Media Ownership and its Impact on Political News Coverage: A case study of Ashh FM

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ABSTRACT
Applying western European and American theoretical frameworks to the understudied Ghanaian context, this study examines media ownership and whether it is related to biased coverage of election campaigns by the Ghanaian news media. Drawing on data from a local radio station owned by a politician in Ghana in a content analysis study, this study found that true to expectations ownership did influence how the Ghanaian news media covered the election campaign. The state of the media in Ghana is widely considered the mostly improved and thriving institution. Ghana has a vibrant media landscape and can be said to be one that is free as criminal libel laws are non-existent in their laws (Gyimah Boadi, 2012). This study therefore delves into the political and media development of Ghana’s media, the content they provide, what affects the content and how specifically media ownership affects political news coverage in Ghana. The study gathered one hundred and twenty hours of data from prime time news coverage (major news bulletin) from Ashh fm, coded it and analysed the data with the SPSS software. The study also found out how the two main political parties in the country had received a greater share of the media coverage of the election campaign with the opposition New Patriotic Party enjoying the greater share with a vast amount of it being positive in nature. The findings are discussed in the light of extant knowledge about media ownership and its effect on news coverage and framing of presidential election campaigns.

Keywords: media, ownership, politics, coverage, bias, radio
1.0 Introduction
The basic role of the media is to educate the public on their content and objective for free debate and the consumption for all (Vanessa, Nellika, Andy, Bronwen, Ann & Abdullahi, 2012). The media is abreast with current events and creates awareness of various issues, which have extreme impact on the public’s view (Vanessa et al, 2012). The media in its capacity as the voice of the citizenry should be applauded for their enormous contribution towards Ghana’s fledgling democracy (Klutse, 2010). The media in the pursuit of their discharge of their mandate have codes of ethics that guide their conduct.

According to article 1(1) of the Ghana Journalist Association’s code of ethics, “it is the duties of the journalist to write and report the truth, bearing in mind his or her duty to serve the public”. This is in the sense that journalists are supposed to serve the public and not any political organisation irrespective of their political beliefs. The same code states that “journalist should give fair opportunity to individuals and organisations”. Article 10(1) states that “media organisation should give fair chances to all political parties to provide balance coverage. The contribution of the media, especially private radio stations in enhancing debate during electioneering period, has helped promote lively and constructive political campaigns and transparency during voting, counting and declaration of results. Therefore, it is the media’s obligation to provide information to the citizenry and help them direct their thoughts to elect the candidate of their choice during election.

2.0 The role of media in Democracy
Considering the role played by the media on the genocide case in Rwanda between 1990 and 1994, one can attest to the media’s vital role in enhancing democracy, especially in Africa. However, it does not give journalists the mandate to go contrary to the codes and ethics that govern their conduct in their discharge of their duty. Media content in the context of democracy sometimes generates concept of balance and bias in their submissions. Some political parties monitor media coverage closely and complain loudly when they perceive themselves to be given less time, less prominence or less favourable coverage in comparison with their leading contenders (Semetko, 2013).

Therefore, the media in its reportage on political news must give same time to political parties, in order to be objective, accurate and not to be bias in their tone of coverage. The media in their way of serving the citizenry within the country helps in enhancing civic and public debates in any democratic state (Yeboah, 2014).

As citizens decide their leaders in the country through elections, the media helps in providing alternative views to the people by shaping the information provided to the electorate in their decision-making (Yeboah, 2014). Because the role of the media is important in influencing voters’ judgment about the candidate, it is mandatory for the media not to poorly present information about the candidate (Joslyn, 1984). As article 10(2) of the GJA codes of ethics states, “Any report or a write-up affecting the reputation of an individual or an organisation without a chance to reply is unfair and must be avoided by journalists”.

2.1 Who owns the Media?
This question takes on added importance today in Ghana where ownership of media outlet is increasingly in the hands of politicians and other powerful people in the country (Bagdikian1997, Wang, 2003). Media ownership is a critical component of journalistic work especially when it has the capacity to influence the direction of media coverage (Opoku, 2016). Shoemaker and Reese (1991) also point out the important role that ownership plays in news media organisation. They argue that, “although news departments may be organisationally buffered from the larger firm, content is still controlled indirectly through hiring and promotion practices” (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991, p.144, Wang, 2003).

