

Press Coverage of Government in 1998 and 2002 Content Analysis of Selected Ghanaian Newspapers

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Abstract

The study examined the coverage of government in 1998 and 2002 by two state-owned and two privately-owned newspapers against the backdrop of frosty relationship that had historically existed between government and particularly the privately-owned media in Ghana. Coverage was defined as number and slant of news stories, editorials and pictorial representation of government. The findings generally supported literature and theories which suggest that the state-owned newspapers would normally support the political establishment and that they are always inclined towards “order” and are hardly disruptive of the status quo. It emerged that coverage by the private press was motivated largely by economics and ownership; and they acted differently under different political administrations. The coverage by the privately-owned press gave credence to the fact that the media would normally react to the posturing of the government in power. In fact a more positive coverage was given to the New Patriotic Party government that was perceived to be media-friendly in 2002. The opposite was true of the National Democratic government which was seen to be unfriendly to the media.

Keywords: Opposition, Journalistic, Government, Media

1.0 Introduction

Political reporting by the media has always been a contentious issue in Ghana as in many other countries. Politicians have often accused the media of either biased coverage or non-coverage of their activities. The Politician’s desire for positive media coverage stems perhaps from the idea or perception that the media have an influence on their audience. As a result, whether in government or in opposition, politicians and political parties have always lobbied for positive coverage, which they believe, would translate into favorable voting patterns during elections. The political history of Ghana indicates that the president of the First Republic, Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah had a firm belief in the effectiveness of the press to “conscientise the people; mobilize them; and prepare them for swift change” Asante (1996:13). Nkrumah’s use of the press to serve his political interest before and after independence was phenomenal, according to Asante (1996). Nkrumah believed in absolute control of the press by the state when he assumed power. He therefore pursued media policies that ensured that the media did the bidding of the government. In a speech delivered to a conference of African journalists in Accra on November 11, 1963, Nkrumah is quoted as having declared:

“The truly African revolutionary press does not exist for the purpose of enriching its proprietors or entertaining its readers. It is an integral part of our society, with which its purpose is in consonance. Just as in the capitalist countries the Press represents and carries out the purpose of capitalism, so in revolutionary African our revolutionary African press must present and carry forward our revolutionary purpose. This is to establish a progressive political and economic system that will free men from want. Ainslie (1966:19)”

The role that Nkrumah expected the media, particularly the press to play pushed him to dominate the press. He did not hide his intense disdain for private ownership of the press. On the question of ownership of the press, Nkrumah is quoted in Asante (1996:23) as having declared:

“It is part of our revolutionary credo that within the competitive system of capitalism, the press cannot function in accordance with a strict regard for the sacredness of facts and that the press, therefore should not remain in private hands.”

Nkrumah therefore did not countenance a dissenting press. He enforced strict censorship of the media, both local and foreign, in order to suppress all negative opinions and attacks on his government. He expected the press to be an integral part of his political and economic ideology and expected journalists to co-operate fully in the onerous task of nation building. Editors of newspapers, which published injurious things about Nkrumah or his government, were swiftly punished. For example, Bankole Timothy, the Sierra Leonean, acting editor of the Daily Graphic was deported for daring to question the embossment of Nkrumah’s head on the new Ghanaian coins. Like Bankole Timothy, all other journalists who criticized Nkrumah, flagrantly questioned his actions, or challenged his political authority were promptly disciplined, that is, banned, jailed and or deported (in the case of foreign journalists) (Asante and Gadzekpo, 2000). Hulteng and Paul Nelson (1971:45) had said of authoritarian regimes: “the media are usually the first to be controlled by them” and that, “once the press is under control, the people are exposed to only propaganda from government.” This assertion by Hulteng and Nelson (1971) appears to explain Nkrumah’s press policies.

