

THE MASS MEDIA PROFESSION IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

A Development Partner or Scourge?

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ABSTRACT

The paper sets up a platform for debating whether the mass media is a partner or a scourge to development. Critics of the mass media argue that media vigilance is necessary for checking the excesses of persons in authority. The media is seen as some form of vigilante that guards against the pursuit of self-interest, nepotism, excessive power and corrupt practices. Indeed, journalists help to promote the freedoms and rights of human beings, distinct from other animals, and the balance of power between rulers and the ruled. Yet, the media can become an avenue for distractive practices. Irresponsibility, corruption and excesses of the media breed and result in crises and chaos. Evidently, the misuse of the media like that of power can impede national development. In Ghana today, the mass media has become an important ally in national yet, some of its practices are causing concern. It is in view of that situation that this analysis was undertaken. It uses secondary data to discuss the role of journalists and to determine their effects on development. It finds that journalism and the media in Ghana are positioned as guardian of democracy and granting of the civil liberties and freedoms. These manifest in media roles as gatekeepers, scorekeepers and watchdogs over society. The mass media at its best helps in scrutinizing the living conditions of people in order to ensure that individuals, institutions and governments do or not fail to do to deepen democracy. The work concludes that mass media practitioners can promote a vibrant democracy leading to sustainable development. Media practitioners through either responsible journalism or investigative reporting, constantly remind people in privileged positions about the concerns of others in less privileged positions. Yet, when media awareness leads people in authority to lose their jobs and privileges, the media may be seen as a scourge and not a useful ally by the constituency that is losing out. On balance, media personnel are the vanguard of democracy and should be supported by lovers of freedom, human rights and democracy to collect and disseminate information towards probity, transparency and accountability.

KEY WORDS: Mass Media, Democratic Practice, Media Professionalism, Popular Opinion, Civil Liberties.

INTRODUCTION

The mass media is emerging as a development partner on the global scene. It has been largely accepted that the mass media is the fourth estate after the Executive, Legislature and Judiciary. The object of this paper has been to explore the role of media practitioners in creating the necessary awareness, resoluteness and attitudes that harness the energies of citizens for national development. The paper looks at what the media is, who constitute media practitioners, how the media works and what objectives they seek to achieve. Media vigilance, resulting in accountable governance and responsible citizenship, can translate positive attitudes into greater productivity and better living standards. Former President Jefferson (1898) of the United States captured the importance of the media more than a century ago in the following statement: "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without

newspapers or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." Information technology has today made the role of the media more important than at the time this statement was made.

The media, as used in this text, refers to all the channels of communication that are used to persuade, educate, entertain and inform various audiences and constituencies. It covers the print, broadcast and electronic means of reaching out to people to influence their thinking and behaviours. The terms: journalists, media personnel and media practitioners, are used interchangeably throughout the text.

"Development" is used rather liberally to refer to a general improvement of the living conditions of people, mindful of the common strains as intimated by Todaro (1986), Seers (1969), Ayittey (1998; 2002) and Myrdal (1970). It is worth noting that the mere material increases in goods and services cannot be considered development if access to these benefits under conditions where there is no dignity and respect for human beings. Yet, it is the tendency to take a reductionist view of development (as in increases in goods and services) at the expense of access (i.e. equity and justice) that creates imperatives for media action, among many roles. Under such circumstances, the media's role becomes one of ensuring that economic and social improvements are matched with access to justice.

The paper draws heavily from secondary data as source for reviewing the roles of media practitioners, trying to locate concrete examples of the various shades of opinion relating to media practice. The paper also sets up a platform to debate the beneficial effects of media vigilance in governance. It also discusses instances of media vigilance considered harmful of influential individuals and governments with respect to their reputation and popularity rating. The paper finally discusses the necessity for mass media in every nation, irrespective of the pain that media practitioners sometimes cause to individuals and governments.

