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## News media logic and democracy: strange bedfellows in political news making practices of private radio stations in Ghana.

### Abstract

Although radio has historically been the most widespread media in Ghana and much of Africa, little is known about its newsmaking practices in political news. Given the rise of mediated politics in an emerging democracy like Ghana, radio's role in enabling communication between political actors and citizens has grown even more pertinent. Drawing on news media logic, described as the imperatives which guide news production, this paper investigates political news production practices through analysis of 17 semi-structured interviews of Ghanaian journalists, politicians and civil society experts. It reveals an emerging trend in political journalism where Ghanaian private radio stations are fast adopting news media logic, characterised by a lack of professionalism and commercialisation, both identified as detrimental to democracy. These practices raise concerns about the media's power in excluding certain political views which do not conform to its logic, thereby providing audiences with a limited reality of the political space. If the sustenance of democracy partly lies on the media providing citizens with accurate information that reflects the range of actors in politics, then attention needs to be paid to these production practices which present limited political content to citizens.

Radio; news media logic; Ghana; democracy; mediatization; political news production

Media are a crucial player in contemporary politics (Bennett and Entman 2001). In many democracies around the world, information about the ideologies, policies and activities of political actors, particularly during elections, is often obtained through some form of media. This makes the media the “primary source of symbolic material out of which people construct their understanding and evaluation of political actors, conditions and events” (Dan and Iorgoveanu 2013, 1028). From this, it is reasonable to assume that public perceptions about politics, political actors and democracy are largely shaped by the quality of political news citizens consume in the media.

The growing importance of the media is captured in the general term *mediatisation* which refers to “a social change process in which media have become increasingly influential in and deeply integrated into different spheres of society” (Strömbäck and Esser 2014a, 244). Mediatisation of politics, on the other hand, describes a process where the media have become so pervasive that their importance in “political processes, institutions and actors and “spill-over effects” has increased (Strömbäck and Esser 2014a, 6). Mediatisation has become popular in the last few years as a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between media and politics. Equally, politics in Ghana is showing increasing signs of becoming more mediatised although historically, Ghanaian media have been inextricably linked with politics (Karikari 2007; Avle 2011). The press in particular was instrumental in mobilising anti-colonial support against the British, leading to independence on March 6, 1957 (Kakari, 2007). Since then, the media have continued to play a key role in the political development of the country.

Radio is notably important because consistently, it has remained the most popular and accessible media in Ghana (Yeboah-Banin, Tietaah, and Akrofi-Quarcoo 2019; Kafewo

2006) as elsewhere in Africa. In the 2018 Afrobarometer study, 56% of Ghanaians said they listen to the radio as opposed to television (42%) and newspapers (3%) (Isbell and Appiah-Nyamekye 2018). This percentage of radio audiences does not even account for the many others who may not personally own a radio set but listen to the blaring sound from a neighbours' radio. Apart from the pervasiveness of radio in Ghana, several recent developments have increased its importance. First, the liberation of the media in the 1990s across several African countries including Ghana opened up the media space for private participation (Akinfemisoye 2018; Avle 2011). This led to subsequent proliferation of private radio stations in Ghana, an important development given that previously, radio stations had been operated solely under state ownership. The introduction of private media injected some level of scrutiny into government activities which was previously lacking (Temin and Smith 2002). In fact, at the time, private Ghanaian media were particularly known for their adversarial posture towards government (Tettey 2001; Diedong 2016) as they were the only means by which government excesses could be checked (Karikari, 2007). Second, the recent proliferation of mobile telephony in Ghana as elsewhere across Africa led to an increase in radio audiences as people could easily tune in to programmes on their phones irrespective of their location in the country (Tettey 2011). Third, as the internet became more accessible and its use more common, many Ghanaian radio stations created an online presence to take advantage of the growing popularity of the internet among citizens (ibid). Finally, radio is the medium that broadcasts most in local languages, making it more inclusive in terms of being accessible not only to the educated but also the illiterate (Temin and Smith 2002). These developments have further served to entrench radio's position as an influential medium in the Ghanaian media landscape, raising its potential for shaping public opinion especially in relation to politics.