The successive government after Dr. Nkrumah's largely continued with media policies that were no different from that of Nkrumah's convention People's Party Press policy. Laws were enacted to gag and punish dissenting voices. In fact the media suffered under all manner of governments; civilian "democratic" ones as well as military "dictatorial" regimes. In fact it took a milestone judgment of the Ghana's Supreme Court in 1993 to compel for example the state-owned television station (GTV) to give all political parties 'equal' access to airtime to put their cases before the electorate. Since that historic ruling, the media in Ghana appeared to have gone from strength to strength. The privately-owned media particularly found a new strength in the ruling to really serve the mandate of the media as the fourth estate of the realm by putting government on its toes. Even the state-owned media also began to wriggle itself out of, (at times self-inflicted) unalloyed and unflinching support for government. Whether or not the privately-owned and state-owned dichotomy in terms of news coverage vis-avis government, did change substantially after the highly-touted Supreme Court of Ghana **ruling** in 1993 could only be tested through a research like this that looks at the nature of coverage government enjoyed from the state-owned and the privately-owned newspapers after that historic ruling. The study therefore examines critically what has changed since the Court's declaration. It examines two regimes in Ghana, that of the New Patriotic Party touted as Press-friendly fared with the Press in their mid-year of 2002 as opposed to what had happened also in the mid-year of the regime of the National Democratic Congress (seen as anti-press) in 1998 also fared with the Press. Four newspapers; two state-owned and two privately-owned were used for the analysis.

1.2 Problem Definition

Despite the constitutional provisions and the Supreme Court's historic ruling of 1995, to the effect that the state media (GTV), had no discretion in giving equal airtime access to all political parties, there still have been criticisms on the issue of biased coverage by the state media in favour of the party in government especially during election periods. For example, even though, the Commonwealth (election) Observer Group (COG) had declared the 1996 Presidential and parliamentary elections free and fair, they also catalogued concerns of the opposition parties which were mainly on the unfair use of the media by the incumbent government. The criticisms included marginalisation of the smaller parties, in terms of placement of stories, and pictorial coverage of their rallies (The COG report, 1996). The state-owned presses especially are still seen as pro-government despite constitutional provisions to insulate them from governmental control and the privately-owned press are often labeled anti-government mostly because of their perceived slanted coverage of government. There has also been the argument that the privately-owned press were particularly hard on the NDC government because of the latter's hostility towards the media and that a lot was going to change with the seemingly media-friendly New Patriotic Party government in power. This article therefore, critically examines what has changed since the ruling of the Supreme Court of 1995, which in substance advocated fair coverage of all diverse and contesting views. Have the state-owned media continued to give only positive coverage to government as it ignores other contesting opinions? In a reversal of roles, the elected party in 1996, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) lost the 2000 elections to the main opposition party, The New Patriotic Party (NPP). How have the press in general (privately-owned and state-owned) covered the different governments in 1998 and 2002? The years 1998 and 2002 were midterms for the NDC and the NPP regimes when politicking was generally on the wane. This article is therefore interested in the nature of coverage by the state-owned and the privately owned press under different administrations during such periods.

1.3 Research Objectives

The study specifically seeks to determine whether there is a difference in coverage of government (in terms of the number and tone of stories carried) between the privately owned and the state press in 1998 and 2002. It also seeks to establish how the state press covered two different regimes in 1998 and 2002 in terms of news stories and features, readers' letters, editorials and pictorial representation and to find out how the privately owned press also covered the different governments in 1998 and 2002. For example, how many positive stories as against negative ones did the papers carry on the different regimes?

1.3.2 Significance of the Study

The study aims at deepening knowledge of the trend of political reporting by the media in general and the press in particular. The study also presents an opportunity to learn if there has been any change in the historical relationship between government of the day and that of the privately-owned and the state-owned press. It could also generate interest for further studies into the subject matter in the years ahead.

2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Agenda Setting, Gatekeeping and Media Ownership theories have been used to provide a framework for the study. The media are generally acknowledged as having the resources to at least influence what the mass of people consider as being the main issues at a particular period in time. The controversy over access to media and