MASS MEDIA AS A PROFESSION

Mass media practitioners are people who have received special training in journalism and public relations and have developed considerable capabilities in news gathering, analysis and reporting through public channels of communication. With this working definition, a messenger or machine operator working at a media house cannot refer to himself or herself as a media practitioner. He or she is an employee of a media house, *finito!* Similarly a professor in English, Communication, Journalism or Public Relations who teaches aspects of professional media practice but not as routine business or does dole out news or feature articles is nevertheless a teacher, and cannot refer to himself or herself as a journalist or media practitioner. He or she has learned to teach and teaches the methods of mass communication but is not a media practitioner.

In reality, there are people with media houses who are not media practitioners and several others outside the industry who may be practitioners either through writing reviews or belonging to an existing media body. Yet, a patriotic person who takes upon himself or herself the burden of writing about disasters, deprivations and newsworthy occurrences cannot say that he or she is a media practitioner if he or she has not received training and does not belong to a professional body regulating his or her practice. There is, however, still considerable debate on what constitutes a profession.

Posner (1999:186) holds the view that:

A profession is an occupation of considerable public importance the practice of which requires highly specialized... knowledge that can be acquired only by specialized formal education or a carefully supervised apprenticeship. It is a profession... that can't

responsibly be entered at will but only in conformity with a prescribed and usually exacting protocol and upon proof of competency.

Posner suggests that unless one has acquired some minimum skills of an occupation and the entry into which is dependent on the possession of those skill they cannot be considered professional. In Ghana, many professions are regulated by not just training and degrees, diplomas or certificates received in accredited institutions but also regulations by membership bodies such as the Physician and Surgeons Council, Nurses Council, Ghana National Association of Teachers and Tailors and Dressmakers Association and state institutions such as the Ghana Health Service, Ghana Education Service and National Council on Vocational and Technical Education and Training. For the media of Ghana the Ghana Journalist Association and the National Media Commission take of roles for regulating practice beyond certification by institutions such as the School of Communication Studies and Ghana Institute of Journalism.

Additionally, media houses and the hierarchies of professional practice provide censors and regulations. Media houses select issues they consider to be newsworthy by looking for the extraordinary and what offends a human sense of dignity, justice or causes suffering. In this wise, competition among media houses and timeliness determine what should be reported. Proximity is equally important as news men and women tend to report more of what is happening around them than what is happening far away. In many cases, therefore, when a dog bites a man it will not be reported; but when a man bites a dog; this out of the ordinary situation is reported as news. Thus, the kinds of reportage and the ability to do so efficiently forms an important part in determining not just professional practice but also competence. Through various regulations and structures, the media is able to respond to and deliver on its roles professionally or not.

FUNCTIONAL ROLES OF MASS MEDIA

The mass media plays very important roles in every society. Wilson (1992:246) surmises that the media “plays the role of gatekeeper, scorekeeper and watchdog” in every state. The media strives to be the conscience of every nation. It takes its position among the weak, vulnerable and powerless in the “gutters” and dares the mighty and powerful to come and meet it there if they really care for the people.

Media as Gatekeeper

The mass media performs its role as gatekeeper by examining the performance of leaders, institutions and processes that are intended to serve public interest. By investigating people, issues, institutions and processes, the media conscientizes the ruled about how those in power are using it. By constantly writing, speaking or broadcasting the activities of governments and their agencies, the media communicates the activities of governments to the people and enables them to assess their performance. By so doing the media is able to influence decisions on and directions of national development. The draws attention to areas needing redress offers explanations to contentious issues and cautions governments to take corrective actions. The media, in this way, helps in the determination of the direction of the national agenda.

