



The Role of Private Radio Stations in Promoting Participatory Democracy in Northern Ghana: Practicalizing Competency Based Training

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Abstract — *The effectiveness of radio as mass medium derives from its capacity to go beyond barriers of illiteracy, to strengthen democracy and governance. Participatory democracy entails a broad involvement of people in administering their nations or organizations. The populace gets involved in decision making by getting their voices heard. Private radio stations, more than the state-owned ones are better positioned and poised for the task of enhancing the mass participation in government business, by not only listening to what the government of the day has to tell them, but also giving them an avenue to hear other views and to also air their (alternative) views. Private radio facilitates the democratic ambitions of the populace, who get to dialogue with government and their representatives. Gone are the days when radio was a one way medium of communication, and all the audience could do was listen to a reader/speaker presenting an item. Today the listener can contribute to the current news item via SMS text or phone INS. It has been in the post-airwave-liberalisation era, when we got into private broadcasting, that radio phone-ins became rife, where live, on-going discourse is captured and relayed to the people, and others call in to share their views. This is what Democracy is about. The proliferation of tiny FM receivers, and radios embedded in cell phones give nearly everybody a radio receiver. The proliferation of private radio stations has opened up more avenues for disseminating information in the local Ghanaian languages. In addition, private radio stations have provided forums for debate in the run up to national and local elections. These debates provide platforms for the electorate to assess the worth of would-be representatives. Private radio stations complement the effort of the public media to inform voters of election calendars, processes, profiling candidates, and mediating information between the general public, politicians, and government. Private radio stations can promote participatory democracy better when workers are given more practical training through a competency based training programme. Competency based training would enable an imbibement of a practically oriented knowledge base that would yield excellent work output.*

Index Terms — *Competency based training, mass medium, democracy, governance, private radio stations, participatory democracy, post-airwave-liberalisation.*

INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that the media is one of the most important additions to the democratic world. The title of this paper is “The Role of Private Radio Stations in Promoting Participatory Democracy in Northern Ghana: Practicalizing Competency Based Training.” Three basic thematic areas are enshrined herein; “private radio/broadcasting” and “participatory democracy” on one hand and how a competency based training programme would enhance the work of the media in its contribution to a participatory democratic dispensation. The problem which is quite fundamental has been identified because there is a total disconnect between the practical knowledge of most media practitioners and the actual work of media practice in Northern Ghana. This has led to a considerable degree of unprofessional conduct especially in the presentation of programmes mostly among private radio stations and the subsequent distortion of information. The anomaly has adverse effects on Ghana’s democratic tenets.

Historical Background

Since the dawn of creation, the media has been very important in everyday life. In Graeco-Roman periods, the media was so important in everyday processes that rulers could hardly take decisions without its input. In the African Kingdoms of ours, we have seen how the media, represented by the drummers and bards, has disseminated information, entertained, as well as educated patrons and the general populace. Rulers in many African Kingdoms saw that their media was so important that the latter needed to be indemnified against sanction for omissions or commissions while at work. The ruler may die, but not so the media, represented by the court drummer. Salifu (2011, p. 30) couches it in these words: “This public record keeper is present when the ‘king’ is born, and is there to announce his death when it occurs...” This tells us that traditional Africa attaches a lot of importance to the media, and has had its version of freedom of the press long before the colonizers came our shores, and long before our politicians of the day dreamt of passing ‘The Right to Information Bill.’

Manuscript received: Jun 29, 2016; revised: Jul 29, 2016;
accepted: August 15, 2016.

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Drawing examples from the west in 1791, the United States Congress passed the First Amendment, which guarantees freedoms of five fundamental areas of life: religion, speech, press, assembly, and petition. The First Amendment states that:

Congress shall make no law regarding an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech; or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble; and to petition the government for a redress of grievances (U.S. Bill of Rights).

The common denominator to all these freedoms is that there is a freedom to choose; and choosing inevitably utilizes the freedom of expression.

The British introduced radio into Gold Coast in the 1930s and made it a propaganda tool, which they used to provide information to improve the colonial masters' chances of victory in World War II. At Independence, the new Ghanaian leaders inherited the structures built by the British, and held on to sole ownership of public broadcasting, which was effectively used to advance their governance.

The Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, like others in the newly Independent African countries, was the target of coup makers, and as such was heavily guarded. According to Heath (2001), the new African leaders also feared "ethnic and sectarian factionalism and challenges to their regimes." So, they beefed-up centralized control rather than "risk" decentralizing radio. This was the time when African radio stations were indeed "the voice of the party or regime in power."

In the period when Ghana transitioned from military rule to multiparty democracy (early 1990s) 'private media' became synonymous with 'democracy' and a 'free market.' The liberalization of the airwaves in Ghana is even more liberating than what we saw in the Arab Spring of 2011-12. This came on the heels of decades of autocratic military regimes and democratically elected ones who would rather see a monopoly of airtime. P.A.V. Ansah, a leading member of the movement to liberalize the airwaves in Ghana, asserts that radio is an important tool for forging a national identity, and that, liberalized airwaves can stimulate development and create more jobs.

Democracy is Supposed to be Participatory; so is Competency Based Training (CBT)

Competency based training involves the use of a curriculum that derives from collaboration among stakeholders including training institutions, industry and employers. Muoka, Bashir, Mursal and Kyola (2013, p. 99) quotes Harris, Hobart, and Lundberg, (1995) as saying:

Proponents of CBET promote it as a way to improve the correspondence between education/training and workplace requirements. CBET is individualized, emphasizes outcomes (what individuals know and can do), and allows flexible pathways for achieving the outcomes. It

makes as clear as possible what is to be achieved and the standards for measuring achievement.

What this means is that there is a very marked bridging of the gap between theory and practice, and thus practicalizing vocational education.

Devarajan, Khemani and Walton (2011, p.24) have this to say of the media:

The potential role of media organizations, such as radio, seems obvious as purveyors of information to a large number of citizens, especially the poor. Indeed, donors have been engaged in setting-up and supporting community radio in various parts of Africa to broadcast public-interest programming for democratic values, human rights, and the importance of health and education.

The opening up of private newspapers and radio stations in particular redefined Ghana's democratic credentials. More people now have access to information, which they use in their day-to-day activities.

METHODOLOGY

This study largely depended on reviewed material as well as conversations and unstructured interviews with media players in the Northern regional capital of Tamale. Personal monitoring of the airwaves also provided very useful information in this regard. Interviews were also conducted among some members of staff as well as students from departments that have already started using the Competency Based Training mechanism at Tamale Polytechnic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It was found among others that the effectiveness of radio as a mass medium derives from its capacity to go beyond barriers of illiteracy, to strengthen democracy and governance. Unfortunately, some private radio presenters lack the practical knowledge with which to properly drive this effort. Macmillan English Dictionary (2005) defines "democracy" as "a system of government in which people vote in elections to choose the people who will govern them" and "a system of running a business or organization in which everyone can vote and share in making decisions"

This is the Western model, and it would be restrictive if we saw it as 'the only form of democracy.' Indeed, there are variants, as we find in traditional African polities, where a monarch oversees daily business, yet everyone has an input to make. Participatory democracy entails a broad involvement of people in administering their nations or organizations. The masses get involved in decision making by getting their voices heard. Ramakhula (2009, p.12) quotes White and Ashcroft (1995) as saying that:

Participatory democracy has meaning only if it encompasses tenets such as access to information, freedom of expression and open communication among the communities...

Without access to information, marginalized groups of people remain unaware of their rights and constitutional entitlements, and as a result fail to challenge decisions, which are not in their best interest.

This means that such disaffected people will harbour their reservations, which bottle up and eventually explode. Such explosions manifest in many ways. Disaffected folk (who feel left out of the system) will not see the need to contribute to the advancement of the community. They keep abilities and inabilities to themselves. These are the people who are more likely to subvert social order or get sued for subversive activities. What compounds the problem is that untrained radio presenters who do not know how to manage sensitive political information seem to have unlimited access to the airwaves.

Private radio stations, more than the state-owned ones, are better positioned and poised for the task of enhancing the mass participation in government business. This they can do by listening to the government of the day and by presenting alternative views. Private radio facilitates the democratic ambitions of the populace, who get the dialogue with government and their representatives.

Gone are the days when radio was a one-way medium of communication, and all that the audience could do was to listen to a reader/speaker presenting an item. Today the listener can contribute to the current news item via SMS text or phone-ins. In the post-airwave-liberalization era, which has opened the floodgate for private broadcasting, radio phone-ins have become rife. This implies that on-going discourses are captured and relayed to the people, and others call in to share their views. This is what democracy is about. The proliferation of tiny FM receivers, and radios imbedded in cell phones give nearly everyone a radio receiver.