coverage of political activities of politicians usually results from the perceived media influence on the electorate. The Agenda Setting theory propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw (1997) suggests that the media do wield a powerful influence on what is put out there in the public domain for discussion. The theory posits that the media are not always successful at telling us what to think, but they are quite successful at telling us what to think about. The mainstay of the theory is that the media determine or significantly affect the structure and content of audience perception of message. In effect, the media set the agenda of the issues for public discussion that over 60 percent of their front page stories came from events such as press conferences, press releases, background briefings, which are staged managed usually by government officials. The study also revealed that although 25 percent of the sampled stories were attributed to reporters' enterprise, over 90 percent of the stories came from interviews with high level government officials. Neumann et al (1992) also observed that news directly supports the establishment by espousing its values and allowing its press agents to define the problem of the citizenry and monopolise the public options available. Judith Lichtenber (1991) comments that the media play directly into the belief that it is always biased in favour of the powers-that-be. She asserts that a commitment to journalistic objectivity may create biases in favour of the conservation of political power. She also notes that the reporter's over-reliance on "credible sources" to enhance the ideals of objectivity makes him vulnerable to official sources as major news source. In fact, Lichtenberg (1991) admits that going by the canons of journalistic objectivity, governments and important decision-makers in society come with ready-made credentials as authentic and reliable attributable sources. The sources, she acknowledges, are not typically disinterested observers motivated only by a love of the truth. Their prime motive is to manipulate the media and the news to their own advantage.

2.1 Order/Solidarity

McQuail (1997) explains the social order in two ways. First, he asserts that the media are often viewed as potentially disruptive of the normal order although they are also indispensable to the maintenance of order in the wider sense of social harmony. A key consideration is given to restraining any impulse to individual or collective disorder and the protection of children and other vulnerable groups by the media from moral or cultural harm. Social order, and maintenance of societal/national cohesion is reflected mainly in the mission and policies of news media particularly, the state-owned media. The editorial policy of the *Daily Graphic* and the *Ghanaian Times* consider the national interest as paramount. The Ghanaian Times for instance would not use certain news items because the paper is obliged by its perception of national interest not to cause unrest and uneasiness (Denkabe and Gadzekpo, 1996).

2.1.2 Media ownership

Michael Schudson (1998) also maintains that both state and market can limit free expression but their motive for doing so may differ. He further asserts that public criticism of state policy is invariably easier in liberal societies with privately owned news outlets than in authoritarian societies with state or private ownership. China is cited as an example of an authoritarian society where published criticism of state is tightly constrained. The media culture is nonetheless affected by the undisputable assertion that a nation's press or media system and policies are closely tied to the political system. Scruton (1982:76) emphasized this notion when he notes that the "media will remain integral to its political system". Governments whether authoritarian or liberal affect the media landscape of their respective countries in one-way or the other. The evolution of Ghana's media culture and policies had a direct relationship with the political governance of the day.

Ownership of the media also confers control over the nature of the information disseminated. Those who argue for public ownership of the media assert that information is a public good, but private owners unfortunately tend to provide less information than would be socially desirable, according to Islam (2002). They also argue that with private ownership, the media industry runs the risk of representing the views of only a narrow group in society. Edward Horman and Noam Chomsky (1988) see the privately owned media as instruments of class domination. They argue that the powerful are able to fix the premises of discourse to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear and think about and to manage public opinion by regular propaganda. Rupert Murdoch agreed to the suggestion of his personal influence on the editorial posture of his newspapers. He confirmed: "The buck stops on my desk. My editors have inputs, but I make the final decision" Davis (1994:74). Otis Candler, publisher of the Los Angeles Times, readily admitted that there existed an ideological selection process. He opines: "I am the executive. I set policy and I am not going to surround myself with people who disagree with me. I surround myself with people who generally see things the way I do" (Davis, 1994:83). Hulteng and Nelson (1992) admit that at times materials likely to be offensive to a principal sponsor are usually rejected. The principal actors in the media today are to be found in commerce and government. While an incumbent government sees the media as a friend or a foe in the re-election bid, commercial moguls are interested in how the mass appeal that the media enjoy could be manipulated to serve their commercial interests.