As the media seeks out whose mandate it is to do what, in its drive to create responsible governments and responsible citizens, people are educated on their corresponding rights and duties towards one another. Journalists are sometimes sensational in their reportage but their desire to create awareness that the common heritage is threatened by certain happenings or omissions on the part of public officers stands supreme. Wilson (1992:260) says that the press is always “suspicious of officialdom and eager to break an embarrassing story that will win for the author honour, prestige, and popularity and (in some cases) a lot of money.” Investigative reporter, Raymond Archer’s relentless pursuit of Dr. Richard Anane, then minister of state, and Miss Obrien’s sexual affair is a typical example of how journalists eventually get popularity in

Ghana. The Ghanaian Press did not take kindly to the fact that the then Minister, during his participation in an international conference on HIV/AIDS had unprotected sex and made a baby in the process. This forced the minister, Anane, to resign his post as Minister for Road and Transport (Daily Graphic, September 16, 2006). However, the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) under President Kufuor, left the position unfilled for about a year only to re-nominate Anane for the same portfolio a second time, after he was cleared of wrongdoing by a high court. When the appointment was submitted to the Parliament of Ghana, he was passed and Anane returned to his post as Minister of Roads and Transport for a second time. This is a classic case of disjuncture between political and popular opinions.

Journalists sometimes raise the expectations of citizens about government duties, to the point where many governments believe that the media everywhere is unbearably demanding and can never be satisfied. The media makes or unmakes governments through a constant vigilance on personalities in public institutions, contributing to the popularity or defamation of governments and the inclination of voters to credit or discredit governments for national fortunes or misfortunes. A former Head of State of Ghana, General Acheampong, is famed for objecting to the persistent blaming of government for everything ill, dysfunction and wrongdoing. He is famed for saying that Ghanaians blamed government whenever it failed to rain or rained too much and whenever national disasters struck. The then military leader is said to have raised his objections on the basis of limits of governments as human rather than divine institutions.

The media can lift the spirit of a nation from gloom to hope and also move a nation from peace to war. It is a fact that in performing its gate-keeping role, the mass media puts governments, institutions and individuals on their feet. In almost every country, mass media practitioners gather support or whip up dislike for those who govern, by highlighting or failing to carry, the failures and/or successes of governments. The media exhorts every citizen to assert his or her rights and resist bad rule. In the words of Achebe (1987:19) "a man must not swallow his cough because he fears to disturb others." People must be bold to speak out about the failings of their governments.

The gate-keeping role of journalists within mass media houses is not without its fair share of challenges. Journalists parade as moral crusaders but have no superior self-controls. They hardly ever pass the morality test when required to apply the prescriptions they proffer to others. Akainyah (2000:7) laments the un/critical stand of media houses against governments as follows:

When bad things are said about the government, the private press accepts it as true without batting an eye. However, any good thing that is said about the government cannot be true and whoever is saying so could either be a sycophant or may have been bribed.

As a journalist scuttles around gathering, disseminating, analyzing, clarifying, classifying and interpreting news items, he or she also consciously tries to match rights and responsibilities. Boadu-Ayebofoh (2001:7) cites UNESCO that: "anyone who acts without responsibility weakens his claim to freedom, while anyone who is denied freedom cannot be called upon to exercise responsibility."

Such is the link between rulers, the ruled and journalists. Jefferson, the third president of the United States, once lamented the inaccuracies and misrepresentations in the writings of journalists by asking editors "*to divide their work into truths, probabilities, possibilities and lies*". Some journalists often fail to separate their facts from the opinions, making their opinions look like facts in their news. This is true of the developed as much as in developing countries of the world.

The Media as Scorekeeper

The mass media keeps account of important events, occurrences and utterances of the mighty in society. They occasionally refer to these notes and demand consistency or performance as the case may be. In this capacity, the mass media acts as the repository of history from which society draws important lessons. The mass media also fishes out the statutory duties of persons and institutions and helps to link up people and/or communities whose challenges lie in those domains. This scorekeeping role makes journalists the eyes and ears of the general public. The fourth President of the United States of America, Madison (1910:103) said it all that:

A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or tragedy or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance. And people who mean to be their own government must arm themselves with the power that knowledge gives.

The road map to impressive performance in governance is knowledge on how others who travelled on a particular road in the past fared and be on the look-out for the dangers that befell such forebears or frontrunners. Journalists keep reminding people from their notes of the commissions, omissions, negligence and promises of public officers in the discharge of their public duties.

