

Media Ownership and Independence: Implications for Democratic Governance in the Fourth Republic of Ghana

by

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Abstract

After two decades of constitutional rule with Ghana having a vibrant and pluralistic media, the media is yet to assert itself as the fourth estate anticipated by the framers of the 1992 Fourth Republican Constitution. Thus, this study examines the extent to which the media and their journalists are independent from their ownership structures (public/private) to perform their watchdog roles (especially when covering government). Hence, this qualitative case study found that journalists working in public media are prevented from exercising their watchdog role on top functionaries of the government. The study also found that journalists exercise their watchdog functions if the target is a rival to their owners political camp, and this watchdog exercise is not dependent of whiter the target of the investigations is in government or not. However, when the target happens to be in the same camp as that of their owners, they appeared constrained in exercising their investigative role. This study concluded that there are marginal differences between the two main ownership structures in the coverage of government.

Key Words: media independence, media ownership, press freedom, democratic governance, watchdog.

Introduction

This study examines how ownership of the media in a polarized political environment affects the media in the performance of their watchdog role on government. The Ghanaian constitution describes the media as a fourth estate; recognizing the media's watchdog role over the other arms of government. Indeed, many social science scholars have argued that the media's ability to hold government and other sections of society accountable to the public is the main justification for the unfettered media freedom found in many liberal democratic constitutions around the world (Roy, 2014; Tettey, 2001; Waisebord, 2009). Accountability is central to democratic governance as it gives citizens, civil society, and the private sector the ability to scrutinize public institutions and governments and to hold them to account.

Schedler (1999) denotes two forms of accountability. These are answerability which holds that office holders have an obligation to inform, explain and justify their actions to electorates, and enforceability that refers to the capacity of state institutions to monitor and sanction office holders who have acted beyond their public duties so that unpopular policies and abuses of power can be challenged and reversed. Key to answerability is the performance of the daily watchdog functions of the media over the actions of state officials. Several scholars have explained this all important function of the media. For instance, Tettey (2006) argues that due to the reality that citizens cannot monitor government officials on daily basis, responsibility for doing this has fallen to the media. In the words of Grabber (2002: 143), the media is to "serve as the citizens' eyes and ears to survey the political scene and the performance of politicians ... and barks loudly when it encounters misbehavior, corruption and abuse of power by public officials." In the view of Netanel (2001), accountability is achieved when the media equips citizens with quality information on a government's performance to empower them to either maintain or vote government out. It was this recognition that made Ghana to adopt a multi-party constitution with elaborate provisions that recognize and promote pluralistic independent media (Tettey, 2001).

Ghana was not the only exception, indeed almost all new and emerging democratic countries in the world adopted multiparty political systems with elaborate freedom that protects press freedom. The Ghanaian media is often referred to as the Fourth Estate of the Realm and mandated to play an effective watchdog role on governments in particular and the larger citizenry. To effectively do this, the Constitution removed what scholars have described as arbitrary barriers and impediments. These impediments included prohibiting all manner of censorship on the way of media particularly from owners-government or private (Afari-Gyan, 1998; Kumado1999). Additionally, the above legal framework coupled with other important milestones such as the repeal of the Criminal Libel Law in 2001 made Ghana an example of emerging democracy. Ghana today is seen generally as a democracy with the freest media in Africa (Freedom House, 2012; Berger, 2007).

From a situation of having zero political print or electronic media in 1992, the country now boasts of over 400 registered newspapers, magazines, and journals; 286 FM radio stations; and over 28 free-to-air/subscription television stations registered in the country. Additionally, there are other multimedia outlets including online newspapers, news portals and websites run by both traditional and non-traditional media (IREX, 2012).

However, these developments do not appear to match the watchdog role of the Ghanaian media as anticipated by the framers of the Constitution. This situation is not only limited to Ghana, but most media in developing countries (Kostadinova, 2015). The media has been criticized for failing to assert itself as the fourth estate over other arms of government (Müller, 2014). They have failed to exercise skepticism over the actions and inactions of public officials anticipated by the framers of the Constitution. The Ghanaian media has also been guilty of partisanship, unprofessionalism (Gadzekpo, 2008; Karikari, 2010). Above all, the media has even witnessed the phenomenon of politicians setting up and owning media establishments to pursue both business and political interests. More importantly, the media's watchdog role under Ghana's Fourth Republic cannot be overemphasized. However, not much work (in terms of empirical research) has been done. Most of the existing literatures available on this all important subject were scholarly opinion pieces, newspaper articles, civil society and anecdotal reports, which are often not reliable.