Given radio's prominence in the Ghanaian media landscape, and the increasing mediatisation of Ghanaian politics, it is important that we consider how these developments shape the mediation of politics and the potential impact they may have on democratisation in the country. This paper therefore examines political news making practices of Ghanaian private radio stations with a view to broadening our understanding not only of the nature of political journalism among Ghanaian private radio stations, but also how news media logic interacts with democratic ideals. Using semi-structured interviews of news workers, politicians and civil society experts in Ghana, the paper asks what production norms guide the production of political news, and what is the potential impact these choices may have on the country's relatively young democracy? In doing this, the paper argues that the logic of operation guiding political news production among Ghanaian private radio stations serves to undermine representative democracy as it is exclusionary while also narrowly presenting politics in ways that are not representative of the political reality.

### Media and democracy in Ghana

Ghana can be described as an emerging democracy, a term which denotes countries who adopted democratic governance from the beginning of the 'third wave' in the 1970s (Voltmer, 2013). Although Ghana gained independence over 60 years ago, Lindberg (2003) asserts that it qualified as a democracy in 1996 after a period of alternating democratic and military rule (Boafo-Arthur, 2007; Arthur, 2010). While a precise definition of democracy still remains elusive (Voltmer, 2013), there is some broad consensus about the key indicators depending on whether it is from a minimalist or maximalist view. Minimalist scholars count a free and fair election as a marker of democracy while for maximalists, a country can only be described as democratic when there is regular elections, a

system of accountability, press freedom and an active and informed citizenry (Bernhagen 2009).

Since 1992, Ghana has had regular elections every four years to elect its presidential and parliamentary leaders. Notably, there have been two successful change of power from one party to another. For some scholars (e.g. Przeworski 1995; O'Donnell 1996), this is a crucial marker of democracy. While there is some scepticism about the usefulness of importing a Western product like democracy into non-Western contexts (Chabal 1998; Carothers 2002), democracy is generally the accepted norm for governance in much of Africa. Thus, Ghana subscribes to the values of liberal democracy or what Dahl (1989) calls 'polyarchy'. According to him, this is characterised mainly by freedom of expression, right of association, media pluralism, political participation, free, fair and competitive elections, and the existence of human rights.

As important as democracy is, it cannot flourish without an independent and free media (Voltmer, 2013). For many scholars, the media are considered 'guardians of democracy' (Gadzekpo 2008). As with the difficulty in reaching a precise definition of democracy, there are differing views in the role the news media are expected to perform in a democracy. Schudson (1999) for instance, proposes the three broad models of 'advocacy', 'market' and 'trustee' which corresponds to partisan, commercial and professionally- independent types of journalism respectively. In relation to their general social role, Christians et al. (2009) suggest the 'monitorial' relating to the media's key function of information provider and 'facilitative' which links to the idea of the press as the fourth estate and speaks to the task of enabling deliberation and active civic activities in the interest in democracy. The other two are 'radical' which strongly relates to the watchdog function where the media focus on making transparent the activities of government while also exposing abuse of power; and 'collaborative' which in contrast, describes when the media choose to support the state rather than criticise it in the interest of national development or security. The authors explain that the facilitative role are the key values of "inclusiveness, pluralism and collective purpose" (ibid, 126).

Voltmer (2013, 26), also proposes another set of role criteria which relates directly to what the media are expected to do in a democracy. These are holding state officials to account (watchdog); providing citizens with credible, unbiased and factual information to facilitate effective participation in democratic processes (information); and providing a deliberative space where different voices can be heard and supported (forum). While media organisations cannot be compelled to fulfil any particular role in a democratic context, the core values of pluralism of news and opinions; neutrality and objectivity in reporting; market orientation and adherence to professional norms tend to characterise the practice of most traditional media (Christians et al. 2009).

It is important to note that not only do some of the roles described above overlap, but the media can likewise prioritise any in their practice depending on historical, political, social and other contextual factors (Voltmer, 2013). For example, due to a history of state suppression of liberties and human rights abuses, private media have assumed a largely radical role or adversarial position towards governments in several African countries including Ghana (Abdulai 2009; Tettey 2001), Ethiopia (Zerai and Alemu 2018) and Zimbabwe (Chuma 2018). In contrast, it is common practice for state media to take a more collaborative role (Diedong 2016; Hasty 2006), similar to the so called 'development journalism' that has become evident in some countries across the continent (Zerai and Alemu 2018).