Scorekeeping is not a useless enterprise. It promotes informed debates in the search for best practices. In this regard, Livy (1971) the ancient Roman historian could not have put it better when he stated:

The study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind; for in history you have a record of all the infinite variety of human experiences plainly set out for all to see, and in that record, you can find for yourself and your country, both examples and warnings, find things to take as models, base things, rotten through and through to avoid.

Media personnel tickle our forgetful selves and remind us to avoid the mistakes of the past. Journalists wield their pens like whips on ungrateful or erring persons. Every nation is better off when its leading statesmen pick useful lessons from its past and accept wise counsel from peers and the media.

Freeman (1967) was instructive when he cited Edmund Burke that:

History consists, for the greater part, of the miseries brought upon the world by pride, ambition, avarice, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrisy, ungoverned zeal, and all the train of disorderly appetites which shake the public... and render life unsweet”.

These records, forewarn many statesmen before a disastrous fall and little men from the trickery of the powerful.

The Media as Watchdog

The mass media, almost everywhere, has a tendency to see governments and political structures as exploitative of the vulnerable in society. Journalists believe that political parties, politicians and rulers are never faithful to their programmes and promises when they are in power.

The adversarial tendency between mass media practitioners and governments alluded to earlier in their gate-keeping role led Achebe (1987:150) to observe that journalists are unpopular for “dispensing national anguish in carefully measured milligrammes.” Achebe (1987:186) again describes a journalist as “a practicing hangman.” Wilson (1992:248) also cites Mencken that journalists are frequently committed “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable”.

In a developing country like Ghana, the electorate in remote areas tend to have little chance of meeting their presidential and parliamentary candidates face-to-face during electioneering

times. They rely on the mass media for opinions on candidates through the broadcast and electronic media houses. Graber (1996) in describing the role of journalists said:

Journalists serve as the watchdog fourth branch of government, which monitors excesses and misbehaviours of the executive, legislature and judiciary branches. Through playing adversarial roles, journalists provide the feedback that democratic systems need to remain on course. If as a result of their scrutiny governments fall and public officials are ousted, this is as it should be.

In Ghana, during the Kufuor administration, unfavourable press reports over the loss of \$46,000 led to the removal and jailing a former minister of sports, of Mallam Issah in 2001. Similarly, unpopular press reports in Ghana on Hon Edumadze over perceived power excesses eventually cost him his job as the Central Regional Minister. Press reportage of acts of malfeasance in the Ministry of Finance by Kwame Peprah and Victor Selormey of the Rawlings Administration resulted in their trial and conviction by an Accra Fast Track High Court in 2003. More recently, similar media reportage led to the investigation and resignation of Youth Minister Alhaji Mohammed Muntaka Mubarak.

Similarly, Pulitzer, as quoted by Boadu-Ayebofoh (2004: 7) describes the journalist as:

The lookout on the bridge of the ship of state; he notes the passing sail, the little things of interest that dot the horizon in fine weather. He reports the drifting castaway whom the ship can save. He peers through the fog and storm to give warning to dangers ahead. He is not thinking of his wages or the profits of owners. He is there to watch over the safety and welfare of the people who trust him.

Journalists at times expose insincere politicians who manipulate the electorate with promises they have no intention to keep. In the words of Achebe (1987:125) journalists expose any “public officer who sees every blow in a battle he never fought.... When he looks around and finds no age mate to challenge the claim, he will turn the marks left on him by chicken pox and yaws he suffered in childhood into bullet scars...” Thus the mass media exposes hypocrites who parade themselves as patriots. It checks the speeches, acts and excesses of persons in high positions in whom so much trust is reposed.

For being the voice of the voiceless, the mass media leads people through awareness creation such that their problems may receive attention at the appropriate levels. The media champions the cause of the poor, and vulnerable in the society it operates. It brings hope and/or comfort to the down-trodden. Media personnel direct people where their problems can be solved. The poor need to know how to secure development assistance. Achebe (1987:127) puts it in a beautiful cultural context:

When a rich man is sick a beggar goes to see him and say sorry. When the beggar is sick, he waits to recover and then goes to tell the rich man that he has been sick. It is the place of the poor to make a visit to the rich man who holds the yam and the knife.

