

# Press Coverage of the Polytechnics in 1998 and 2002 A Content Analysis of the Daily Graphic

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## Abstract

The study examined the coverage of polytechnic 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. There were a number of so-called social commentators and even some government officials who were ignorant of the new policy that had created the Polytechnics as tertiary institutions and therefore their opinion pieces and statements attributed to them tendered to be pedestrian and negative to the Polytechnics.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

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 Agenda setting theory propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw (1973) 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 messages. In effect, the media set the agenda of the issues for public discussion by systematically letting certain issues appear and remain in the public domain. The Agenda setting theory would not operate in a vacuum; the agenda that is set, is deliberately done by various gatekeepers within the industry. The editor of a newspaper could influence which news item get published and the prominence such news items attract. An editor's news selection according to Shoemaker (1991) is based on his own prejudices and his concept of the audience, who have to be satisfied, and the subject matter and style of the writer. Newspapers editors would argue that what they really gate keep is not according to Editors prejudices and likes but news values have always defined what newsworthy events are. The traditional news values include consequence, proximity, conflict, novelty, proximity, conflict, novelty, prominence, human interest and timeliness. Interestingly, Breen (1998) adds government to the newsworthy values. Government, because of the power it wields, particularly in the developing world. So in the state-owned Newspapers, what a sitting government considers important would always win prominence. It flows from this logic that, because the Polytechnics are a creation of the state, they should naturally enjoy good coverage by a state media. Often Government sources are ready-made news-sources for the state-owned media; so the more the politician talked about a project or an entity, it should translate into coverage by the state media. So between the two governments of NDC (1998) and the NPP (2002), it remains to be seen which of them at least placed issues concerning the Polytechnics in national discourse.

## 1.1 Problem Definition

The Polytechnics which hitherto were secondary schools were upgraded to Diploma-awarding tertiary institutions since 1993. The interest that Newspapers generate about the Polytechnics would naturally translate into mainstreaming the Polytechnics in public discourse. This research therefore looks at what interest at least two successive governments have generated about the Polytechnic through their pronouncements and activities. It is also of interest to know how editors gatekeep with respect to news about the Polytechnics. Is the trend/slant towards conflict or prominence for example?

## 1.2 Objectives

The study intended achieving the following objectives, to:

- Establish the regularity with which the Polytechnics become news items,
- Find out the slant of the stories on the Polytechnics (negative or positive),
- Establish the prominence that stories about the Polytechnic enjoy,
- Bring to the fore interests various gatekeepers in the state-owned newspaper generate about the Polytechnic,

- Find out the number and nature of editorial opinions on the Polytechnic, and
- To establish what the attitude of the successive governments on the Polytechnics over the years.

The study is being conducted on a number of assumptions, which include:

- 1) Polytechnics are not likely to generate so much interest in the National Daily
- 2) There is likely to be more negative stories about the Polytechnics than positive ones

### 1.3 Significance of the Study

The study will bring to the fore the place of the Polytechnics in national discourse. Governments past and present would come to appreciate what their attitudes towards the Polytechnics have been whether positive or negative and more so the extent to which issues about the Polytechnics have engaged their thinking. The study will also highlight the slant of the coverage of the Polytechnics by the National Daily.

### 2.0 Theoretical Framework And Literature

The theories of news values which determine newsworthiness and that of media ownership are relevant to this study. Traditionally, news value has been determined by consequence, proximity, conflict, novelty, prominence, human interest and timeliness. Breen (1998) adds government to newsworthy values. For a state newspaper, which will be supporting the status quo however, the need for social order tends to be a foremost criterion in gate keeping. In fact, whether or not the Polytechnic as a state –owned entity enjoyed a negative or positive press coverage, is directly a function of the criteria underpinning newsworthiness

McQuail (1997) identifies social order as a news selection criterion and explains it 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 Media ownership

Michael Schudson (1998) 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. 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 the research is content analysis, which is useful in the evaluation of public information (Hebert and Rabin 1981). It focuses primarily on characteristics of content messages, determining what kind of 'meanings' the words may represent. The research content analysed a state-owned newspapers: the Daily Graphic. The selected years for the analysis are 1998, 2002. The selected years represented a mid-year for two successive regimes. The chosen years would help the research measure level and nature of interest generated about the Polytechnic by the respective governments and newspapers. The Research used all editions of the Daily Graphic in 1998 and 2002 hence no sampling was done (i.e. the entire universe was considered).

### 3.1 Coding Procedure

In coding, coverage meant all stories, pictures and articles carried by the newspapers on activities of the Polytechnic. The included news stories, readers' letters, editorials, feature articles, opinions and pictorial representation of the Polytechnics. These stories or articles were categorized as positive when they portrayed the Polytechnics in favourable light. The stories or articles were deemed negative where they are critical of the Polytechnics or when the Polytechnics are portrayed in bad light. Neutral stories are those stories that neither portrayed the Polytechnics in good nor bad light. At time such stories or articles balanced good news and negative news of the Polytechnics. News stories were also classified according to placement. Front-page stories were considered to have been given more prominence than those that appeared on the back page of the paper. Stories located in the middle pages were deemed to have been given the least prominence.

### 3.2 Data Analysis

The study is purely a quantitative content analysis of the selected Newspapers and how they covered the Polytechnics in the specific years mentioned. Unit of analysis were mainly stories, defined as straight news stories, readers' letters, opinions, features and the newspapers' editorial on the Polytechnic. The units were categorized into positive, negative and neutral and the data were

### 4.0 Findings and Discussions

This work is the first of a Trend study on the coverage of the Polytechnic by the Print media. It is important to the extent that the media generate public discourse and more than ever before, governments are paying more and more attention to issues raised by the media in general and governmental policies and decisions are increasingly responding to media discourse. Reaction of governments to media is founded in empirical evidence as for example suggested by Robert Schiller et al (1995) that the agenda setting role of the media in Public discourse is not limited to first providing information but also a possible manipulation of public opinion which is achieved by raising issues to unprecedented levels of importance or salience in the public eye.

