Democratizing Media Systems in African Societies: The Case of Ghana

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Abstract

This paper takes the Ghanaian situation as a case in point to demonstrate that in Sub Saharan Africa the imbalances in communication systems observed at the international level also exist within the national borders. The author proposes some mechanisms for achieving the democratization of communication systems at the national level. The deciding factor in this process, he argues, is the presence of genuine political will and commitment to effect the necessary changes.

Résumé

En prenant la situation du Ghana comme point de référence cet article tend à démontrer qu'en Afrique Sub-Saharienne, les déséquilibres des systèmes de communications observés au niveau international existent également au sein des frontieres nationales. L'auteur proprose des mécanismes pour atteindre la démocratisation des systèmes de communication au niveau national. Il démontre que le facteur décisif d'un tel processus est l'existence d'une volonté politique sincère et un engagement à effectuer les changements nécéssaires.

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Introduction:

Central to the long debate on the new world information order is the issue of democratizing communication infrastructure both at the international and the national level.1 The broader question of creating, at the international level, a new world information order has engaged the attention of political leaders, communication scholars and practitioners in Africa, but the crucial issue of restructuring and democratizing communication systems within individual countries in the region has not received as much attention. Nevertheless, no less important than the striking global imbalances in communication technology systems and international news flow are the imbalances and disparities in the internal communication structures of African countries and the monopoly exercised over those structures by a small segment of the population.

The communication situation in each African country is a microcosm of the present world order and any major shift in the present world information order must start within national boundaries.2 Thus, corresponding in significance to the need to evolve a new world information order is the need to search for the implement strategies and mechanisms to democratize systems in African countries, create opportunities for mass participation in the national communication process and, thereby establish a new internal communication order. The present paper focuses on the issue of democratizing media systems in Ghana, as a case study of media systems in the Sub-Saharan African region. The paper analyses the present structure of media systems in Ghana, presents a rationale for their democratization and proposes some mechanisms to that end.

Media Systems in Ghana

Media systems in Ghana present a microcosmic picture of media systems in Sub-Saharan African region. Much like what pertains elsewhere in the region, the geographic distribution of media resources in Ghana is characterized by lopsidedness, lack of equity and balance and an extreme rural-urban dichotomy. Available data on media distribution indicate that media systems in the country operate in an extremely centralized fashion with a sharp concentration of the power, resources and services of the media in the urban centres. Newspapers, radio and television sets are markedly concentrated in the few cities and major towns where

only about 31% of the national population lives.

Newspapers are generally published and circulated mainly in the cities and their environs. In 1985, there were two national daily newspapers, one tri-weekly and about 58 weekly newspapers, monthlies and other occasional publications registered in Ghana.3 About 85% of all newspapers, magazines, journals and other periodicals published in Ghana originate from the national capital, Accra, and the remaining 15% come out of Kumasi, the second major city in the country, and occasionally from such other regional capitals as Cape Coast and Takoradi. That is, regardless of the publication frequency or content orientation of newspapers, magazines and journals - be they general, religious, sports and other pleasure-oriented publications - the principal location for publication and original point of circulation is the national capital.

Publishers of the mostly privately-owned weeklies, monthlies and other journals hardly make any conscious efforts to circulate copies outside the national capital, a few major cities and their surroundings. The principal newspapers, the *People's Daily Graphic* (with circulation of 130,000 in 1985) and the *Ghanaian Times* (circulation of 100,000) and their respective weekly counterparts, *The Mirror* and the *Weekly Spectator* (each with a circulation of 100,000 copies) - all of which are state-owned and government-subsidized - are also published and circulated from Accra. In 1985, 50% each of copies of both the *Ghanaian Times* and the *Weekly Spectator* (i.e. 50,000 copies of each newspaper) were distributed in the Accra-Tema area. The Ashanti region received 15% or 15,000 copies; Western Region 10% or 10,000 copies and the Eastern Region about 5% or 5,000 copies. The six remaining regions, volta, Brong Ahafo, Central, Northern, Upper East and Upper West, had just about 3 percent or 3,000 copies each of both newspapers.4

