. Access to specific editorial sections of the various media, especially the major ones (news story, features and letters to the editor) for external 'news promoters' and news executives.
- c. Access to the media products (firstly whether all the population who desire to have access, end up having it; and secondly, how promptly this happens for all the citizens, especially those who are far from the national and/or regional capital.

The first two examples have already been discussed under 'Ownership and control' and 'legal restraints'. The case of the third category shows a serious imbalance, a situation which is ironic in the case of strident arguments Third World governments and scholars have been making about a gross imbalance in the global news flow.

In discussing media systems in Ghana, Boafo states that the geographical distribution of media resources in Ghana is characterised by lopsidedness, lack of equity and balance and an extreme rural-urban dichotomy.<sup>16</sup>

In terms of distribution of resources, there is an undue concentration of the resources in the capitals.<sup>17</sup> All the two dailies and the 58 other publications are in tabloid form and about 85 percent of these press products emanate from the national capital, with 15 percent from Kumasi (second largest city), and occasionally some come from Cape Coast and Sekondi-Takoradi. Most of these papers do not go beyond these capitals. (*Daily Graphic* sells 45 percent of its circulation in the national capital, while *Ghanaian Times* and *Weekly Spectator* have 50 percent of their products sold in Accra.)

Generally, the papers are geared towards satisfying the news tastes of the urban and semi-urban elite in terms of style and presentation. More serious is the unique situation, with origins dating to the first republic, especially after the government took over the Graphic Corporation,



where the two government-owned dailies in essence publish identical editorial matter. Boafo concludes that they operate without any clearly defined areas of responsibility and are thus characterised by duplication and inefficient utilisation of resources.<sup>18</sup>

The electronic media also display these characteristics. Television's reception is limited in terms of the officially registered estimate of 140,000 sets. Radio has a figure of 2.5 million transistor sets and 64,000 rediffusion boxes, with 52 relay stations outside the capital. These stations transmit a few local programmes, a few hours daily, for a diminishing audience of people who have access to rediffusion boxes.

Programmes produced mainly for rural communities only form a small percentage of the total broadcast hours. The local language station of GBC devotes only 6 hours, or 5-8 percent of total time to rural broadcasting, specifically programmes in the local languages on social activities and daily occupations of the rural people and developmental programmes on agriculture, health, nutrition, home management and other areas of rural development. Meanwhile, the 'elitist' English language station GBC Radio 2 devotes only one hour to development-oriented programmes.

While these statistics portray a dismal picture of access to the media, certain developments, some of them initiated earlier, are having positive benefits. There are numerous rural electrification programmes and the extension of power to several areas in the hinterland. The liberalisation programme under the Economic Recovery Programme has also meant the availability of more dry-cell batteries and imported and locally-made transistor sets, and imported radio-cassette recorders for all the citizens.

Ghana's Radio Forum for rural development, started in the 1960s, also serves as a vanguard for the involvement of local citizens in programme production. There are specialised localised frequency modulation (FM) stations in Apam, Swedru and Bolgatanga. There is the *Wonsuom* paper published by the School of Communication Studies for the Swedru area as a component of the Swedru Communication Project. The national capital also has an FM station which mainly transmits news and music to serve the cultivated tastes of the citizens of the capital.

## Conclusion

This paper is basically a descriptive effort with no attempt at making prescriptions. We discussed specific communication concepts like ideological state apparatus, consensual paradigm, development journalism, ownership and control, technological development, and access to the media, all analysed within the holistic principle. It is obvious, therefore, that the media in terms of performance and form are

undoubtedly a reflection of the broad socio-economic and political environment within which they operate.

Within such a framework, we cannot discuss their "functionality" or otherwise, without having to encompass a discussion of the overall political system, created by the overthrow of the third republic, an issue which is beyond the purview of this paper.