However, there are few existing studies which include *The Press in Ghana: "Problems and Prospects"* by Clement Asante (1996). This work did not touch on the Fourth Republic. It examined the relationship between the press and government in Ghana from 1822 to 1992. Two other works found were *The Press and Political Culture in Ghana* by Jennifer Hasty (2005), and Ghana Research Findings and Conclusions in African Media Development Initiative. London: BBC World Service Trust (2006) by Samuel Kafewo. Even with these examples, it came out clearly that they were studies done by non-Ghanaian scholars who arguably lacked the right indigenous perceptual apparatus in examining the Ghanaian experience.

This study therefore attempted to fill this gap by looking beyond the direct control of the media by government. The study is guided by the tenets of the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press, propounded by Siebert et al in their 1956 seminal work: *Four Theories of the Press*. The study looked at the link between media ownership and media behavior with reference to their watchdog role over government actions. The Social Responsibility Theory postulates that media is a public trust and gives an important role to the state; so is the media able to serve the public good, rather than the interests of owners or funders (Nerone, 1995; Picard, 1985). Based on the social responsibility principle that the media is a public trust, we investigate (I) how the media is exercising this trust in terms of its watchdog functions over government, in other words, we investigate the extent to which the media are able to perform their watchdog functions in accordance with Article 162 (6) of the Constitution which requires the media to "uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people of Ghana" (Republic of Ghana, 1992), and (ii) whether the type of ownership of media has any role in this?

Methodology

The study focused on two crucial periods in the Fourth Republic during which important political and institutional changes took place that affected the role and performance of the media in significant ways. The eight years study period starts from the second term of President John Kufuor (2004-2008) and ends with the first term of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) under President John Mills (2008-2012). The study focused on newspapers, rather than broadcast or cable coverage, for two main reasons. First, in Ghana, although the circulation of newspapers has dwindled in the last two decades, they continue to set the agenda and have great influence on other media such as television and radio (FES, 2011). And finally, it was in newspapers that media watchdog journalism in Ghana first emerged. The study compares state and privately-owned newspapers in the performance of their watchdog functions. However, only newspapers that have covered political news since 2005 were included in the study sample.

Qualitative case study approach was deemed as the best method for gathering data in this study. According to Creswell (2013: 97), “case study research is a qualitative approach in which an investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information.” Specifically, the study employed collective case study design with multiple-methods namely, content analysis, in-depth interviews and review of relevant documents. The multiple case study design as Creswell (2013) again points out, investigates several cases to gain insight into a phenomenon or cases under investigation. As Creswell (2013) observes, data in case studies are largely drawn from documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, audio visuals, and etc. As stated above the study was aimed at measuring the contribution of the media (selected newspapers with different ownership structures) in the democratic governance process. The study conceptualized democratic governance into certain main variables: political accountability (watchdog role) and press freedom. In other words, how the selected newspapers covered governments and to what extent they are at liberty to do so? The study used largely qualitative data collected through review of documents, content analysis and in-depth interviews.

Documentary Review

Documentary review as qualitative data collection method was chosen because information on newspaper ownership is directly documented. Without reviewing such documents, proper analysis would not be possible. Documents reviewed were the National Media Policy, 1992 Constitution, the Inter-Ministerial Report on Ghana Telecom–Vodafone Sale Controversy (GT-V) and court documents on Mabey and Johnson (M&J) Bribery allegations. Selected newspapers’ articles on the GT-V Sale and M&J cases especially, were reviewed.

Content Analysis and Design Inquiry

Summative content approach, one of the three approaches of qualitative content analysis, propounded by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), was applied in analyzing the latent dimensions of coverage of Ghana Telecom-Vodafone Sale Controversy GT-V and Mabey & Johnson Bribery Scandal (M&J) in the four selected newspapers- two publicly-owned newspapers(*Daily Graphic* and *Ghanaian Times*; and two privately-owned newspapers *Daily Guide* and *The Enquirer* to ascertain their watchdog functions over government during the study period. These corruption allegations were selected over many others because they were straightforward and considerable copies were available for analysis. The newspapers chosen reflect a purposive sample of the entire universe of Ghanaian newspapers. They were selected among over 450 newspapers that have registered with the media regulator, the National Media Commission (NMC, 2014). The selected newspapers appear regularly and have been active in reporting on politics and governance issues during the study period; second, they represent the two traditional ownership structures; they are the leading newspapers and represent the opinions of the major political elites.