The circulation of the *People's Daily Graphic* and *The Mirror* presents parallel patterns with the bulk of copies serving the Accra-Tema area. Specifically, in 1985 about 49,000 or 39% of copies of the *People's Daily Graphic* were distributed in Accra and Tema. The Ashanti and Brong Ahafo regions received about 17,000 copies or 13% each while about 10,000 copies or 8% went to the Eastern and Volta regions. The Central and Western regions together had 16,000 copies or 12.4 percent and the Northern, Upper East and Upper West regions each received slightly more than 1,000 copies or just about 1%.5

Only a small and insignificant number of newspaper copies penetrates the small towns and villages for the readers living there;

the village schoolmaster or teacher, the elementary school child, the semi-educated farmer or fisherman and other new literates are, thus, largely excluded from the reach of the print media.

The principal newspapers also appear to operate without any clearly defined areas of responsibility and are, thus, characterized by duplication and inefficient utilization of resources. They tend to carry almost the same news, information and entertainment packages from the same sources as well as virtually the same editorial stance to the same audience targets. In terms of readability, the content of the newspapers is generally presented in style and language which are much above the reading and comprehension abilities of the average literate Ghanaian, the elementary school-educated reader.

Broadcasting programming and transmission also occur mainly within the urban areas, a situation that is particularly so with the country's television broadcasting system. Although, in theory, television transmission can cover about 45% of the land surface of Ghana, in practice, television broadcasting benefits only a few urban communities where the estimated 140,000 sets in the country are concentrated. Even radio broadcasting which is considered to be the sole mass communication medium in Ghana, as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, has achieved only a minimal degree of mass circulation. There are an estimated 2.5 million transistorized radio sets and 64,000 rediffusion boxes in Ghana, making a total coverage of 16 radio sets per 100 of the population6 - about twice the average in Africa, although considerably less than the world average of 30. The greater proportion of available sets are concentrated in the major cities and towns. Radio production and transmitting facilities are centralized in Accra with the 52 stations outside of the capital city performing a mainly relay function. Since they lack transmitting facilities, the capacity of the relay stations to generate and transmit programmes of local relevance and interest is limited. The few hours of local programmes which the relay stations broadcast are received only in homes with working rediffusion boxes.

Previous efforts to extend media resources, especially newspapers beyond the urban areas were sporadic, ill-planned and, thus, foundered after a while. From the late 1950s until the late 1960s, there were newspapers in such Ghanaian languages as Akan, Ewe, Dagari and Kasem which reported on regional and official news for local readers. Such newspapers as the "Nkwantabisa", published in Akan, the "Kasem Labaare", published in Kasem, the "Lahabali TZUXU" in Dagari, "Mansralo" in Ga and "Motabiala" in Ewe were published at various times by

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the Ghana Ministry of Information and the Bureau of Ghana Languages. Also in 1978, the Ministry of Information experimented with simple English language regional newspapers such as *Volta Review* and *Northern Review*. Such publications served as a means of bridging the information gaps, disseminating news and information to the people and providing them with materials to buttress their newly-acquired literacy skills.

Similarly, in the 1970s, there were experiments with rural community-oriented newspapers. For example, between 1974 and 1977, the School of Communication Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon, published two rural school-community newspapers, "The Densu Times" and "The Akora New Era", both in English, primarily for middle school children in selected rural communities in the Eastern and the Central regions respectively.[7] Also, as part of its adult literacy programme, the Institute of Adult Education at the same University, started in 1976 an experiment with a rural community newspaper, *Kpodoga*, which was published in Ewe and distributed to rural communities in the Tsito area of the Volta Region.[8]

However, the various regional newspapers were not sustained and the rural newspapers did not generally survive beyond the experimental periods. Faced with mounting organizational difficulties and diminishing financial, technical and personnel resources, those newspapers soon faded out of the print media scene. One would attribute these failures to such factors as the general socio-economic deterioration in the country since about the end of the 1960s, a consequent inadequate governmental and institutional support, general lack of seriousness on the part of national policy-makers about such projects and the absence of a well-defined, future-oriented policy which integrated development and expansion of media systems into overall national socio-economic development plans, especially rural development.

The national and regional capitals, big towns and their environs where the print media and radio and television facilities are concentrated are the same areas which receive the principal services of cinema theatres, telephone, telegraph and postal systems as well as of new communication technologies such as video, telex and computers.