Currently, the Ghanaian media landscape is considered one of the most vibrant, pluralist and independent in the continent (Yeboah-Banin, Tietaah, and Akrofi-Quarcoo 2019; Tettey 2011). A number of factors account for this. First, current figures for operational media organisations in Ghana are about 426, of which 80% are radio stations (Yeboah-Banin and Amoakohene 2018). These are owned by a mix of state, political and business actors, with private ownership being the most dominant. Most of these private media are either affiliated to specific political parties or subscribe to particular ideologies. Second, the 1992 constitution provides legal support for freedom of expression as well as the independence and freedom of the media. This is a vital point given that the period prior had been marked by state intolerance of dissenting views, which sometimes led to harassment, imprisonment and even death of journalists (Abdulai 2009; Tettey 2001). Additionally, the Ghana Media Commission was established in 1993 as a result of Article 447 of the constitution to safeguard the independence and freedom of the media, and to oversee the general management of media organisations in the country among other things. Further, the National Media Policy, drafted in 2000, had the core mandate of promoting free, independent and pluralistic media freely accessible to citizens. Finally, in 2001, the Criminal libel law which had previously been used by the state to censor journalists and limit freedom of expression was repealed.

Yet, despite these provisions, Akpojivi (2014) argues that self-censorship and fear of state reprisals still influence journalistic practices particularly in state media. Nonetheless, the media freedom currently existing in Ghana is a far cry from what pertained prior to the 1995 media liberalisation. The Ghanaian private media, in particular, have been instrumental in exposing shady government deals to public knowledge, subsequently leading to investigations and jobs losses. A case in point is the withdrawal of the AMERI deal from parliament in December 2018 after the media reported that the figures were bloated. The energy minister at the time, Boakye Agyarko, was consequently sacked and the deal renegotiated. Several other examples of similar media exposés have occurred in the past to illustrate the vigilance of particularly the private media in Ghana. These cases have injected some vibrancy into the Ghanaian media ecology, most evidently on radio.

The 1992 democratic transition significantly changed political discourse in the country as it opened up the media space for a range of topics, opinions and debates that were previously censored (Karikari 1998). Through phone-ins for example, talk radio allows audiences to contribute to public discourses, call government officials to account and receive (immediate) responses to their questions (Tettey 2011). As Voltmer (2013) argues, the extent to which the media are democratised—that is, fulfil the prerequisites of democracy as outlined above—is a good marker of the degree of democratisation in the country. If media pluralism and an informed citizenry are key characteristics of democracy, then the current media landscape in Ghana can be said to be on track for the consolidation of democracy. However, this optimistic evaluation needs to be moderated as there is still a growing sense that the media freedom currently existing in Ghana is, to some extent, enabling a culture of incivility and irresponsible talk which could undermine the democratic strides the country has made so far (Tettey, 2011). As discussed above, the privileging of controversial and scandalous news over analytical issues, in addition to the fact that lies can sometimes be published all seem to confirm this assertion. In particular, due to the high level of audience participation and immediacy, radio has great potential to act as “a powerful and potentially dangerous medium” (Gunner, Ligaga, and Moyo 2011). In this regard, it is important that we pay attention to the processes which contribute to political news production among private radio stations in Ghana.

## News media logic and political news production

Media logic couples with political logic to form the two key concepts undergirding mediatisation of politics. As earlier noted, mediatisation of politics considers the relationship between media and politics and assumes that actors in each of these institutions are guided in their behaviour by a specific “logic of appropriateness” (Strömbäck and Esser 2014, 14). Often presented as oppositional concepts, political logic refers to the imperatives associated with the shaping and (re)distribution of power (Nygren and Niemikari 2019), while media logic is construed as “encompass[ing] all those imperatives that guide the production of news that ...serve[s] as an authoritative presentation of the political reality” (Esser 2013, 166). Originally proposed by Altheide and Snow (1979, 10) as broadly denoting “a form of communication; the process through which media present and transmit information”, the way media logic was conceived initially has been refined over the years due to criticisms of ambiguity and vagueness (Landerer 2013). Strömbäck (2011) offers a narrower conceptualisation that specifically relates to news making organisations. This is the theoretical perspective adopted in this paper.