In qualitative content analysis, unit analysis could be themes, sentences, or paragraphs. These themes could be “expressed in a single word, a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph, or an entire document” (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009). The unit of analysis in this study is news accounts of the two cases (GT-V and M&J). Through the summative content approach, 72 news articles were analyzed. In this approach, data analysis starts with either computer assisted or manual search. It then followed with a count of pages that covered specific cases, followed by descriptions and interpretations, including evaluating the quality of content (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This study inquires how variables influence the watchdog performance of the media. Several variables influenced the coverage of watchdog journalism from the literature. Therefore, in order to understand how ownership’s political affiliation influences newspaper coverage, the study used five indicators to measure their watchdog performance. Three of the indicators were based on categorization of media watchdog function by Jebiril (2013). They were: objectivity, factuality and critical coverage. News prominence and sources of information were also used (Netanel, 2001; Coronel, 2010).

According to this study, the watchdog function is supported when the four newspapers (a) cover the controversy objectively (b) publish factual stories (c) cover the controversy critically (d) publish the story on a front-page and e) use more sources other than government. The variables together measure the strength of a newspaper’s watchdog function. Objective was conceptualized as: absence of decided views, expression or strong feelings; absence of personal or organizational interests; and presenting all sides of an argument fairly. Thus objectivity was coded as: objective; not objective; neutral. Factuality was also measured as: use of verifiable sources, in the case where anonymous sources are cited a lot of background information should be given; putting voices against each other. Factuality was coded: factual, not factual, neutral.

The Critical coverage variable was measured in two ways—stories skeptical toward all sides; and critical of government. Critical Coverage was coded: critical, not critical, neutral. Prominence was measured as the importance the newspapers placed on the allegations by giving it a prominent position in the newspapers. A story is assessed as very important to the newspaper when it is published on the front-page. It was important when carried it at the back page and least important when it is buried in the inside pages. Front-page stories were defined as all stories carried on the front page including those published inside or on the back pages but advertised on the front-page. Back Pages stories are those carried on the back page. And inside pages are stories carried on the inside pages. There were three indicators in measuring sources of information in this study. They are government sources, opposition sources and independent sources of information. Government sources means information obtained from elected officials including ministers, state agencies, etc. and Opposition sources include information obtained from opposition political parties, opposition official's spokesperson, and etc. Other sources come from civil society, academics, and experts. SPSS tool was used to determine the frequencies and Microsoft Excel software was used in drawing diagrams.

Interview Method and Selection

Through purposive sampling technique, eight journalists (senior political reporters and editors of the four newspapers) were targeted for interview. It was aimed at ascertaining the conditions under which they performed their watchdog functions. Interviewing both editors and reporters helped in gathering information from as many angles as possible. In all, only six were interviewed based on their availability. All of them were contacted and interviewed in their respective offices. Responses and comments were analyzed using thematic analysis. All the responses were triangulated to answer the research questions comprehensively.

Ownership Structure

From the findings, it emerged that the legal and regulatory framework of media freedom in Ghana is in line with the best international practices. The supreme law, that is, the 1992 Constitution devotes a whole chapter (Chapter 12) to media development in Ghana. This includes the creation of the National Media Commission (NMC) to serve as a buffer to prevent government and other political forces from interfering in the work of particularly the state media. For instance, the constitution gave the power of appointment of board members and a heads of the state-media to the NMC. This was deliberately done to avoid a repetition of instances of government interference with editorial independence in the past (Ansu-Kyeremeh and Karikari, 1998). Yet, this study found out that, over two decades after the coming into force of the Constitution, there was widespread concern that public media has not been wholly or fully free from government control and interference. This has resulted in indirect manipulations from government.

It emerged from interviews that there exist a reward or punishment scheme by governments for journalists in the state media. Indeed, this confirms anecdotes and reported instances of governments' continuing interference in state media operations (Hasty, 2006: CDD, 2000). In an opinion, an ex-journalist and a former staff member of the *Daily Graphic*, who was one time critical of government in the aftermath of the murder of the Dagbon King, YaaNaa in 2002, wrote that “gagging orders from the NPP government were smuggled into Graphic Communications Group Limited and I was forbidden from speaking on radio or any other medium apart from the *Daily Graphic* where Mr. Boadu-Ayebofo, as an editor, exercised an unfettered right to edit whatever I wrote” (Fuseini, 2012). Similarly, during the early years of the Fourth Republic, a TV show hosted by Kwaku Sakyi-Addo, a popular journalist on GTV was taken off air reportedly on the orders of the NDC government (Tettey, 2001).

On the privately-owned media, it was found out that, despite the constitutional guarantees, there were some institutional challenges which impede the journalists from embarking on the watchdog role. Most of the newspapers were owned by politicians and there is no proper governing structure in the operations of the private media industry. An earlier study revealed that typical of the newspapers, the proprietor is often the editor-in-chief, sub-editor as well as financial manager among other responsibilities” (IREX, 2012, p.180). This description by IREX is an apt description of *The Enquirer* newspaper. In the case of the *Daily Guide*, it is owned by the acting chairman of the opposition NPP and managed by his wife who is a known sympathizer of the NPP and close friend of former President Kufuor and currently, the NPP's presidential candidate, Nana Akufo-Addo.