Press Freedom also identifies these three types of media ownership: privately owned, government owned, and by both government and individuals or private organisations (Press Freedom, 2009). Party and politician-
owned media: these cover the range of different types of mass media created by parties, from small party propaganda sheets to media owned by rich politico-business people. Ownership has effect on the nature of a media outlet in elections coverage, in this sense, any political coverage. State and government owned media are under direct or indirect state or ruling party control and may therefore tend toward favouring incumbent parties or candidates. Privately owned (be it corporate or otherwise) media may be independent, but may also serve the political interest of their owners. In some countries, these owners might belong to certain political parties and even candidates themselves (Yeboah, 2014).

Okwudishu (1988) posits that, as long as government ownership of the media continues, information flow will be elusive and uneasy to access. He hammered on the proverbial adage, “he who pays the piper dictates the tune”. This means that if an individual or a known politician owns the media, then the person might have some influence on the content.

3.0 Does ownership affect content?

The popular saying goes; ‘he who pays the piper calls the tune.’ In this vein, it is important to know that there is the potential of owners influencing what comes out of the newsroom unto the screens, on air and the newspapers.

In a study by Shoemaker and Reese (1991) to test Altschull’s (1984) study, in the United States, they posit that the owners of a media organisation have the exclusive power over the news content of the newspaper. They argue that the main aim of a state-owned news organisation is to make profit, and the only way to get readers is by way of being unbiased. Shoemaker el al. (1991) observed that, economic objective of the news organisation is often built into the content of the news. The owners may sometimes decide to make profit less important to the organisation and then focus on an ideological goal, such as promoting a particular agenda.

Research available on Mexico’s 2000 presidential campaign found that privately owned television stations were generally more balanced that public broadcasters were. Yet private ownership also usually employs special arrangements between broadcasters and politicians based on the prospect of future business, which (Sallie and Chappell) describe as “crony capitalism.” Changes in ownership therefore don not appear to be preventing partisan bias in the news (Sallie and Chappell, 2004).

In a study of the influence of media ownership and control on media agenda setting in Nigeria by (Okwuchukwu, 2014), the findings show that the current media ownership pattern and the level of media control in Nigeria actually hinder the media from independently setting society’s agenda. This is, because of different levels of government personnel’s in Nigeria owns most of the media organisation. In addition, it was observed that these groups of people (the ruling elites) are the core “news makers” whose views and opinions populate most of the views, news, opinions and information disseminated in the media in Nigeria. Therefore, some interference from the elites who owns the media was not allowing the media to operate independently. However, the concept of “news making” by “news makers” which largely revolves around this same people (the ruling elites) and the control they exert whether directly or indirectly undermines the ability of the media to on its own perform its agenda setting function.

In Kenya, (Simiyu, 2013) assessed the media ownership and framing using the International Criminal Court (ICC) case against Uhuru Kenyatta. Simiyu’s finding shows that the privately held People Daily newspaper had content that was more favourable for Uhuru Kenyatta, which shows that its trend has a bearing on ownership theory. The conclusion revealed, that as far as Uhuru Kenyatta has part ownership of the People Daily newspaper, there is no way they were going to report negative about him. This therefore supports Shoemaker and Reese (1991) assertion that the privately held media outlet will largely be reflective of the ideological learning of its owner(s). This reveals that once a personality owns a media, the media will project a good image about that personality in every situation.
However, other studies also posit to the contrary with (Wand, 2003) arguing that, ownership conglomeration, which has generally been criticized, might not be all bad. He points out that his study and previous study reviewed by him shows that, newspapers that were owned by large corporation did a better job of fair and balanced coverage of presidential candidates.

Together, the literature suggests the following hypotheses and a research question:

**RQ:** Do known politician owners of media houses have any influence on political news coverage?

**H1:** The New Patriotic Party (NPP) will enjoy a greater level of frequency in the coverage of campaign by ASHH FM.

**H2:** ASHH FM’s news coverage will be overly positive towards the NPP and negative towards the NDC.

### 4.0 Methodology

The study, one with a cross-sectional research design, adopted a content analysis method that saw us code one hundred and twenty hours worth of primetime news from Kumasi based Ashh Fm. Content analysis was selected because it is a technique which aims at describing, with optimum objectivity, precision and generality, what is said on a given subject in a given place at a given time (Laswell, Lerner, & de sola pool, p.34). The period of the selection was between 1st August to 6th December, 2016, the period from when the Electoral Commission of Ghana had announced who all eligible candidates were and the last day of campaigning. The data, a primary one was selected using the simple random sampling technique. The SPSS software was used to analyse the data to know the level of frequency, the tone in which the story is portrayed and the time allocated to the political news stories covering the various political parties and their candidates in the 2016 general election campaign in Ghana. The coding was done by two people using the code sheet developed and later two other people coded again to ensure inter coder reliability.