## Notes and References

1. K.A.B. Jones Quartey. *A Summary History of Ghana Press 1822-1960*, Accra, Ghana Information Services, 1974.
2. For more details on *Reuters'* activities see William Hachten, *Muffled Drums*, Ames, Iowa State University Press, 1971, pp. 58-59.
3. Criminal Code, Act of Parliament No. 29, Section 183, Subsection 2, Accra, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.
4. This concept has originated from Louis Althusser. For our purposes, we are not going to distinguish between ISAs (media, educational institutions, political parties) and repressive state apparatus RSA (Legal system, army, police, security services), where the latter functions through violence and coercion. For more information on this, see, Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, New York: Monthly Review Press; 1971 pp. 135-160 and Dauda Abubakar, *The Mass Media and Ideological State Apparatuses in Post-Colonial Africa*, Chapter 6, pp. 52-64; taken from *Mass and the African Society*, Edited by Jerry Domatob, Abubakar Jika, Ikechukwu Nwosu; *Africa Media Monograph Series*, No. 4, African Council on Communication Education, ACCE, 1st Edition, December, 1987.
5. For details on the two concepts, see Stanely Cohen and Jock Young in Stanley Cohen and Jock Young, (eds). *The Manufacture of News: A reader*. Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, California.
6. On the other hand several media, mostly sports, entertainment, human interest, music and the arts, etc, generally privately-owned will fall under the commercial *laissez-faire* category. They are profit-making print media with limited circulations which serve the gratification needs of their audience. To cash in on this situation and to reap some financial returns, the two largest publishing houses also introduced their own sports papers (*Graphic Sports* and *Sporting Times*) in response to the market, although even on a daily basis the major newspapers (dailies and weeklies) have prominent sports sections.
7. Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx Engles, Reader*, 2nd Edition, London: W.W. Norton and Co. 1978, pp. 178.
8. The concept has been used to explain the prevalence of a specific direction of thinking at the expense of others within a polity, due to the fact that such an ideological thinking is held by the dominating forces in the society. For further details on this concept see Jock Young, 'Beyond the Consensual Paradigm. A Critique of Left Functionalism in Media Theory' from *The Manufacture of Deviance. Social Problems and the Mass Media*, Sage Publications, pp. 393.
9. On the whole, no subtle or professional attempt is made to blend noise, channel capacity and redundancy, as principles for maximum effect, in terms of mass persuasive communication. These concepts have been taken from concepts in *Information Theory* by Claude Shannon in 1948, originally presented as a means of 'signal transmission'. For more information on this theory and its application to human and mass communication, read Wilbur Schramm 'Information Theory and Mass Communication, from *Reader in Public Opinion and Communication*, 2nd Edition, edited by Bernald Berelson and Morris Janowitz, 1953. New York: The Free Press.



10. For Details on the two positions, see Christian Ogan *Development Journalism/Communication: The Status of the Concept*, *Gazette* 29: 3-13 (1982).
11. Kofi Quakyi is perhaps the most competent person to express in clear terms an ideology for the mass media since all the media and the professionals fall directly under the Information Ministry. He was for the five years the longest-serving top political appointee in the ministry. He started his career as a personal assistant and rose to become an Under Secretary and later Secretary, and made this statement in a speech on April 5, 1988, at a seminar for journalists on the 'Act of Interviewing and feature-writing' at the Ghana Institute of Journalism.
12. For an explanation of this theory and the other three, see F.S. Siebert, T. Peterson and W. Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956.
13. For details see S.T.K. Bofo 'Ghana's Press Under the PNDC: Performance Under Confinement', *Gazette* 1985, pp. 73-80.
14. PNDC Law 6, 25th May, 1982, Accra, Ministry of Information.
15. This recent law on the press was promulgated after a member of the PNDC had commented on the 'sensational venomous flying sheets' in January 1989, when there were about 15 sports, 10 romantic weeklies and also nearly 10 lotto forecasting papers. The 'flying sheets' refer to the 4-page tabloids, which is the standard page number for most papers, especially the private ones. One other government functionary had explained that the section against foreign publications was intended to 'stop their devastating influence on the cultural and moral values of the country'.

Shortly before this regulation was published, the Information Ministry revoked the registration of all newspapers and magazines and asked all publishers to reapply with a copy of the last issue of publication. A committee was set up to examine applications. Meanwhile, importers were also required to obtain authorization before publications were cleared from ports of entry.

Law 211, Section 2, empowers the Secretary of Information to revoke or suspend a licence for any length of time where a licence holder failed to comply with stipulated conditions. Section 3 (3) prescribes a fine not exceeding C500,000.00 or a term of imprisonment not exceeding 2 years, or both, for a person found guilty of an offence under this law.

Applications for a licence should be made in writing to the Secretary, not less than 14 days before the first publication with a fee of C25,000.00. Exempted from payment of fees are applications for publication of cultural, educational, religious, technical, scientific, military, housemagazines, papers for free distribution, and those published by diplomatic missions. The licence will be in force for 12 months, and the imprint on the paper must include the name of the editor, publisher, address of printer, and number of newspaper licence and date of issue.

The application form asks for title, frequency, nationality of the editor, educational qualifications, members of the editorial board, source of paper apart from government, last tax clearance certificate, valid social security statement, planned circulation and price of publication.

16. S.T. Kwame Bofo, 'Democratizing Media System in African Societies: The Case of Ghana', *Africa Media Review*, Vol. 2 No. 1 1987. Education (ACCE).
17. Ibid, Bofo The figures are for 1985.
18. Ibid, Bofo.