The Enquirer is owned by an NDC sympathizer whose paper was established with funds from leading NDC members (Interview with The Enquirer editor, 2014). On the NMC, it was found out that governments have reportedly even attempted to dominate or have control over it by trying to get people sympathetic to their cause to become members. Although, there are no criteria in terms of the political affiliations to become one of the 18 Commissioners of the NMC, Karikari (1998) even cites the PNDC's passing of a decree (PNDC Law 299, 1992) empowering itself to appoint an Executive Secretary of the yet-to-be-created NMC as an attempt to influence its composition. Further down the road, contradictions within the NMC were demonstrated dramatically when in response to labor agitations in the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, the NMC set up a committee to investigate the issue. But the then Director General of the GBC, Ms. Eva Lokko, blatantly refused to cooperate with the committee and the NMC could not do anything about it (Boadu-Ayebofo, 2010; CDD, 2008).

Impact of Ownership Structure on Watchdog Performance

As to whether the ownership structures affected the media in the performance of their watchdog functions, content analysis confirmed that the ownership structures of the media affected the media. The figure below shows the frequencies of watchdog performance according to the above mentioned variables.

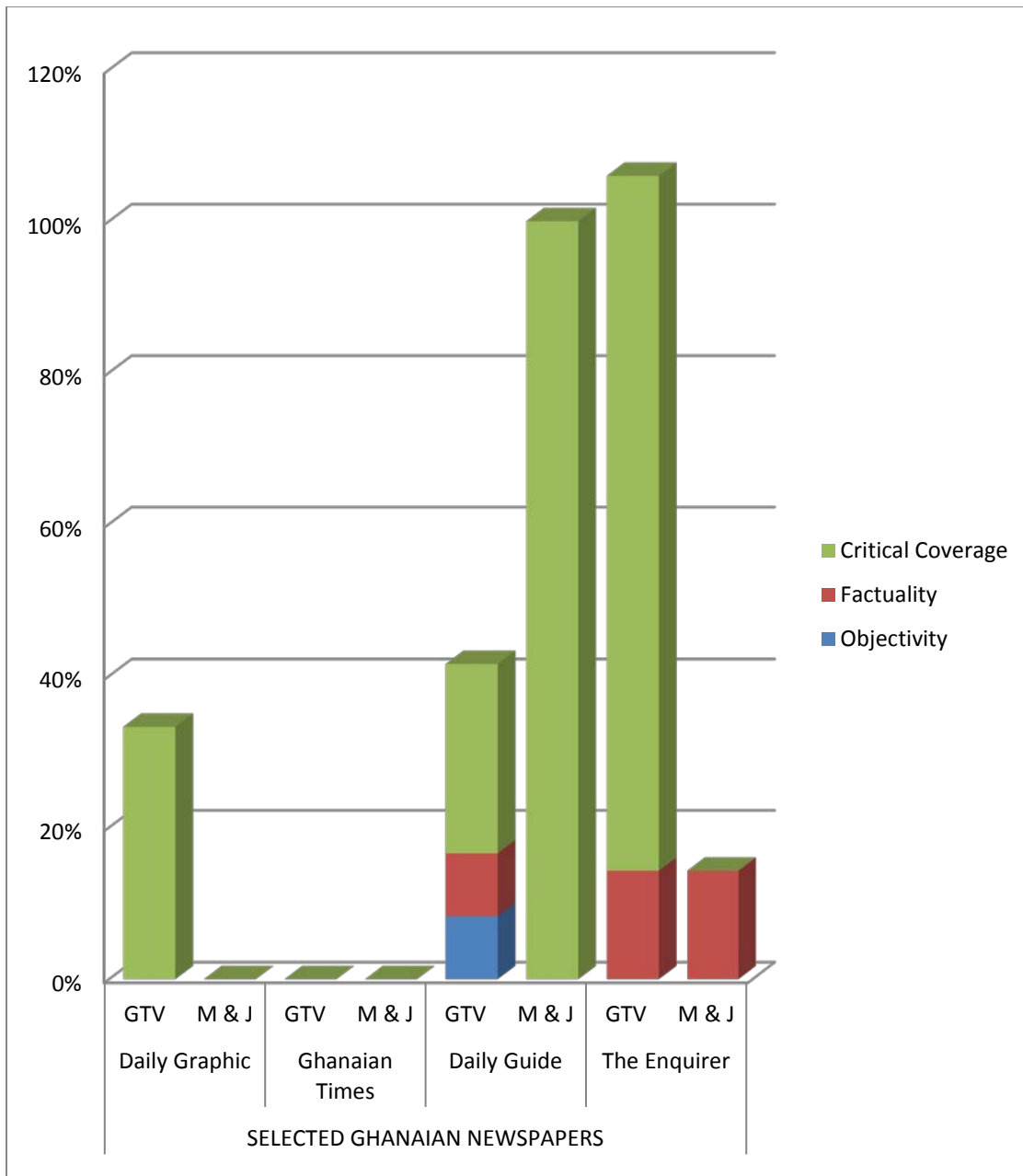


Fig 1: Overall performance of watchdog role of the newspapers

As can be observed from Figure 1 above, ownership of the newspapers had strong influence on the content of the four newspapers on the coverage of GT-V and M&J allegations that were reviewed in this study. For instance, the GT-V Sale Controversy broke out in 2008 during the second