According to Bagdikian (1998), Rupert Murdoch stopped the publishing of the memoirs of Chris

Patten (the last Governor of the then British administered Hong Kong) in his influential newspapers simply because Patten's rather critical memoirs were going to hurt his (Murdock's) business interest in the People's Republic of China. This is an example of how financially powerful individuals can affect the news as published by media houses they own. Various studies in Africa suggest that government always had preferred newspaper coverage, particularly with the state-owned newspapers. For example, a study by Akirinade (1979), established a relationship between newspaper ownership and tone of news coverage on government. According to the study, where government owned a newspaper, there was an increased loyalty for the paper to cover government in a very favourable light and a conscious diminution of news considered negative to government. According to the study, two state-owned newspapers, the *Daily Times* and the *New Nigerian*, both printed more favourable items on government than the independently-owned *Nigerian Tribune* and the *Daily Sketch*. Another study on the influence of press ownership on editorial policies of Ghanaian newspapers, Akordor (1994), found that while majority of the editorials in the state-owned *Daily Graphic* and the *Ghanaian Times* were either favourable to the policies, programmes and action of government, or chose to be neutral, The *Free Press* and the *Ghanaian Chronicle's* editorials were mostly unfavourable or critical of government's policies, programmes and actions. Akanbong (1996), concluded in a comparative study of editorials of the *Ghanaian Times* and the *Free Press*, that, the editorial direction of The *Times* contrasted sharply with that of the *Free Press*. The *Ghanaian Times* was pro-government in all respect; the *Free Press* was devoted to the publication of anti-Rawlings (government) sentiments and used its editorials to pursue that agenda. Akanbong (1996) also noted that the number of readers' letters published also reflected the polarized stance of the two papers.

In yet another unpublished work, Bonsu (1996), studied how the media covered the 1996 election campaign. Her concern was whether it was wholly true that the state media were totally biased against the opposition parties. She discovered that the state press made conscious efforts to cover activities of the opposition. However, the privately owned press chose to slant stories to the advantage of the opposition and to the disadvantage of the incumbent government. Most of the privately owned press presented government in a negative light and chose not to publish the constitutionally-mandated rejoinders. Bonsu (1996) observed that the government had no choice than to rely on the state-owned media to state its case. However, the government also over-used and even abused the use of the state-owned media for this purpose. In fact, editorials and readers' letters allowed by the state press tended to be highly complimentary of the incumbent government and disadvantaged the opposition parties. Other studies looked at what usually inspired coverage by newspapers. For example, Louis da Costa (1980), in his study of African media in 15 countries found that private newspapers seemed to apply a commercial criterion in selecting news, unlike government newspapers.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research was content analysis, which is useful in the evaluation of public information (Hiebert and Rabin 1981). It focuses primarily on characteristics of content messages, determining what kind of "meanings" the words may represent.

Krippendorff (1980:21) defined content analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context". Hsia (1998:28) sees content analysis as simply the analysis of what is said, printed, broadcast or written" Hsia further observes that content analysis does not only examine content but infers underlying intent, motivation, orientation and effects, either implicit or manifest. This work content analysed four Ghanaian newspapers (two privately-owned and two-state owned) on their coverage of government in 1998 and 2002. The *Daily Graphic* and The *Ghanaian Times*, representing the state owned newspapers; and *The Ghanaian Chronicle* and *The Independent* representing the privately owned newspapers, were selected for the study. Currently, *The Ghanaian Times* and the *Daily Graphic* are the only state-owned daily newspapers available, hence their choice for the study. The *Ghanaian Chronicle* and the *Independent* have come out consistently since the early 1990's when they started appearing on the newsstands. The years 1998 and 2002 were chosen because they presented the researcher with an opportunity to compare press coverage of two different regimes in their midterms. The year 1998 was a mid-term year for the then ruling National Democratic Congress (NDC) government, while 2002, was the mid-term for the New Patriotic Party (NPP) government, which assumed the reins of governance after the 2000 general elections.

3.1 Sampling

The universe for the study comprised of all the 1998 and 2000 editions of the four newspapers, which totaled 1875 issues. Stratified sampling with randomness was used to select the sample for the study. To ensure that all days and months were fairly represented in the sample, serial numbers for all Monday issues, for example of the *Graphic* in January, were written on pieces of paper and put in a cup. One of the issues was randomly selected to be part of the sample (for month January). The process was repeated for all the days of the week excluding Sunday (because the papers do not appear on Sundays) for a particular month. This selection process was also repeated for all 12 months of the chosen year. The total sample for the *Graphic* for 1998 came up to 72 copies.

