

**ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF
POLARISATION, LACK OF OBJECTIVITY
AND BIASED COVERAGE IN
REPORTING EVENTS**

**A PRESENTATION AT A WORKSHOP FOR MEDIA
AND POLITICAL PARTY LEADERS**

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Introduction

The 2008 elections are the fifth successive ones in the Fourth Republic.

It is submitted that the 2008 elections are coming in an atmosphere of relatively less polarization, less tension, less fear, and less uncertainty in the Ghanaian society than during the period of any of the four preceding elections.

Yet, being as it is, this year's elections are more significant in consolidating democracy than before. For the second time in our history a president will be enhancing constitutional rule by respecting it without controversy. The registration and involvement of new generations of the voting population will represent a deepening and expansion of the culture of democratic participation and constitutionalism. The elections will also add to the strengthening and maturation of institutions such as the Electoral Commission, the political parties, the security agencies and all others in the conduct of elections and the rule of law in this country.

However, the very concerns for consolidating and expanding democratic rule and strengthening peace, raise for this year's elections equally strong concerns for:

- transparency in the electoral process
- the commitment of the incumbent government to ensuring transparency;
- the capacity and commitment of all political parties to respect the rules and to accept the results;
- the commitment of political parties not to escalate pre-existing crisis for electoral purposes.

Elections make controversy and contain the seeds of conflicts. In other words, conflict is inevitable or unavoidable in elections. The test is how the government, the courts, the electoral commission, and political parties manage elections-related conflicts. As well as for the media, the test is how the media address the controversies and conflict arising from or inherent in elections.

The media environment

The media environment for the 2008 elections is also significantly different from during previous elections. There are more radio stations today, and the newspaper industry appears to be more consolidated, though market forces are not likely to ensure the survival of some in the near future. Though most of the print media remain still highly partisan in their political outlooks, the language of the press appears more refined and less unprofessional. In that, they appear to be less vitriolic and “insulting” in their expressions regarding subjects they oppose.

It is also to be recognized that, especially regarding the radio stations, there is improvement in the professional standards of their output.

The more significant developments on the media landscape include:

- a) the growth of the internet as an outlet and source of information; and
- b) the growth of listener participation in media by way of the radio phone-in which has become a feature for nearly every programme format.

That there are in Ghana conditions for media pluralism and press freedom is beyond dispute. This basic condition means that the media ought to be diverse and varied in their political, social and ideological persuasions and orientations. Therefore any discussion of media and politics must start from the premise that the media’s attitudes and behaviour in elections – a highly competitive activity – are going to be characterised by partisanship, biases, controversy and, in extreme ways, propaganda.

If the media are to be relevant in political processes in a democracy, they must represent and express clear positions on and preferences in issues and choices in the public domain.

Does this mean that anything goes as far as the media are concerned? Is the fact of pluralism and freedom a licence for the expression of any attitude and position whatsoever? Does the intrinsic partisanship of elections give to the media freedom to disregard all rules of professional standards and ethics?

Problems of bias

We have seen already the publication of falsehood such as the manufactured death of a presidential candidate; the extremely defamatory accusation of drug-dealing against another candidate and on and on. We are nearly everyday inundated with speculation about vice presidential candidates. We have also seen abuse of the confidentiality of sources. We are also every minute bombarded by radio discussions of elections related issues that are completely empty of substance but full of pretence at expertise.

Above all, however, we are seeing more and more media forums involving competing parties and contending positions, all of which add to strengthening a culture of tolerance and civilized political discourse.

Professionalism and election coverage

Whatever the nature, ownership or ideological outlook of particular media the underlying common standard is expressed in the age-old slogan: facts are sacred, opinion is freed.

In practical terms, the demand for factual accuracy, balance and fairness in reporting events, situations and issues cannot be compromised. In elections this responsibility is reinforced by the public's demand to receive information necessary for exercising the franchise, and the imperatives of promoting the transparency of the electoral process.

In my estimation an important test of the media's professional conduct or otherwise in the current process was the recent case of the alleged "bloated voters register" for parts of Ashanti region. The overall conduct of the media was satisfactory and professionally executed. It was a useful indication of the claim that the media, broadly speaking, appear to be improving in professional standards and quality.

As the campaigns gather momentum and the days of election approach, there will be more pressure on the media's test of professionalism.

The challenges of bias, etc

Sources of pressure and inducement to questionable professional conduct of the media will also become more pronounced.

Usually, an important source of challenge are the political parties and candidates. The desire for publicity and the reality of limited air time and print space produce incentives for unethical conduct.

Nowadays, an important source of bias in the media is the fact of the increasing ownership of media by politicians or persons closely associated with them.

The era of the party press seems to be over. In its place the commercial media now provide the political candidate and party the commercial vehicle for reaching the electorate.

We see from election to election in Ghana increasing use of commercial media for political campaign. The role of the political public relations firm in this area of communication is also growing. As our democracy grows and as the economy also grows, we can expect the growth and formalization of lobby groups, and therefore other critical sources of possible influence on media's political coverage.

Perspectives on 2008

Meanwhile, it appears that the 2008 elections will be more than the NDC-NPP 2-horse race dominating the previous elections. The media cannot afford to dismiss other parties and their candidates. They have a more challenging task of providing analysis of the various policy pronouncements, and of balancing air time and space to provide fair coverage and access.

But while fair coverage may be insisted on, fair access cannot be externally imposed on or demanded of the commercial media beyond the coverage of news and some other programmes.

Such demands can be exacted from the GBC and its network as a constitutional obligation, as well as from the small but growing number of community radio stations as a matter of institutional principle.

Even as the commercial media have no obligation to promote fair (not necessarily equal) access, it is obviously in their commercial interest to provide fair access to all parties, candidates and viewpoints.

As usual, GBC is likely to produce a framework for access by the candidates.

What can we demand of the media, however?

Elections are critical for democracy, but are prone to conflict. Therefore elections also improve on media strong necessity to adhere to high professional standards. We may conclude by repeating some familiar demands on the media to promote transparent, peaceful and successful elections. Thus, the media should:

- be alert, critical and stubborn in monitoring the electoral process to ensure transparency;
- desist from rumour and manufacturing information;
- avoid exaggerating situations and occurrences;
- while exposing misconduct, corruption etc, be truthful and credible;
- monitor phone-ins to avoid insulting language, rumour and false information;
- monitor expressions of candidates and discourage their use of falsehood or unwarranted attacks on opponents;
- though our media are devoid of negative ethnic prejudices, they must stay alert to prevent occurrence of such negative expressions.

Above all, the media must sharpen their capacity for critical analysis, so they can provide for the public some leadership in assessing the pronouncement of candidates and parties.

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Accra

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