The study content-analyzed the Daily Graphic (inarguably the largest-selling state-owned newspaper in Ghana currently) with respect to how the Polytechnics were covered in 1998 and 2002. The two selected years were within political spheres of two different governments. The political slant to the work was borne out of the fact that, Government remains one of the most important news sources. In fact according to Lichtenberg (1991), governments and important decision-makers in society come with ready-made credentials as authentic and reliable attributable sources.

Findings of the study have been presented by means of frequency and percentage tables:

**Frequency distribution of stories carried on the Polytechnics in 1998 and 2002**

YEAR	FREQUENCY
1998	39
2002	58

**Table 1**

The Frequency Table (Table 1) tells a story. There is an indication that the Polytechnic did not generate enough interest to merit regular place in the newspaper, particularly in 1998. The increased coverage in 2002 though positive, still cannot be called impressive coverage, given a universe of 364 editions of the paper per year.

**Slant or Tone of Story**

YEAR	NEGATIVE	POSITIVE	NEUTRAL	TOTAL SCORES
1998	13	11	15	39
2002	13	33	12	58

**Table 2**

The Picture that **Table 2** paints, would have dual interpretations. A third of all stories published on the Polytechnic by the Daily Graphic in 1998 were coded negative, significantly, this was higher than the number of stories deemed positive. An attributable reason would be that, prejudices and wrong perceptions about the Polytechnics were rife in the early days of the tertiary Polytechnic. Perhaps by 2002, the public and Gate Keepers perception on the Polytechnics had changed considerably and the credibility of the Polytechnics had started growing and that might explain the increase both in frequency of stories and more importantly positive stories. As Table 2 indicates, more than 50% of all stories on the Polytechnics were coded positive. An added explanation could be that Policy-makers were waking up to the realization of the cornerstone role of the Polytechnic in national development.

**Cross Tabulation**

**Placement of Stories (Positive Stories)**

YEAR	FRONT PAGE	MIDDLE PAGE	BACK PAGE
1998	1	6	4
2002	5	25	3

**Table 3**

The significance of Table 3 is that most of the positive stories covered on the Polytechnics especially in 2002 were “buried” in the middle pages of the book. It is an acknowledged fact in the print media that stories that appear on front page of any paper are deemed to be premium stories which deserve a front-page treatment of that paper. Given that National newspapers always influenced public discourse not only with published stories but more importantly, where the story is placed in the newspaper. It would suggest that the Polytechnics enjoyed an extremely low public attention and discourse in both years under discussion.

**Cross Tabulation**

**Placement of Stories (Negative Stories)**

YEAR	FRONT PAGE	MIDDLE PAGE	BACK PAGE
1998	5	4	2
2002	3	10	-

**Table 4**

It would appear from Table 4, that in 1998, the Polytechnics would appear on the front page of the Daily Graphic for all the wrong reasons. Apart from the low coverage, already bemoaned, the few stories which appeared in the newspapers were not only negative but were also given prominence by the gatekeepers.

**5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations**

The analysis of the data clearly indicates the fact that the Polytechnic enjoyed relatively low coverage by the National Daily in both 1998 and 2002. Even though, it could also be argued out that, coverage had appreciated from the low of 39 stories in 1998 to 58 stories in 2002. If it is assumed that each of the stories appeared in different editions of the newspaper, then one is looking at coverage of 11% (of all editions for the year totaling 364) in 1998 and 16% in 2002. The low level coverage could be attributable to two main issues: the fact that the Polytechnics were particularly not news-worthy in terms of the stories they generated by themselves; and also the perception that had been built out there on the Polytechnics and their new status. There were a number of so-called social commentators and even some government officials who were ignorant of the new policy that had created the Polytechnics as tertiary institutions and therefore their opinion pieces and statements attributed to them tendered to be pedestrian and negative to the Polytechnics. Students agitations in the late part of the 1990s and early 2000 on the status of the Higher National Diploma awarded by the Polytechnics also gave the Polytechnics a bad press. Editors and Commentators who had gone through University Education carried with

them the mentality of the Polytechnics being hands-on low-intellect institutions – in fact a place for the academically weak students. Naturally therefore, their comments and views which made the news were always not those that would enhance the image of the Polytechnics. Another observation is that of the Editor burying most of the positive stories on the Polytechnics in the middle pages of the newspaper. This observation falls within the already adduced perception that at least the Polytechnics did not appear to have what it takes to merit front-page treatment. Compared to the universities, issues emanating or affecting the universities were seen as national issues and were usually given prominence in the Daily Graphic.

A general recommendation borne out of the facts available from the study is that, the Polytechnics should make the conscious effort to court or perhaps cultivate the media. The rise in the interest of the Polytechnics from the 1998 low figures to an appreciably high ones in 2002 should give the impetus to a conscious promotion of the Polytechnics through the Pages of the newspapers in particular and mass media in general. The Polytechnics also ought to tell their own stories instead of allowing individual outside who claim to have the expertise trying to tell the story amidst little distortions. Being a trend study, the next stage of the study is to look at coverage of both the privately-owned and the state-owned newspapers of the Polytechnics in recent years. Also in line to be studied is a comparative research into the coverage of the Polytechnics vis-a-vis the established universities.

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