Rationale for Democratization

Media structures predominantly determine and circumscribe audience targets and information reach. Thus, one dysfunctional

consequence of the prevailing features of media systems in Ghana is that information transmitted through them generally tends to circulate within the urban centres and from one urban centre to another. Also, since the communication technological nexus between the urban centres and the rural peripheries is tenuous, only a trickle of news and information disseminated through the media reach or penetrate the rural communities.

The notion of democratizing media systems in Ghana is predicated on the rationale that centralized media are poor and inadequate tools for fostering a self-reliant development. The centralized model of managing and operating media systems is non-participatory, hierarchical and non-conducive to the development needs of the country. As has often been evident in Ghana and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, centralized media systems are susceptible to political manipulation and facilitate the utilization of communication resources and institutions much more for propaganda, indoctrination and trivia than for genuine socio-economic development. Partly as a result of their centralized structures, media facilities in Ghana and other countries in the sub-Saharan region are monopolized by the urban population, particularly the socio-economic, political, military and administrative elite, who use them for what Ekwelie terms "a collective monologue, ignoring the villages and farmers and, by implication, an overwhelming majority of the population."9

Content analytical studies have indicated that news and information about events from urban centres, especially news concerning the political leadership and other socio-economic elite, occupy disproportionately more space in the press and more air time in the broadcast media in Ghana than news and information about events in the rural communities. For example, Twumasi found that the two national dailies - the *People's Daily Graphic* and the *Ghanaian Times* - gave significantly more space to news items and information about urban than about rural social classes. His content analysis indicated that the newspapers devoted about 86.3% of their coverage to urban classes and just about 13.7% to rural social classes, although the latter form the majority in the population.10 Hachten has observed that the daily newspapers in Ghana do not provide much news and information relevant to most readers, especially those who live outside the confines of the urban areas and that the newspapers do not supply adequate

developmental information to the majority of readers; they have rather tools for daily living for the more affluent sectors of the Ghanaian society.11 A study by the present author of the sources, principal actors and the subject-matter of news stories as well as origins of letters to newspaper editors indicated that Ghanaian newspapers exhibit a heavy urban orientation in their content.

Programmes oriented to rural communities also occupy a small proportion of the total broadcast hours on the nation's radio station. In 1985, the local languages station of the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, GBC Radio 1, broadcast about 104 hours of programmes per week. Out of that number, 6 hours or 5.8% were given to rural broadcasting: that is, broadcasting of programmes in the indigenous Ghanaian languages portraying local social activities and daily occupations of the rural people and general educational programmes on agriculture, health, nutrition, home management and other areas of rural development.

The English-language, GBC Radio 2, also gives just about an hour of its total broadcasts of 104 hours per week to agricultural and health programmes oriented to national development.12 Most of the remaining hours are taken up by news and current affairs, musical programmes, talk shows and other programmes of questionable relevance or significance for national development, especially at the rural community level. Ansah also found that, in terms of time allocation and programme content, the few hours of local programmes broadcast from the relay stations are oriented more towards pure entertainment than systematic development education.13 All in all, as Ansah has remarked, "it is not exactly uncharitable to assume that the authorities do not consider broadcasting as a development tool."14

As occurs in many African societies, the structure of media systems in Ghana ensures a vertical communication situation in which the predominant mode of information flow is from the top to the bottom and the few talk to the many about the needs and problems of the many from the perspective of the few.15 Opportunities for reaction and feedback from the many to the few on national development policies, programmes and other issues of national significance through the centralized media systems are limited.

The effectiveness of mass media systems in transmitting ideas and information and generating feedback about development-oriented programmes, activities and other issues among the national population is partly a factor of the geographic reach of the systems. Media systems which are incapable of carrying messages to various segments of the population and which do not extend

significantly into communities where about 69% of the population lives cannot adequately respond to the information needs of the society. Put differently, getting developmental information to the generality of the population and utilizing media systems to help in mobilizing them to participate in the development process require media systems which reach out into all sections of the society.

Media systems in Ghana are elitist, undemocratic and serve the interest of the minority rather than the majority of the national population. This vitiates the effective functioning of media institutions as channels for disseminating news and information among the national population and through which the people share - in a vertical and horizontal fashion - their views and ideas on national issues, development policies and programmes. To enable them better respond to the national development needs, objectives and aspirations, media systems in Ghana must be decentralized, de-urbanized and democratized. Besides, social justice demands that media systems which are predominantly financed through public taxation be equally distributed and made available to all sections of the society.