The process was adopted for 2002 as well. This meant that, 144 copies for the Graphic were selected for the study. Since the Ghanaian Times is also a daily, the same selection procedure was repeated to select another 144 copies. Together, therefore, 288 copies for the study represented the state-owned newspapers. The Chronicle and the Independent were irregular in terms of how many times they appeared on the newsstand per week in 1998. Averagely, they appeared four times in a week. The Chronicle however, became a daily in 2002. The average appearance of four per week in 1998 for the two privately owned press was used to select the sample. Consequently, all editions for the month for each paper were numbered and put in a bowl. Four numbers were picked for each month. The corresponding editions were selected as part of the sample for every month. This yielded 96 copies each for the Chronicle and the Independent. In total, the privately-owned press had 192 copies as a sample for the study.

3.2 Coding Procedure

In coding, coverage meant all stories, pictures and articles carried by the newspapers on activities of government. These included news stories, readers letters, editorials, feature articles, opinions and pictorial representation of the Presidency and ministers of state. These stories or articles were categorized as positive when they supported government programmes and actions. The stories or articles were deemed negative where they were critical of government's programmes or activities. Neutral stories were those stories that neither criticized nor complimented efforts or activities of government. At times such stories or articles balanced criticisms with praise of government actions. This dimension of coverage was included to facilitate comparison between the two different regimes on the extent to which the press gave them privileged front-page treatment. The study also noted whether these pictures accompanied positive or negative stories.

3.3 Data Analysis

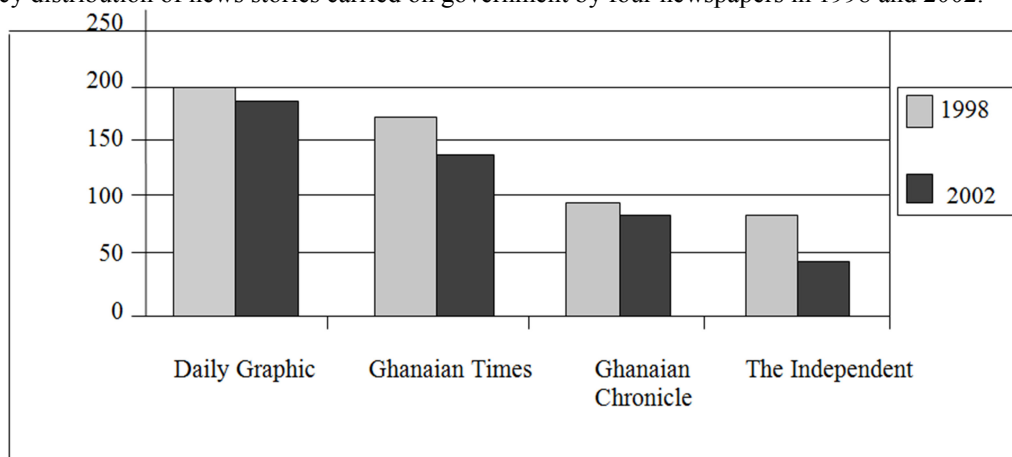
The study was a purely quantitative content analysis of the selected newspapers. Units of the analysis were: stories, defined as straight news stories, readers' letters, opinions, features, and the newspapers' editorials on the government. The units were categorized into positive, negative and neutral and the data were genera.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study was interested primarily in how the press (i.e. privately-owned versus state-owned) covered two different democratic regimes, in 1998 and 2002. The data generally reflect the nature of difference in coverage between the two types of press ownership. Graphs, frequency and percentage tables have been used to present the primary field data. Frequency tables measured how often a government was covered in terms of news stories, pictures or editorials. Tone measured the slant the coverage was given, whether positive or negative. The 1998 data have also been contrasted with that of 2002 to establish differences if any, in coverage.

GRAPH 1

Frequency distribution of news stories carried on government by four newspapers in 1998 and 2002.