Constant publicity, inquisitiveness and direction by the media sometimes lead to the solution of problems of the less fortunate in society. The mass media imperils public officers and leaderships wherever it finds any muck, hence the derogatory reference to media practitioners as “muckrakers.” The mass media occasionally causes targeted persons to panic by pointing out injustice or breaches in public duty. Dr. Richard Anane’s sexual escapades and the Kufuor Hotel saga are typical examples of anxieties and embarrassments journalists sometimes cause public figures.

In the Hotel Kufuor saga, the press accused the then president of Ghana of employing his power in the guise of state security to compel the owner of a hotel near his private presidential villa to sell the hotel to his son at an almost give away price. The press speculated on the then

President Kufuor's role in financing the purchase and acquisition. Another high profile case has been that involving now former vice chancellor of the University of Ghana. In that saga, Press coverage of examination malpractices at the University of Ghana, Legon, which led to the questioning of the then vice chancellor and the pro vice chancellor immediately, moved an internal matter into national headlines status. By the end of the investigation by the Mfodwo Committee, then Vice-Chancellor, Professor Asenso-Okyere, was interdicted only to be later reinstated and subsequently retired. However, the Pro-Vice-Chancellor was never reinstated (Daily Graphic, July 3, 2006). It took the media for that level of conversion, from local to national, to happen.

Yet in Ghana, it is the case that some journalists resort to sensational journalism and make mountains out of mole hills. Some such cases may be petty but media involvement could cause paralysis in decision-making and implementation in democratic states. The failure to recognize that public decisions are made when all the information has not been collected and political, rather than rational, forces are equally important in determining the policy choices of those in authority points to the limitations of authority and the power of the media. It also suggests that the choices that are made under such circumstance and their timelines have social consequences with far reaching effects on the options, directions and outcomes.

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE MASS MEDIA

Through playing its functional roles, the mass media of Ghana contributes in many ways toward the social improvements of the country. These include the promotion of press freedom, human rights, socio-economic development and popular knowledge.

Promotion of Press Freedom

The mass media cannot act as successful gatekeeper, scorekeeper and watchdog if it is not free to go about its business without interference. What then is press freedom? Boadu-Ayeboafoh (2004) cites Lord Denning as follows:

Freedom of the press is extolled as one of the great bulwarks of liberty.... I will first say what it does not mean. It does not mean that the press is free to ruin the reputation or break a confidence, or to pollute the course of justice or do anything that is unlawful. It means there should be no censorship. No restraint should be placed on the press as at what they should publish. It can publish whatever it chooses to publish. But it does so at its own risk.

Lord Oliver Wendell Holmes is also reported by Boadu-Ayeboafoh (2003) to have said that: "The guarantee of free speech does not permit a citizen to raise a false cry of fire in a crowded meeting hall and escape punishment. Nor can a political leader incite riot because there is a constitutional guarantee of free assembly."

The freedom to do anything in a democracy as long as it does not infringe upon the rights of anybody is the pillar upon which peace and development thrives. Boadu-Ayeboafoh (2003:7) again reminds humanity of Thomas Erskine's following powerful words:

Let men (sic) communicate their thoughts with freedom and their indignation fly off like fire spread on the surface; like gunpowder scattered, they kindle, they communicate, but the explosion is neither loud nor dangerous; keep them under restraint, it is subterranean fire whose agitation is unseen till it bursts into an earthquake or volcano"

Press freedom does not mean the right for journalists to foment trouble by raising passions likely to burst into uncontrollable conflicts. In 1993, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, then UN Secretary-General, was also reported to have observed that:

Without peace there can be no development and there can be no democracy. Without development, the basis for democracy will be lacking and societies tend to fall into conflict. And without democracy, no sustainable development can occur. Without sustainable development, peace cannot long be maintained (Boadu-Ayeboafah, 2004:7)

Protection of Human Rights

The media creates awareness about the fundamental value of human rights. Human rights are enjoyed only by human beings. Human rights are not, therefore, available to monkeys, donkeys, dogs and rats because they are not human. The latter category of animals however has rights under wildlife regulations that entitle them to kindness, care, protection and merciful death among others.