The express objectives of breaking away from the present structures and democratizing media systems in the country must be: (1) to achieve a wider geographical reach, and greater social justice and egalitarianism in the distribution of the resources and services of media systems; (2) to increase access to national media networks for the information malnourished and disadvantaged majority of the population who lives in the rural areas; (3) to elicit a more meaningful local initiative and participation in using media systems to generate and disseminate information and general communication content which meet the real needs, interests and values of the general population and, in effect, (4) to liberate media systems from elite domination and usage to propagate and transmit elite values and ideologies. Media systems need to be democratized and reorganized also so that all sectors of the national population can contribute to the pool of information which provides the basis for local and national decision-making as well as the basis for resources allocation in the society.16 In this way, media systems can better function in the liberating paradigm of fundamental democratization of society.17

Some Suggested Mechanisms for Democratization

Democratization of media systems in Ghana can be initiated within the state-owned media institutions. One suggested mechanism relating to the print media system is to remove from

Accra and "decompose" into regional newspapers the publications of one of the two state-owned and government-subsidized press establishments. The principal thrust of the change mechanism proposed here is the utilization of the existing human and technical resources of either the Graphic Corporation or the New Times Corporation in publishing and circulating weekly regional newspapers - one for each of the 10 administrative regions in the country.

The present policy is for each of the state-owned press establishments to publish a daily and a weekly newspaper. It is suggested that both publications of one press establishment be turned into regional newspapers which will be published for a different region each day of the week. The regional newspaper will cover, first, news originating from communities in the regions; second, development-oriented information on agriculture, health, community change, home management, and other areas; and, third significant national and international news stories which have some bearing on the lives of the people in the region. Such news and information must be presented in a style and language which are appropriate for the average literate Ghanaian.18

Another mechanism for democratizing and decentralizing newspaper publication and distribution system is to give serious and sustained encouragement and financial support to the introduction of newspapers and other mimeographed publications at the rural community level.19 Individuals and organizations wishing to establish newspapers and other publications could be actively encouraged and assisted - for example, in the form of tax reliefs, preferential allocation of newsprint and other printing materials - to look outward of the national capital and, particularly, to the district administrative level. The capacity to print newspapers at the regional and district levels would help solve production problems and facilitate newspaper circulation in the national community. A long term measure to develop the press system in Ghana will be to plan for printing facilities in each region to print regional and rural newspapers. In this regard, one would suggest that the editorial offices and printing equipment of one state-owned press establishment be dismantled and installed in the regions. Printing facilities in the regions could be so organized and located that, to ensure efficient operation, each facility would be shared by several newspapers and other publications in the region.

A deliberate and systematically pursued approach to newspaper development and expansion could help evolve in the country a democratized press system which would better respond to the

information and educational needs of the entire society.

Democratization of media systems and taking media paraphernalia to the grassroots level also entail a decentralization of broadcasting production and transmission facilities. The nucleus for decentralizing the broadcasting system in Ghana could be the 52 radio relay stations some of which could be equipped with facilities which would enable them to generate and transmit, on a wider scale, programmes of local interest and relevance. The problems, merits and demerits of localizing broadcasting systems in African societies have been extensively analysed elsewhere.20 Decentralizing and developing community-level broadcasting system would facilitate a more conscious and systematic use of the electronic media to respond to the development needs and aspirations of the general poluation.21 As White observed, geographical decentralization of media facilities in the form of local community radio, television and rural press brings the media systems much closer to local interests and involvement, local issues and problems and local cultural expression.22

Central to the democratization mechanism proposed here is the issue of media control and management. Research and experience have indicated that excessive governmental control and the dominating influence of the ruling body in managing media systems tend to primarily benefit the ruling elite and a minority of the population who have the socio-economic and political leverage to use media facilities to propagate their views, programmes and values.23 One would suggest that democratized media systems would function more effectively in the government and self-reliance process and respond better to the needs and interests of the entire society, if government control of media systems is minimized and genuine public participation in media management, especially the state-owned media institutions, is maximized.