To understand how news media logic works, it is importance to further explicate mediatisation of politics. Strömbäck's (2008; 2011) suggest a multidimensional framework consisting of four interrelated but analytically distinct dimensions which constitute a continuum where politics can be more or less mediatised. The first, which is the prerequisite for the other dimensions, is when the news media become the main source of political information and the primary means through which political actors and citizens communicate (Mazzoleni, 2008a). In the second, the media become comparatively more independent and therefore increasingly adopt media logic. This phase reflects “increasing journalistic professionalism, a more pragmatic and less sacerdotal approach to politics, and increasing commercialization” (Strömbäck, 2008; p. 237). The third dimension is when media content is guided by news media logic rather than political logic. Here, the “selection and framing of news are [now] guided by the news media’s own news values and need to garner audience attention while keeping own costs, rather than by the needs of political actors or what kind of news people need as citizens rather than as consumers” (Strömbäck and Van Aelst, 2013, p.343). In the fourth dimension, news media logic determines the selection of media content such that political actors not only adopt but also internalise the logic and dominant news values in order to gain some control over the news. As this paper focuses on news media logic, that is, the journalistic-driven news imperatives that guide political news production among private Ghanaian radio stations, it relates more to the third dimension of mediatisation of politics.

In addition to the above, Strömbäck and Esser (2014) describe news media logic as constituting *professionalism*, *commercialisation* and *media technology*. Professionalism refers to the shared norms and values that distinguish journalism as a profession, and by which journalists operate. Crucially, these include media independence, adherence to standards of newsworthiness such as news values, and the goal to serve the public interest including acting as watchdog and providing citizens with the information they need to make them democratically competent and active (ibid). While several factors account for determining newsworthiness, the generally accepted criteria include timeliness, proximity, surprise, negativity, elite people, conflict and personalisation (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Harcup and O’Neill 2017; Shoemaker and Cohen 2006). However, in relation to political news production, Haselmayer, Wagner, and Meyer (2017, 368) suggest power elites, conflict,



surprise, topic relevance and topic continuity in the media's agenda as the most important determinants.

Additionally, commercialism claims that most media organisations operate to make profit, and this considerably shapes the news production, selection and presentation process (Strömbäck and Esser 2014). This implies that journalists “compete with each other to offer the least expensive mix of content that protects the interests of sponsors and investors while garnering the largest audience advertisers will pay to reach” (McManus 1994, 85). Strömbäck and Esser (2014) suggest a tension between professionalism and commercialism as each seems geared towards goals that appear antithetical. Media technology, on the other hand, refers to how the different communication technologies shape news content and hence news production. For example, the oral nature of radio allows it to use sound bites while the same is not possible for print.

Despite the popularity of mediatisation of politics as a theoretical framework for examining the nexus between media and politics, it has not been empirically tested in a non- Western democracy until recently (see Jones 2019). As will be seen below, the three components of news media logic as outlined above are particularly relevant to the study of political news production among Ghanaian private radio stations. The small but growing literature available has documented a lack of professionalism among journalists particularly in private media, characterised by engagement in unethical practices. These range from accepting bribes from politicians or publishing false stories that discredit their opponents (Abdulai and Crawford 2010), incentive- driven reporting (Amankwah, Ako-Gyima, and Quansah 2017), sensationalism (Owusu 2012) and partisan reporting that favours political allies (Temin and Smith 2002; Owusu 2012; Ayee 2002). Further, Nyarko (2016) reports that in selecting headlines to discuss in newspaper review shows on radio, the hosts are careful not to highlight those that negatively depict their sponsors while also being mindful to select sensational headlines to attract audience attention. Afful (2017) also found a rise in horse race reporting among especially private media in their coverage of the 2008 and 2012 Ghanaian elections.

### Methodology

This paper contributes to political journalism scholarship by focusing on political news production practices among Ghanaian private radio stations, a context that is particularly understudied. It relies on a qualitative analysis of 17 semi-structured, in-depth interviews of editors and political journalists in two private radio stations, (women) politicians and civil society experts in Ghana, all conducted between October and November 2017.

Data presented here forms part of a bigger project investigating Ghanaian and Nigerian women politicians' media coverage in print and radio news content in which, among other methods, 49 interviews were conducted. All the interviews were face to face and in English as that is the official language. Interviews were then coded and analysed thematically against the literature on political journalism. While all interviewees gave their consent to be named, I chose to anonymise them to minimise any potential fallout to them.