Under Article 12 (2) of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana:

Every person in Ghana, whatever his or her place of origin, political opinion, colour, religion, creed or gender shall be entitled to the fundamental human rights and freedoms of the individual but subject to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and for the public interest. (Ghana, 1992:2)

Similarly, United States House of Representatives, on the 4th of July 1877, proclaimed that:

All men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, that to secure these rights, governments are instituted by men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundations on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to affect their safety and happiness.

In part the Proclamation also read that when “repeated petitions have been answered with repeated injury, a character... thus marked by every act of which may define a tyrant is unfit to be the ruler of a free people”.

The writings of James Madison and Thomas Jefferson as journalists before becoming presidents were crucial in stopping the ills of colonialism on the people of America. Today, journalists still play very crucial roles in preventing or promoting violence around the world.

Contribution to Socio-Economic Development

The mass media does not just criticise or condemn perceived wrongdoing; it endeavours to prescribe the way forward to improve upon the welfare of their audiences in a particular state. Around times of elections, journalists seek to enlighten people to make the right choices. They also exhort politicians to use honest means to obtain power from the people. Abuse of incumbency and use of monetary incentives to woo voters during electioneering is frowned upon by media practitioners. As voters learn that electioneering pledges on campaign platforms are not meant to be taken literally and seriously, electioneering time is the time the poor and vulnerable call the shots. Irish and associates (1981:101) were instructive when they cited G.B. Shaw’s description of the expectations of British poor and which also true of voter behaviour and voting patterns of the poor in many developing countries.

Man (sic) does not philosophise on an empty stomach. Poor people worry about basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter; about not being able to pay for a visit to the doctor, about their children being bitten by rats. These concerns are quite different from those of the wealthy matron, who has to worry about overeating, avoiding high taxes and getting their children to the best schools.

The media admonishes people to be mindful of politicians who promise heaven on earth since most politicians habitually have no intention of keeping their promises. Santayana, (1905:47) describes politicians "as intellectuals who swagger about the place and sniff at everything, professing to be foreigners with superior habits, they are not really strangers but prodigal sons, or truant bastards of his, who have had relatively good luck in their wanderings."

Through admonitions and exhortations, the media mobilizes people and resources for informed choices on political leaders. Politicians too benefit from media revelations of uncommitted followers who pretend to support their agendas but are really economic self-seekers. During the recent New Patriotic Party delegates Congress held at the University of Ghana, Legon in December, 2007 to elect its flag-bearer to replace President Kufuor, many journalists openly asked delegates to put morality aside and accept anything from all the presidential hopefuls for their votes. After the primaries, Dr. Arthur Kennedy who had only one vote as a presidential contestant from all the delegates present was still assured by those who earlier promised to support his campaign bid that they cast the one vote. How did so many delegates voting separately through a roll call cast one vote for Arthur-Kennedy? The 2007 NPP National Delegates Congress, during which the flag bearer was selected, was one event where voters proved that they could beat politicians to their game in their own backyard.

Protection of Democratic Ideals

Mass media engagements seek to inform and educate the public to promote democracy; foster a greater participation in the affairs of the state and minimise abuse or the dereliction of public duty by the rulers over the ruled. A watchful mass media can help to reduce the incidence of revolts, riots, uprisings, rebellions and revolutions. The resulting peace and stability forms a stronger ground upon which democracy and development can be pursued.