Private Radio and Northern Ghana's Democracy

Northern Ghana has had her fair share of private news media, especially radio. There are only three State owned radio stations in the sub-region. Private radio stations/Community radios in the Northern Region include Filla FM 89.3 MHz, Might FM 90.5 MHz, Northern Radio 92.1 MHz, Diamond FM 93.7, Simli Radio 95.0 MHz, Bishara FM 97.7 MHz, Radio Justice 98.5, Zaa FM 99.3 MHz, Radio Ghaky (Saboba), and Kesmi FM 107.1. Two campus radios, Radio Green (UDS Nyankpala campus) and Ridge FM (Tamale Polytechnic) are also in the wings. The Upper East has A1 Radio and Word FM, while Upper West has Radio Upper West, Radio Freedom, Radio Progress and Radford FM.

Northern Ghana has a large illiterate population, who can hardly comprehend messages delivered in English, the language we inherited from our colonial masters. Heath (2001) agrees with Raboy (1996, p.78) when the latter asserts that, public sector broadcasting in Africa is "a distant ideal" and not a "working reality" because; state broadcasters have "typically associated themselves with the public sector traditions of their former colonial masters." The proliferation of private radio stations has opened up more avenues for disseminating information in the local

Ghanaian languages. Our local radio stations should therefore strive to operate within our local cultural frame.

In addition, private radio stations have provided forums for debate in the run up to national and local elections. These debates provide platforms for the electorate to assess the worth of would-be representatives. Private radio stations complement the effort of the public media to inform voters of election calendars, processes, profiling candidates, and mediating information among the general public, politicians, and government. This is one of the reasons it is important for radio presenters to have a practical orientation through a competency based training mechanism to equip them with the requisite competence to carry out the important duty of properly informing the populace on such democratic tenets.

The Place of Social Media

Private Bloggers, such as You Tube, Twitter, Facebook, and various "news-on-line" programmes complement private radio to disseminate news, education and entertainment. These, without a doubt, impact our listening and viewing public greatly. Home videos, satellites, and the internet have presented a wide array of avenues where messages on democratic politics and governance may be disseminated. Ghana's teeming youth largely rely on web sources for political discourse, especially in times of elections. Social media can be an effective propaganda tool; it is also an active platform on which factual material as well as outrageous gossip and innuendos can be spread. A competency based approach would properly imbibe a practical orientation in all facets of broadcast journalism including the now popular Social media.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that there is a lack of practical orientation in the work ethics of many private radio presenters in Northern Ghana as well as their knowledge in democratic issues. The result of this unfortunate situation is low quality of their contents and incoherence in their presentations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As Lasswell (1949, p.102) asserts, the act of communication involves a process in which one answers the following questions:

- (a) Who
- (b) Says what
- (c) In which channel
- (d) To whom
- (e) With what effect?

This should guide private broadcasters, who must make their radio stations viable entities, because they risk losing their means of livelihood if there is little or no patronage of the stations. In order to make the stations successful in their mission to provide information and edutainment, would-be presenters and programmers should be "different." There should be extra efforts to make the difference. Presenters must always research before they

deliver. Such an intellectual approach would enable them to identify appropriate messages for appropriate audiences at appropriate times.

It is significant to caution against the abuse of the fundamental right to press freedom. In fact, freedom goes with responsibility. We should, therefore, exercise our rights responsibly and professionally. Broadcasting in particular and journalism in general are governed by professional ethics. Presenters should, at all times, be mindful of this cardinal principle and strive to become competent moderators of discourses on air. Certainly, the presenters have a critical role to play in the relatively nascent democratic dispensation in the country.

Different radio presenters may be loyalists of different political ideologies. Radio stations may have some hidden political motives behind their establishment. The important thing here is to ensure that personal and political motives subordinate to professional principles. We have had volatile situations in the past, but thankfully we have not witnessed a situation where violence or a disruption to democracy has been as a result of a radio show. Remember, it was a presenter's reckless comments that ignited the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Private radio stations are our hope for nurturing the relatively young democracy in Ghana. They should help to preserve it.

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