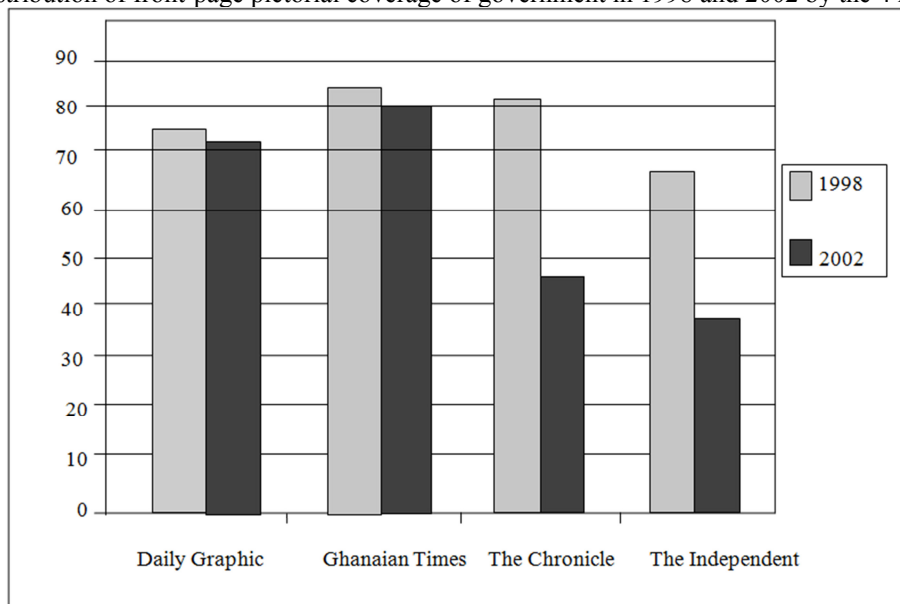
Graph 1 clearly indicates that all four papers carried more stories on government in 1998 than in 2002. The 32-page Graphic is the largest (in terms of volume) of the four newspapers under study. It is therefore, not surprising that the paper covered more stories on government than the other papers. This was followed by the Ghanaian Times, which is a daily and has broader sheets.

The privately owned newspapers, put together, also had fewer stories on government in 2002 than in 1998. In fact, 176 news stories were published by the private press on government in 1998 as against a total of 127 in 2002. However, while the Chronicle maintained almost the same level of interest in government in both 1998 and 2002, (i.e. 95 and 82 stories respectfully) the Independent appeared to be far less interested in

government affairs in 2002 than was the case in 1998 (45 stories and 81 respectfully). However, given the smaller sample size of the privately-owned newspapers coupled with the fact that they have fewer pages, their general coverage of government particularly, in 1998, was relatively speaking, higher than that of the state presses which have more pages and were represented by a larger sample size.

GRAPH 2

Frequency distribution of front-page pictorial coverage of government in 1998 and 2002 by the 4 newspapers.



The trend of pictorial coverage was not very different from the story coverage of government. The state-owned newspapers had almost the same level of coverage for government in both 1998 and 2002. This may indicate how the state-owned newspapers define their role vis a vis government, whether the NDC or the NPP. The privately-owned papers had a reduced number of pictorial coverage of government in 2002. Both the Independent and the Chronicle gave nearly twice as much pictorial coverage of government in 1998 as in 2002. Most of these pictures in 1998 by the private press however, accompanied negative stories.

TABLE 1 Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Tone of News Stories – 1998

Paper	Number of Stories	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Graphic	205	160 (78%)	5 (2.4%)	40 (20%)
Times	165	148 (90%)	2 (1.2%)	15 (9%)
Chronicle	95	8 (8.3%)	82 (85%)	6 (6.25%)
Independent	81	5 (6.12%)	70 (86.4%)	6 (7.4%)

Table 1 above shows that there was a clear difference in pattern of coverage between the private and the state-owned newspapers. The state-owned newspapers presented government in favourable light in terms of the numbers of positive stories they published. While the Ghanaian Time had 90 percent of all stories published categorized as positive, the Graphic similarly, had 78 percent of all its stories on government counted as positive. Negative stories on government were few in the state press.

On the other hand, the private press had more than two-thirds of their stories counted as negative to government. Very few positive stories on government were published. One sees a pattern of a polarized coverage between the privately-owned and the state-owned newspapers in terms of the positive and negative stories published on government in 1998. This data confirms the perception that the state-owned press tend to be favourably disposed towards government in their coverage. The anti-government stance of the privately owned press, is given further proof, in the tone of most of their stories on government.