The insufficiency or inequitable distribution of basic needs for many people together with the greed of well-placed public officers often breeds tensions and factions especially whenever economic opportunities are also unequal. Although mass media activities cannot totally prevent chaos in societies, the absence of such vigilance may not only hasten civil commotion but deepen tensions and pain globally. Moore (1972:38) raises the issue of the futility of force to create just societies this way:

Why is it that revolutionaries sooner or later adopt, and sometimes, intensify the cruelties of the regimes against which they fight? Why is it that revolutionaries begin with camaraderie and end with factions? Why do revolutionaries start by proclaiming brotherhood of man, end of lies, deceit, and secrecy, and culminate in tyranny, whose victims are overwhelmingly the little people for whom the revolution was proclaimed as the advent of a happier life.

The answer to the above questions points to the obvious fact of human nature with all its fallibilities and vulnerabilities. The continued abuse of power and authority in African politics and social systems by politicians, public official and even traditional authorities only creates mistrust and suspicion. Media scrutiny of the lives of public officers keeps in check the tendency to exceed bounds. The conduct of those in power needs to be carefully watched. The media endeavours to purge players in the body politic of evil tendencies which stand in the way of national reconstruction and transformation.

Creation of Popular Knowledge

Media practitioners often attempt to influence the course of events through collating public opinion. Public opinion is the totality of views, preferences, values, wants and aspirations of a people. In reality, differences in social and economic backgrounds, religion, customs, occupations, education and other indicators always lead to a plurality of public opinions. Public

opinion polls enable governments to learn of prevailing public interests. The executive arm then charts its policies and actions mindful of the possible repercussions of any unpopular policy or law. Governments' actions are often at variance with that of the people. Public opinion in America according to Wilson (1992:557) did not approve of either the Vietnam War of 1975, the invasion of Grenada in 1983 or the Persian Gulf War of 1990 but the sitting US Presidents went ahead and declared such wars. The Value-Added Tax (VAT) Law, Act 546 of 1998 in Ghana was not popular but the Rawlings led government had the political will to introduce it in 2000 in spite of massive demonstrations. VAT is now one of Ghana's most reliable sources of income.

Governments listen to but are not bound to accept what the citizens consider to be popular public opinion. It would be strange to expect governments to ignore the purposes for which they are created, and implement only the desires of its constituent "publics" which, frequently, are never uniform. The preambles of most constitutions state the agreed purposes to which their citizens bond themselves. In the United States Constitution, these objects were stated as, "to form a more perfect union, establish peace, ensure domestic tranquillity, provide for common defence, promote the general welfare and secure the blessing of liberty."

Similar objectives are stated in the preambles of Ghana's 1969, 1979 and 1992 Constitutions. Checks and balances ensure that the public interest of citizens not in the privileged executive, legislature and judiciary are respected and protected. Politics is important but most citizens are concerned not only about politics but also about economic and social issues. Politics is very important only to people whose basic needs have been met. Most governments tend to listen and deal with only opinions from their informed and elite "publics."

CONCLUSION

In the analysis above, I have looked at the mass media landscape, especially how its practitioners influence public officials, decisions and choices. I have examined the gate-keeping, scorekeeping and watchdog roles of the mass media and their role as facilitators of development. Media craving to expose inept public officers, conscientise citizens and help voters to make informed choices at elections are discussed as vital in deepening and strengthening democracy for sustainable development. The paper concludes that a virile press is not only necessary for the promotion and enjoyment of fundamental human rights and press freedom but for making public officers accountable for the trust often reposed in them. Media practitioners whether in capitalist democracies, dictatorships and socialist states make great material sacrifices in the conviction that rights and freedoms are worth fighting and dying for at all costs. Whether the mass media is a partner in development or a scourge stands out as a matter of how helpful or harmful media houses are perceived by the people and governments of their time. Undoubtedly the media in Ghana has been largely a partner. In times when they have been a scourge they have often taken sides with the people or governments rather than both.

Undoubtedly, politicians and media practitioners need each other. They should also know that disagreement is not necessarily unguarded dislike or envy of each other's professional callings. Media practitioners should, however, check their facts before going to the press because damage to a person's reputation is almost always irreparable. The media is a necessary tool for sustaining democracy and facilitating development. Media houses should readily apologise and correct misstatements and poor judgements to let their audiences trust that they are objective and mean no harm to their clients.

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