tenure of President John Agyekum Kufour-led NPP government, and was later revisited by the NDC-led government of President J. E. Atta-Mills' administration in 2009; we saw that three of the newspapers, the *Graphic*, the *Ghanaian Times* and the *Daily Guide* were mild in their reports on government. *The Enquirer* was the only newspaper which was very critical of the deal. A similar but different trend was witnessed in the M&J issue.

Objectivity

All the four newspapers (*Graphic*, *Ghanaian Times*, *Daily Guide* and *The Enquirer*) fell short of meeting the objectivity criterion set up by this work, namely: *the absence of decided views, expression or strong feelings; absence of personal or organizational interest and presenting all sides of an argument fairly*. As can be observed from the figure, objectivity as a watchdog variable appears to be an exception. Of the 76 articles (48 on GT-V and 28 M&J) the two public newspapers- *Graphic* and *Ghanaian Times* scored no marks in terms of objectivity in both cases. However, the privately-owned newspapers also scored low marks. While *Daily Guide* scored 8.3% and 0% respectively in the GT-V and M&J cases, *The Enquirer* on the other hand scored 14.3% in GT-V and 0% in M&J.

Factuality

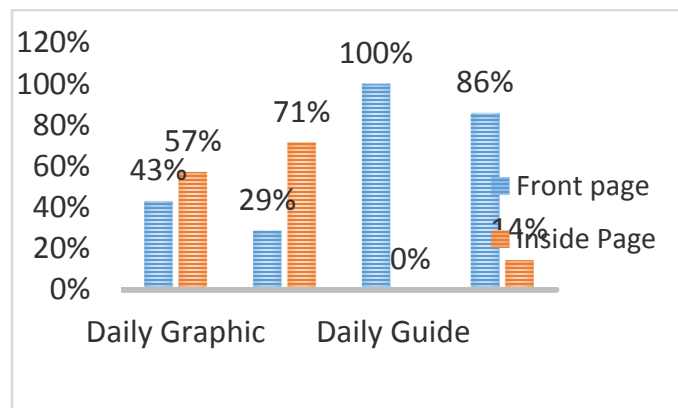
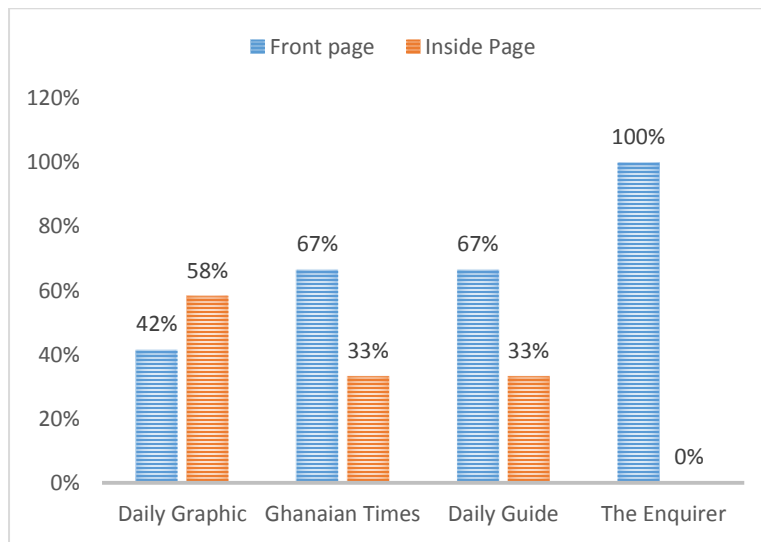
Analyzing factuality as a variable of watchdog as a measure of the media's watchdog role in the two allegations, we observed that there were no scores on factuality in the two publicly-owned newspapers: *Daily Graphic* and *Ghanaian Times*. However, the privately owned newspapers recorded some percentages, albeit low. In the GT-V case, *The Enquirer* recorded a slightly higher figure, i.e. 14.3% compared to 8.3% of the *Daily Guide*. However, in the M&J case, both of them scored 0%.