Any attempt to democratize media systems in Ghana, as proposed in this paper, are likely to encounter a host of problems. These problems include the large-scale illiteracy rate, shortage of newsprint and other printing materials as well as the limited national electricity grid, the capital outlay for installing and operating broadcasting systems and the cost of radio and television receiving sets.

To deal with these problems, one would suggest that the democratization mechanisms proposed here should be integrated into wholistic policies and plans for national development and transformation of socio-economic and political institutions. Thus, for example, nation-wide literacy campaigns and decentralization

of political administration, as planned by the ruling government of the Provisional National Defence Council, could be accompanied by the publication of regional and rural community newspapers; the extension of broadcasting facilities could be integrated into plans to extend the national electricity grid; and indigenous manufacture of paper and other printing materials, radio and television sets could become part of long-term industrialization programmes in the country. Broadcasting receiving facilities such as the pre-set radio could also be subsidized as part of a national strategy to extend social services to the rural communities.

In effect, what is needed is a well thought-out national policy on development and democratization of communication technology systems in Ghana; a policy that will seek, inter alia, to integrate communication technology into national development strategies and plans; allocate, on a sustained basis, financial and technical resources for an equitable development and expansion of media and other communication facilities and gear communication technology to the long-term development needs of the entire society.

One would contend that the principal constraint to democratizing media systems, as is the case with societal restructuring and democratization as a whole, lies much in the domain of politics than elsewhere. That is, the decision to democratize media systems and give a voice to the voiceless majority of the people and make them active participants rather than passive recipients of information and viewpoints is primarily a political one. Likewise, the decision to make media systems more participatory and interactive and less centralized, bureaucratized and hierarchical is a political one. The responsibility to initiate such decisions would seem to rest with national political leaders. In the final analysis, the determining factor is whether there is genuine political will and commitment to radically change systems which may well serve the vested interests and established positions of the elite.

Conclusion:

The central thesis of this paper is that existing media systems are poorly and inadequately structured to serve the needs of development and self-reliance in Ghana. Centralization, bureaucratization and autocratic controls have hindered the performance of the development-oriented functions of media systems in the country. An effective and efficient utilization of information in the process of national development partly requires

decentralized, de-urbanized and democratized media systems. Similarly, democratized media systems can facilitate a more effective application of the media to stimulate vertical and horizontal communication, help create a nation-wide spirit of self-reliance, encourage and strengthen critical awareness, discussion and sharing of experiences and opinions as well as to generate grassroots participation in determining and establishing development policies, objectives and priorities.

A meaningful democratization of media systems in Ghana should be undertaken as part of comprehensive, integrated efforts at societal transformation. But profound structural changes in the nation's media systems, as in other sectors, can only come about if there is political will and commitment to initiate and implement measures and mechanisms which go beyond podial pronouncements.

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7. For details of this experiment, see, for example, S.T.K. Boafo, "The Impact of a school/community Newspaper on selected Households and Townspeople in the Koforidua Education District." Unpublished M.A. Thesis, School of Journalism and Communication, University of Ghana, Legon, March 1976 and M. Neff Smart, "A School/Community Newspaper's Effect on Literacy Development in Ghana." *Journalism Quarterly*, 55, 1, 1978, pp. 119-124. In early 1986, the School of Journalism and Communication (now the School of Communication Studies) started another experiment with a rural newspaper, *Wonsuom*, which is published in Fante for the people in a selected number of rural communities in the Swedru area, about 80 Kilometres west of Accra.

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19. An example of such mimeographed publications in the "Larteh Newsletter" (established in 1953) which reports on news and information of relevence tot the people of Larteh, a small town about 40 kilometres to the east of Accra.

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21. When in early 1986, the Government of Ghana received FM radio transmitters from the Federal Republic of Germany, the opportunity was created for policy-makers to effect some structural changes in the country's radio broadcasting system by installing the new transmitters at the local community level. However, political leaders and policy-makers decided to install the transmitters in the same premises as the national radio station in Accra. Consequently, rather than being used to broadcast development oriented programmes of local needs and interest, the FM radio station has become a day-time electronic discotheque, the most prominent characteristic of which is the broadcasting of musical programmes for about nine hours each day.

22. White, 1982, *op. cit.*

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