TABLE 2 Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Story Placement – 1998

Paper	Number Page	Middle Page	Back Page
Daily Graphic	98 (48%)	64 (31%)	43 (21%)
Ghanaian Times	101 (61%)	23 (14%)	41 (25%)
Chronicle	74 (77%)	14 (15%)	8 (8%)
Independent	63 (78%)	11 (13%)	7 (9%)

According to Table 2, all four newspapers had a good number of stories on government getting front-

page placement. At least the placement distribution suggests that stories on government enjoyed prominence. With the exception of the Graphic, which had less than 50 percent of its stories on government placed on its front-page, the rest placed more than 60 percent of all their stories on government on their front pages. This may give an indication that news on government enjoyed wide readership. The distribution of the stories with regard to placement also reveals that the state press had a fairer spread of news on government in their pages than the privately owned press. The concentration of stories on government was mostly on the front page of the private papers.

TABLE 3 Frequency Distribution of Tone of Editorials on Government (1998)

Paper	Frequency	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Daily Graphic	10	8 (80%)	0	2 (20%)
Times	8	8(100%)	0	0
The Chronicle	12	1 (8%)	10 (84%)	1 (8%)
Independent	9	0	9 (100%)	0

Table 3 establishes the fact that newspapers selected for the study devoted few of their editorials to government. The Chronicle had the highest, which were 12 editorials, followed by The Daily Graphic with 10 editorials. The trend of the editorials followed the now familiar pattern. As expected, the state-owned newspapers had no negative editorials on government. Sixteen out of the total 18 editorials they did on government were categorized as positive. The Chronicle and the Independent on the other hand had virtually all their 21 editorials uncomplimentary of government and were thus categorized as negative.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Examined theories supporting the study have sought to give the rationale behind media coverage of news. Media ownership, news values, journalistic ethics, media gate keeping and agenda setting and economics have all been identified as impinging on what finally gets published as news. The study looked at press coverage of two different democratic regimes in Ghana, in 1998 and 2002. Four broad questions were examined and addressed by the work:

1. How the privately-owned newspapers differed from the state-owned newspaper, when it comes to what really makes news and how news is reported or published;
2. What influences there are that affected the tone of news as published by the press divide;
3. The nature of press coverage of government in non-election years against the backdrop of the often-alleged incumbency abuse of the press in election years; and
4. Whether the assertion by Majid (1991) that press systems are usually defined by the character of political regimes, held true.

The history of the press in Ghana supports the view that the privately-owned presses have always been more critical of government than the state-owned press, in terms of the slant of their news coverage or reportage. The private presses have always been critical of governments with scathing editorials. Indeed, the private-press is perceived as conduits through which “dissenting” views are expressed. This study confirmed the assertion. For example, more than 60 percent of all readers’ letters allowed for publication in 1998, by the privately-owned press were counted as negative to government) compared to the state owned press which had less than 5 percent of all readers’ letters published classified as negative. The picture painted here is in consonance with what has always been suggested by theories on media ownership and the news, that some newspapers would deliberately refuse to publish materials that are at odds with the interest of a major sponsor (of the paper). The publication of low levels of critical readers’ letters by the state owned press could therefore, be explained by the fact that government remains a “major sponsor” of the papers” Even though, there is a constitutional body like the National Media Commission that has been put in place to check undue influence that government might want to exert on the state media, governments have always had alternative ways of exerting pressure on state-owned media.

Davis (1994) argued that government could act in a manner that can harm the economic interests of a press house. It can be a withholding (denial) of advertisements from the paper and or imposing higher tariffs on newsprint generally. The private presses in Ghana, have in the past risked covert or overt governmental action against their interests, when perceived to be antagonistic to government (Asante, 1996). It was also concluded from the data collected that, the privately-owned papers gave prominence to stories that were critical of government, particularly in 1998. This was expected, given the fact that the NDC regime was perceived to be anti-media freedoms. The 2002 picture was somewhat different. In fact, the Independent, (a privately-owned paper), published more positive front-page stories than negative ones on government. The Chronicle, the other privately owned paper also published a lot more positive stories on government on the paper’s front-page in 2002, when the administration had changed from NDC to NPP than was the case in 1998. The Graphic published as many as 11 negative stories on government in 2002 on its front page from a low of five in 1998.