Critical Coverage

Critical coverage (*News stories must be skeptical toward all sides; adversarial (aggressive) government*), *Daily Graphic* recorded 33.3% of critical coverage in the GT-V case. However, it scored 0% in the M&J case. The *Ghanaian Times* on the other hand scored 0% in both cases. In the case of the privately-owned newspapers, there were different but similar patterns in terms of critical coverage. *Daily Guide* recorded 25% in the GT-V deal and 100% in the M&J case, while *The Enquirer* recorded 91.7% in the case of GT-V and 0% in M&J.

Prominence

As figures 2 and 3 below show the page placement of articles on GT-V Sale controversy that were reviewed in this study. The study measured the level of prominence via placements in specific pages of the four newspapers. Options in this category included front page, back page, and inside pages. Majority of the 24 stories by the two state-owned media on the GT-V sale were published in the inside pages. *Ghanaian Times* placed 67% of the news article on the front-page, while the *Graphic* placed only 42% on the front-pages. Similarly, in the M&J case, majority of the 14 stories analyzed in the two state-owned media were from the inside pages. The privately-owned newspapers, *Daily Guide* and *The Enquirer*, on the other hand published majority of the GT-V and M&J stories on their front-pages. On the other hand, *The Enquirer* newspaper placed all the 12 (100%) stories on the front-page; *Daily Guide* placed 67% of the stories on the front-page.



Sources

The last variable the study measured was the ‘source’ of the GT-V and M&J stories published in the sampled newspapers. This was done to examine the sources of stories they published. As Table 1 shows clearly, out of a total of 78 stories, there were as many as 69 sources. Of the 69 sources, as many as 48 came from government and opposition sources. However, the majority of information was from government sources for all the newspapers

Table 1- Sources of Coverage

Ownership	Total sources	Government	Opposition	Others
State-owned	28	12	7	9
Privately-owned	41	21	8	12

Comparison Between The Ownership Structures

Compared to the public media, the private media tended to be more critical of government. Stories from the two newspapers to a large extent were not critical of government. While *Daily Guide* was mild in their reports on government. The *Enquirer* was the only newspaper which was very critical of the deal. A similar but different trend was witnessed in the M&J issue. Majority of the stories were from government sources. Tendency for partisanship is strong among journalists sampled. According to reporters, newsroom practices influence how they cover events including issues relating to corruption against government: “We have our usual style of writing our articles and you need not change that way of writing”, the Graphic journalist said. The Ghanaian Times journalist also said: “Normally... we only concentrate on angles that would be positive on the government”

Editorial Independence

Despite constitutional provisions, journalists in the public media spoke as if the government was still in charge of the media while those in the private media admitted they have to promote their owners preferences. These were also confirmed by the content analysis. With regard to private and public ownership and its impact on the ability to play the watchdog role, the study pointed to some interesting findings, As stated earlier the NMC has been put in charge of the public media but interviews with the journalists showed that they still see the government as the one with control over them.

This has made them timid with regard to playing effective watchdog role on government. This is clearly illustrated in their performances on variables of watchdog especially the critical coverage. The private media on the other hand scored highly on the critical coverage variable with regard to particular allegations. Interviews with the journalists as well as documentary reviews explained the phenomenon. The allegations which gained critical coverage from the private press were those that put rivals of their preferred political parties in bad light. They, however, appeared to lose their bite when the allegations are against their preferred political parties.

Self-Censorship

The study found out that there was great deal of self-censorship among journalists working in the media. It was observed from the interviews and content analysis that while the private media are more interested in allegations against government officials, the publicly-owned media mostly focused on allegations against private individuals and high State officials who are not political office holders. The *Ghanaian Times* journalist interviewed said, news on corruption must come from sources such as state agencies- the Courts and agencies such as the Police, but not elected government officials. The *Ghanaian Times* editor confirmed this: *“Being a watchdog [on government] is just one role of the media and cannot take all the time of the media... We were the first to break the news of the policemen who were neglected by the police service...”* In interviews with the journalists, the editors said there were no direct intervention in their role in the day-to-day news production but some of the reporters interviewed said that the first thing they consider before writing a story is whether the story would see the light of day, suggesting some amount of self-censorship in their approach to reporting. The editor of the *Ghanaian Times*, when asked about the interference in his work noted that: *“No one directs anyone as to what to do [but] I, as an editor have a gate keeping role.”*

