

BOOK REVIEW

Africanus Lewil Diedong (2016). *Responsible Journalism and the Quest for Professional Standards in Ghana.* Accra: Woeli Publishing Services. 129 pages.

The publication of *Responsible Journalism and Quest for Professional Standards in Ghana* could not have been timely. One of the most strident concerns in this Fourth Republic of Ghana's democracy has been about the performance of Ghana's media within the institutional arrangement of the country's governance and social structure. In the media, among researchers and experts on media and democracy, and in public spaces, the concern has been rife that the Ghanaian media are not living up to general expectation. The expectation is the acknowledged information role of the media in ensuring citizens' welfare and enhancing the democratization process of the country. This comes as a black spot to media that has earlier been hugely applauded for their contribution in the fight against both colonialism and dictatorship and in restoring democratic governance to the country. The book is therefore relevant to media and journalistic practice in Ghana and also provides a window for the understanding of media work and its constraints and rewards in the country.

The core problem behind what many perceive as backsliding of the media has been a relative absence of *professional standards, responsibility and accountability* on the part of journalists and media organisations in news production and dissemination. This is the pivot of *Responsible Journalism and Quest for Professional Standards in Ghana* (2016). The title of the book is very suggestive; the use of *quest* implies two things. The first is that journalism practice in Ghana lacks professional standards, and second, that it could be difficult to overcome this challenge. These implications account for the need for an in-depth publication on journalistic standards which the entire book is about. The work is timely because the more the years roll by and each time the clock ticks for general multiparty elections to occur, such as in this year, 2016, the more the media come up for scrutiny for all the negative reasons. Yet, until the coming of this book, a full-scale research-based publication focused on issues of journalistic standards, professionalism, responsibility, and accountability in Ghana has been almost absent.

The many critical questions that this book addresses revolve round the quest for Ghanaian media practitioners to adopt, cultivate and apply journalistic practices that are in sync with Ghanaian normative expectations regarding the media's institutional, legal and informative function. The author, Africanus Lewil Diedong (Ph.D), is an accomplished scholar who currently works as a lecturer and researcher at the University for Development Studies in Ghana. His terminal degree in social communication, his research output, together with his membership of various media and communications

associations, as indicated in the blurb of the book, amply testifies to his sound grounding in the field. On the way to his current academic status, Diedong also drew inspiration and knowledge at the feet of some of the best scholars in the field in Africa, Europe and elsewhere, which reflects in the insightful content of the book.

The book comes in six chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of the Ghanaian media scene, which serves as a useful background for an understanding of the issues discussed in the subsequent chapters. Chapters 2 to 4, in my opinion, are the most crucial sections of the book. Chapter 2 captures the various theoretical perspectives framing the study, covering the information function of the media, ethics, and media and communication ethics, as well as normative theories of the media. Chapter 3 dwells insightfully on media responsibility and journalistic standards, while Chapter 4 covers media accountability mechanisms in Ghana and their various institutional ramifications. Chapter 5 discusses journalism education in Ghana, the idea being that responsible media correlates strongly with education, training and knowledge of journalists. The last chapter uses the experiences and views of some outstanding Ghanaian media personalities to normatively frame qualities that define professional and responsible journalism in the country and then concludes the whole book.

One prominent feature of this book is the fact that it is underpinned by a strong theoretical base, specifically involving ethics and normative considerations. This is not very surprising since a study on professionalism, standards, and responsibility would naturally be informed by ethical and normative views. The emphasis on ethics comes with other important considerations. Issues that are associated with the term include professionalism and professionalisation, freedom of the media, morality, social cohesion, among others and these are adequately engaged in the book. In an important work that questions whether journalism can co-exist with ethics, Belsey (1998), raises philosophical and germane arguments about the difficulty of their co-existence. The argument is that ethics depends on people's trust. Yet, people generally do not trust journalists and journalism because of the nature and complexities of journalism work and the impact of news on various sections of society. But the author shows that the two can co-exist, difficult as it is, in so far as the reality of ethical journalism is 'journalism based on the idea of virtuous conduct, facilitating the democratic process and serving the public interest' (Belsey, 1998: 11). Diedong's book situates ethics within its classical origins and uses the unique Ghanaian context to provide further and detailed explication of this argument. Concerning normative ideals, the book delves deep into various popular Western-based normative perspectives that could frame the media of any liberal democracy. Every society has expectations of what and how its institutions should be to serve the interest of the larger segments of society. Thus, a critical normative position the book adopts may be expressed in the question: how

should Ghanaian journalists and newsrooms be and how should they perform their functions in order to be (seen as being) responsible and accountable to the people who have guaranteed them their freedom and other democratic privileges?