### 5.0 Results and Analysis

**Political Parties Frequency Percentage**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Parties</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NPP</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDC</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPP</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PNC</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPP</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDP</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Candidate</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>105</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hypothesis 1 was confirmed as the table above describes the number of political stories covered by Ashh Fm. The total number of stories for the political parties and their representative were 105: out of which NPP had 54 representing 51.4 percent, 36 went to NDC represent 34.3 percent, PPP had 8 representing 7.6 percent, 3 stories for PNC representing 2.8 percent, CPP had 3 stories indicating 2.9 percent and the rest of the parties had none of the stories been attributed to them. This implies that the NPP and its representative had the most frequency coverage than the other parties, followed by NDC, PPP, PNC, CPP and other political parties respectively.

Hypothesis 2 was also confirmed as the results indicated that out of the 54 stories for the NPP there were 37 positive stories (68.54%), and not a single negative story about them, (2%) slightly more negative story and
12 (22.2%) stories for neutral stories. On the other hand, NDC had six (6) positive stories representing (17%), 4 (7.4%) stories for slightly more positive, 18 (50%) stories for negative stories, 5 (1.4%) slightly more negative story and 3 (8.3%) stories for neutral stories. The five other parties were given less attention as compared to these two major political parties in the country.

After analysing the data gathered, the results indicated that majority of the stories; 54 out of 105 (51.4%) were about the NPP and its representative as against 34.3% for NDC, 7.6% for PPP, PNC also had 3.8%, and 2.9% for CPP. This in reference to the findings of Hayford Yeboah (2012) which projected the NPP by giving them 64% as against 36% for the NDC, as reported by Daily Guide; a private media organisation.

Tone in this context talks about the positively, negativity, slightly more positivity, slightly more negativity and how balance the stories are presented. In that assertion, out of the 54 stories for the NPP there were 37 positive stories (68.54%), (47.4%) stories for slightly more positive, 0 stories for negative stories, 1 (2%) slightly more negative story and 12 (22.2%) stories for balance stories. In the same respect for NDC; 6 positive stories (17%), 4 (7.4%) stories for slightly more 3 (8.3%) stories for balance stories. The five other of the parties are given less attention as compared to these two major political parties in the country.

In the analysis of the coverage by Ashh Fm, all the results that came out from the coding parameters posed more negative towards the NDC, PPP, PNC, CPP, NDP and Independent Party and their representatives, that is, all the results that posed positivity towards the NPP and its representative. In our analysis we deduced that the NPP was more portrayed using their policies as a form of campaigning for the party by the organisation due to the political leniency of the owner (Kennedy Agyapong). This confirms the media ownership theory propounded by Altschull (1984) that “the content of the press is directly related with the interests of those who finance the press” (Altschull, 1984, p.254) which some researchers such as Kenny and Sampson (1993) used this theory in their content analysis on Washington Post and Times which resulted in Washington Post producing fair and balance coverage unlike Time producing bias coverage (Yeboah, 2014). It also disagrees to some researches such as Maxico’s 2000 presidential campaign that found that privately owned television stations were generally more balanced than public broadcasters were, and Wang’s research on media ownership and objectivity. Wang argued that, ownership conglomeration, which has generally been criticized, might not be all bad. He points out that his study and previous study reviewed by him shows that, newspapers that were owned by large corporation did a better job of fair and balanced coverage of presidential candidates. Ashh Fm falls foul according to article 1(2) of the GJA code of ethics, which states “the public have the right to unbiased, accurate and balanced and comprehensive information as well as express themselves freely through the media”. It is crystal shown in this research work that indeed ownership affects content.

6.0 Conclusion

Findings generated for this study is very helpful but in future research, especially one that would be radio or television ownership oriented should be a comparative content analysis study because this research was restricted to one private radio media organisation. It would be interesting if future researchers combine private-owned television and radio media organisations in analysing electioneering campaign seasons.
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