The situation is different as far as the privately-owned newspapers were concerned. The editor of the *Daily Guide* newspaper explained that the private newspapers sell their newspapers if they anchor it on prominent personalities- particularly elected government officials. *“We are in the business of selling news. People love to read scandals involving government officials, they like it. So we are trying our best... to get (them) information. We pick intelligence report, do our best (to) reach (people) involved (for) more information”*. And in the words of *The Enquirer* editor: *“well, if we get the lead that there is a scandal, we do our investigations.... We listen to the radio programs, the news reviews ... talk shows, there we can pick... find something that is newsworthy, or news being investigated.* Asked directly how he sees the *Ghanaian Times*’ watchdog role on government, he responded thus *‘the objective of the Ghanaian Times is to publish news to inform the public particularly about what government is doing for the people and get feedback for government’*.

However, one journalist from a state-owned newspaper said “*As far as I am concerned as a journalist [Daily Graphic], there is no need to be critical on an issue involving government because, the story may not likely be published and if it is even published it will be in the inside pages. In my years of working for Graphic, you need to take a favorable [government] angle to get a front page.*” The response of the reporter provides a good explanation of why public newspapers scored low on critical coverage variables. This also confirms Hasty (2006, p. 14) study on the *Daily Graphic*.

Partisanship

Partisanship was found as one of the main stumbling blocks to the watchdog role of the media in both ownership structures. Interviews with journalists of the public media brought out the fact that journalists aligned with government play more assertive role while journalists supporting rival parties tend to withdraw into marginalized roles giving some of them an extra incentive to toe a particular line. Another explanation given by the journalists working in the public media was the unwritten rules which guide their work. The study found out that the media has often been liable to ethical lapses, partisanship and a number of unprofessional practices. On a question about whether newspapers (especially the state owned) are influenced directly or indirectly by the government in power, the journalists gave answers which on the surface may appear contradictory but upon reflection provides a good insight into the operations of the state-owned media, while the journalists said the government did not directly intervene in their operations, they added that the government has its own “representatives (i.e. supporters)” in the newsroom.

They further explained that journalists whose political parties go into opposition become inactive during this period but take on active roles once their professed political parties assume power. In the words of a journalist from *Ghanaian Times*: “*depending on which government is in power, journalists who appear not to side with the government will not be active in editorial meetings or will not partake in (editorial) meetings at all. So, it becomes something like a field day for those who support government.*” He continued that: “*we report mostly in favor of the ruling government, either NDC or NPP. They (journalists) get a lot of sponsorship from government. There is no way they can write or speak against them. Because the presidency sponsors you, you are forced to speak for them without criticism. I think it is natural because, you cannot bite the fingers that feed you.*” The above assertion lends credence to Hasty’s observation in her study on the *Daily Graphic*. This indication applies to the *Ghanaian Times* as well. In that study, she found out that journalists working with the newspaper were often “under pressure to give favorable publicity to the state; but that pressure is exercised through a set of cultural understandings in such a way that journalists do not recognize themselves as mere puppets of propaganda” (ibid, p. 14). It also appears to support the argument put forward by Marxian political economic theorists that media owners indirectly control their journalists and managers who cannot assert their editorial independence for the sake of job security (Bagdikian, 1990; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Gramsci, 1987).

On the other hand, partisanship in the private media appears not to be an issue because most of the journalists generally support the ideologies of the parties or individuals that sponsor or own them. The editor of *The Enquirer*, for instance, remarked that: *“sometimes the publisher brings a topic and tells me to toe a certain line, because he who pays the piper calls the tune. We are employees and the publisher is our employer. So there have been situations where we had to follow his dictates”*.

Indeed we have records in our history where governments have given political appointments to journalists deepening the reward and punishment scheme. Some journalists therefore have an extra incentive to toe a particular line. This trend appears to support Houston et al (2012’s) conclusion that the only way the media could perform their watchdog function is when their owners have the incentives to do so. According to the reporters interviewed, newsroom practices influence how they cover events including issues relating to corruption against government: *“We have our usual style of writing our articles and you need not change that way of writing”* the Graphic journalist said. The Ghanaian Times journalist also said: *“Normally... we only concentrate on angles that would be positive on the government”*.