Another key strength of the book lies in its sophisticated and in-depth analysis of journalistic standards, responsibility and accountability in media practices in Ghana. The book conducts a surgery on the socio-political, economic and cultural conditions that motivate and induce what may be termed irresponsible and unaccountable journalism practices, which have been discussed within the unique regulatory framework of the country. Among others, the author identifies individual journalists, management of media organisations, lack of independence, profit motives, low remuneration for media workers, news sources, the power elite, and so on, as veritably possible avenues through which the media could be compromised to negate the democratic aspirations of the nation.

The book additionally presents a remarkable but often ignored perspective on the thorny issue of media regulation. Besides the role of the state, democratic institutions and self-regulation, the author introduces the notion of citizens and audience as regulators. Indeed, the majority of the Ghanaian media organizations are commercially oriented and provide products and services which are either directly paid for or used to mobilise audience for advertisers. All these are supposed to bring income to sustain the operations, programmes and other financial obligations of the organizations. This means that the audience contributes immensely to the financial sustenance of media organisations. Thus, if a media organisation or a journalist engages in unethical or irresponsible practices, the audience could impose 'sanction' by refusing to patronise the journalist or media house concerned as a way of protesting. In other jurisdictions such as the UK, if a media house or a journalist engages in such infractions, the reaction of the audience is swift as recently happened to Rupert Murdoch's News International in the phone hacking scandal in the UK. In fact, most Ghanaian journalists would concede that they produce what the audience wants or expects, thereby raising fundamental questions about whether many of the infractions of the media are not induced by audience expectations. This perspective also raises further controversial questions about the morality of the Ghanaian audience which require further interrogation beyond this book or the current print. Although Diedong's book does not engage much with this angle regarding the role of the audience in media regulation, it has raised an important media regulation issue that should engage the attention of researchers and civil society organisations in the country.

In spite of its glowing attributes, the book also displays some notable weaknesses that ought to be acknowledged. One noticeable feature of the book is the over dependence on exogenous concepts, theories and other references that may not exactly reflect

the Ghanaian and African situation. For instance, the book is framed by the notion of *standard* and *professional* journalism practices. Yet, the author appears to take the concepts for granted assuming that the Western understandings exactly applies to Ghana. Thus, he does not engage the concepts critically within the context of Ghana. Similarly, the author discusses theories involving ethics from a purely Graeco-European perspective without acknowledging the obvious differences between the socio-cultural environment of Ghana and that of the societies used to develop such theoretical perspective. For example, the ethical and moral underpinnings of a gift, respect, and so on, in the Ghanaian context are radically different from elsewhere and this could have been acknowledged in the discussion. While the work is based on normative models, the author depends on Western perspectives without considering the extent to which they reflect the unique socio-political and economic and cultural conditions of Ghana. The argument here is that the political, social and cultural conditions pertaining to Ghana are not the same as those of the Western societies on which such theories were based. Granted that Africa is yet to outdoor any normative theories that depend on data from the continent and reflect the unique conditions of the continent, the author could have demonstrated knowledge of efforts on the continent at evolving such theories (see for instance, Asante, 2004; Fourie, 2011) and major works that urge African scholars towards this end (Ugangu, 2012). In fact the author could have engaged Paulo Freire's conscientisation model in his *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1993/1970) as a theory that could normatively frame the Ghanaian, and for that matter, African media. This is because, Freire's model was based on the Brazilian experience and environment, which could largely reflect the African condition more than the Western-based ones. Another significant issue concerns the author's solutions or suggestions to responsible and accountable journalism in Ghana. The writer has argued, and rightly so, that there are many deep-seated factors beyond individual journalists and media organisations accounting for media practices that could be seen as irresponsible and unethical. However, in discussing solutions, the author appears to fall into an anecdotal trap by focusing attention largely on individual journalists and management of media organisations. In this way, other crucial factors such as the political and economic environment, media ownership, literacy rates, audience, ethnic considerations, and a host of others are ignored in the overall picture of enhancing professionalism and journalistic standards in the country. It is only when all these factors are considered in a comprehensive manner in the solution that we can make any headway in the fight to make our media responsible and professional.

The above critiques notwithstanding, Diedong's book fills a critical gap not only in academia but also in the Ghanaian media and communication industry. A notable contribution of the book has been the distillation of the discussions and findings, laced with a heavy dose of anecdotal opinions flying about in Ghanaian public spaces.

Significantly, the publication adds to knowledge production by converting vital opinions, discussions and findings into research information making it an important and informed source of reference for research and practice. The book may be based on Ghana, but as a research work, it could replicate similar geo-political societies in Africa and elsewhere that fit the description of underdeveloped or developing countries like Ghana. The book is no doubt useful as a textbook for students in tertiary institutions who are interested in or studying courses related to media and governance, political communication, media and political participation, among others. The book is also a must-read for academics and more particularly for media and communication practitioners who want to learn about the constraints and rewards of the profession and how to be a responsible and accountable journalist or communicator.

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