The deduction here could be that, the media atmosphere appeared to be freer in 2002 than 1998. Apart from the perception that the NPP regime appeared more media friendly, democracy in the country had grown further by 2002. This empowered the state media to perform their duty with less self-inflicted restraint. The fact that the NDC government which was in power in 1998, was an offshoot of the dictatorial PNDC regime, made the private press particularly continue to see the democratic NDC in the same light as the “PNDC”. Some actions by the NDC government also exacerbated the perception. For example, during the NDC regime (1993 – 2000), the then Attorney General and Minister of Justice, Dr. Obed Asamoah is on record as having stated his opposition to the repeal of the criminal libel law. Indeed, the law was used against some perceived anti-government journalists, notably, Nana Kofi Coomson, then Editor of the Ghanaian Chronicle and Thommy Thompson who was publisher of the Free Press newspaper. The NPP repealed the criminal libel law when they came into power in 2001 and generally courted the friendship of the press by appointing some journalists to positions in government. This gesture by the NPP administration was a factor that made the press friendlier towards them. Akhavan Majid’s (1991) suggestion that a nation’s press would respond to the political order of the day therefore holds true here. As part of its grievances to the Commonwealth observer group (COG) in 1996, the opposition had complained about the incumbent government’s abuse of the state-owned media not only in an election year, but also in the build-up to the election, particularly, in the preceding non-election years. Even though the study did not compare coverage of government and the opposition, one thing was clear: that government in both 1998 and 2002 enjoyed a great deal of prominent coverage of their activities by the state-owned press. Even the privately owned newspapers gave government prominent space (i.e. front-page coverage) in their papers. This undoubtedly made government a big news source for the media in general. There was ample evidence also to suggest that the state-owned press continued to be non-disruptive of the established order, while the private press tended to stoke the fire. This assertion is supported not only by the difference in number of positive and negative stories published by the state-owned press and the privately owned press, but also by their editorial posture. For the most part, the editorials in the state-run papers tended to be complimentary of government actions, while the reverse was true of the privately run newspapers.

5.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

The media have globally been acknowledged as a particularly important institution for democracy and political pluralism. Society is made up of individuals with diverse views and opinions on issues that crop up everyday. The media are generally looked upon to give voice to these diverse ideas, so that citizens can have informed choices. On this score, the media generally need balance in their reportage in order to play the aforementioned role.

It is recommended that the state-owned press should have more confidence in themselves to criticize government when necessary, in much the same way as the privately-owned newspapers could also compliment good governmental actions by publication of such news without any restraint.

There is therefore the need for the press, particularly, the state owned to reflect diverse opinions and thinking by publishing a lot more critical readers’ letters and news stories on government than they are currently doing. The importance of the readers’ column has been acknowledged by Lander (1968) who observed that, columns of readers’ letters in a newspaper serve as a platform for debates and discussions on various issues including government policies, societal issues as well as a forum for rejoinders. Such letters, according to Lander (1968), could serve as a kind of index for gauging public interest in national affairs. The issue of media ownership certainly has a role to play in the way press in general and the state-owned press in particular fulfills their mandate of keeping the government on her toes. The ability of the papers to generate enough funds to run their business (especially when government is not seen as a major sponsor) would help the effort of the National Media Commission to achieve a more vibrant media, independent of governmental influence.

The privately-owned media do have the right to choose what they publish, however, they must also be alive to their social responsibility by giving prominence from time to time to stories which may not have the desired commercial value but could promote the good of society in one way or the other. There is also the need to erase the age-old mutual suspicion between government and the private press through conscious effort on the part of government to cultivate them (the private press). Even though reasons have been advanced as to why the private press was particularly hostile to the NDC regime, the continued mutual suspicion would not serve the national interest. This is because, media criticisms are supposed to help government to govern effectively, however because of the suspicion that the private-press is out there to cause mischief against government, genuine criticisms could be overlooked. The small change, in media coverage of government particularly by the private press in 2002 should be encouraged and built upon. It is envisaged that as democracy grows and deepens, the media would also be enabled to play its watchdog role more effectively.

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