Owners’ Interest Influence Media Watchdog Performance

The study found out that although financial viability is the main economic obstacle to the watchdog viability that most faced, they responded that financial viability was the main economic obstacle to the performance of their watchdog role. The interviewees further identified issues such as poor circulation, high cost of printing, lack of advertisements among many others as economic hindrances. These obstacles affect the media in two ways; first, it limits investigative reporting which is the heart of watchdog journalism and secondly, it renders the reportage less factual. In fact, two of the editors expressed their frustration at the inability sometimes to pursue investigations because of resource constraints. The editor of *The Enquirer* opined: *“we have to move from the situation where politicians sponsor media houses to becoming a self-sustaining business; this would enhance our ability to play the watchdog role.”* He further acknowledged that reporting on government’s corrupt practices required some amount of financial resources. *“From my point of view, the economic threat is easily the biggest threat (to watchdog journalism in Ghana). Investigative stories involve a lot of money. It is also time consuming. In the past owners were more interested in investigative stories than today.”* However, even though scholars such as Herman and Chomsky (2006) conclude that the fear of losing advertisement especially from governments causes editors and journalists not to investigate stories on government. The editors of the two sampled private papers indicated that this does not apply in their case. As the editor of *The Enquirer* explains; *“the job of the newspaper is to tell the public what they need to know about government operations, whether good or bad, so that they can hold government accountable. ... This work goes with money ... So governments don’t give money to their opponents because that will mean that you are giving more ammunition to your opponent”*.

The editor of *Daily Guide* was also of the view that, “*our newspapers survived through circulation. We don’t need government adverts. Government is struggling with the little resources that they have. Fine, if we should get government advert... We will use it to further motivate our staff*”.

Beyond these views expressed is also the observation that newspapers which are unsympathetic to a particular political party appear to take their watchdog role over government more seriously when that party assumes power; such papers expect very little advertising support from government, anyway. Nevertheless financial viability poses a strong challenge to newspapers or media organizations. It is difficult for financially strapped media houses to employ and maintain competent journalists. This is one reason why most of the employees of the private media in Ghana are either stringers or staff with poor salaries (IREX, 2011). The economic hindrances explained above according to the journalists interviewed also force journalists to adopt political *godfathers*.

Implications for Democratic Governance

It is evident from the 1992 Constitution and Social Responsibility Theory of the press used in this study that, the media both public and private, have the responsibility to vigorously pursue a watchdog role over government (McQuail, 2006; Karikari, 1999). However, the findings shown in figure 1 above goes contrary to the expectations of the Constitution and also not consistent with the theory. The findings raised doubts about expectations of the framers of the Constitution which was largely influenced by the Social responsibility theory. The public newspapers appear not to have served the interest of the public in issues under investigations and weakened the claim that the media is a public trust which must serve the public interest. The finding has, however, validated observation of the public media by Netanel (2001) that the public media often avoids controversial stories or issues, especially those that are critical of government and its officials. Similarly, although government has no direct role in the day-to-day operations of the public media, there is evidence observed from the ownership structures analysis in Section (4.2) that governments have indirect way of manipulating the public media. As Netanel explained on the public media, government exerts pressure on the editors of the public media to avoid controversial issues. She argues further that partisanship among journalists in the public media also prevents them from reporting critically on government. This has been confirmed by Kafewo (2006) in his study on the state-owned media and their reportage on government. According to him, the state media have always been pro-government on all issues.

The editor of the *Ghanaian Times* confirmed this when he said in an interview that ‘*the objective of the Ghanaian Times is to publish news to inform the public particularly about what government is doing for the people and get feedback for government*. Findings above largely inhibited journalists’ or media’s ability to play their watchdog role effectively thereby not offering quality information to Ghanaians to either reward or punish government.

Again from the perspective of the social responsibility theory, the media is also expected to represent the diversity of cultures they represent, and should have high standards for professionalism, truth, and accuracy (McQuail, 2005) Example of this in the Ghanaian Constitution is the setting up of the NMC and the self-regulation enforcement mechanism prescribed. However, from content analysis and documentary review, again the media also failed to protect the interest of the public in the two cases reviewed. The two newspapers with differing political viewpoints performed a similar but different pattern of coverage of the governments of NPP and NDC. This notwithstanding the fact that the *Daily Guide* and *The Enquirer* thrive on sales; their modus operandi were not directly influenced by the two governments.

Conclusions

This study explored the interplay between media ownership and its effect on the media's watchdog role over government actions and inactions. Analyses of the four newspapers selected for this study shed light on the pressures and the general challenges faced by journalists in Ghana. The study established that legally, conditions of press freedom exist and there is no evidence of physical coercive measures to frighten journalists in their watchdog role over government. Also, the journalists interviewed demonstrated fair knowledge of what was expected of them as far as basic journalism skills were concerned, including the fact that they have a duty to play a watchdog role over government. Yet, some practices largely inhibited journalists' or media's ability to play their watchdog role effectively. On paper, the country has one of the best regulatory environments for the independent media. However, as suggested by this study, there are number of factors both tangible and intangible which impede the media from exercising their watchdog role on government effectively. There is a need for the NMC to be proactive and assert its mandate as a regulator, and a buffer against government interference in the media's work. .

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