The two stations sampled in this paper are Joy FM and Citi FM, both of which are located in Accra, Ghana's capital. They were chosen based on their position as the two most popular English-speaking, private media organisations in the country (Botchway 2016). As the first English-speaking private station in Ghana, Joy FM for instance, has become a media giant in the Ghanaian media ecology, often setting the pace in

journalism for other media houses. As far back as 2008 when all media houses were content to follow the elections results as they trickled in from the Electoral Commission (EC), Joy FM was the first media station to organise an elaborate tallying system which enabled it to announce the winner of the presidential election even before the EC (Avle 2011). After that announcement, their forecast was subsequently reproduced by the other media houses. The disproportionate power Joy FM and Citi FM hold among Ghanaian media make them a prime data source for political news production.

### The Politics of Sticking to Professional Values

Strömbäck and Esser (2014b) note that news media logic is shaped by historical and contextual factors. Therefore, the particular iteration of the logic that guides political news production among the two private stations sampled here are likely to be mediated by organisational values. As journalism in Ghana as elsewhere in Africa subscribe to the Western liberal model, (Mabweazara 2018; Banda 2009), news production culture broadly follow the standardised method of determining the newsworthiness of stories. However, the local context tends to mediate which news values are more salient. It became evident in the interviews that the core news values that largely guide news selection in the private radio stations sampled are power elite, controversy and conflict. Literature on political news journalism supports the idea that political function largely determines who gets coverage (Vos 2014; Wolfsfeld 2011). Generally, the higher up a politician is on the political ladder, the more likely (s)he is to get covered in the news. In this sense, presidents and ministers for example, will have easier access to the media than their deputies. What is interesting is that with private media, charisma and social capital are sometimes privileged over political function when selecting sources as one editor explains:

*Which personalities are involved, by the way, is also very important. Sometimes it's not even the bigger the personality. There are people that are not that big but they gain notoriety for being very controversial characters. Every time you hear their names, people will listen and wonder, "What has he done again?" so the personalities involved are important.*

These additional considerations in news selection resonate with the charismatic skill approach developed by Sheafer (2001) which proposes that a politician gains media legitimacy if they have an interesting personality. The high value placed on politicians' personality seems to imply that those without 'interesting' personalities may have limited media access as a result. In other parts of the world, it is common practice for politicians to hire media intermediaries like PR consultants to manage their relationship with journalists. However, what was noted in Ghana is that journalists generally tend to deal with the politicians themselves, except those very high in government such as the presidency. Even so, a few journalists have direct access. Because journalists are used to dealing directly with politicians, those lower up in political function like MPs and even ministers who avoid media contact and use intermediaries are viewed with some suspicion, as it suggests they are hiding something.

Apart from the above, journalists stated that communication skill also contributes to being selected for the news. For example, one made the following comment:

*It has to do with words. It has to do the capacity to handle complex issues without being rattled as a source speaking to a journalist.*



In addition to personalities determining the news, as earlier mentioned, controversy and conflict are key considerations and this was emphasised in the interviews as this senior editor explains:

*It's just the same principles in determining any news item. So first of all, how controversial is this? I mean, for us controversy and conflict is important news values... I mean any editor will know about the news values but for us, the most important is where is the conflict and where's the controversy skewed in making a determination on that story?*

Another point to note is that while political reporting dominates the news, it tends to focus on personalities from the two main parties, thus reflecting the duopoly in political culture as this editor notes:

*Ghana's elections are only between NDC and NPP. Everybody else is [peripheral]. The two parties dominate. So if you are not from the two main parties, you will definitely not be talked about.*

The dominance of the two parties and the marginalisation of the others was one of the concerns raised by women politicians who belong to smaller parties as this not only marginalises the politicians in those parties, but also gives a very limited view of the political reality in the country. A woman politician from one of the small parties noted:

*We only have two parties, the others are appendages or, basically, completely dominated by either or both of these two parties at any point in time.*

This particular finding confirms Sampaio-Dias' (2019) study in Guinea-Bissau which reveals a similar trend of exclusion of smaller parties in the news.

A major theme that emerged from the interviews, and which has received much scholarly attention in African journalism is brown envelop phenomenon or incentive-driven coverage (Skjerdal 2010; 2018; Sampaio-Dias 2019). The practice has become so pervasive in media culture that most journalists in the interviews talked about it matter-of-factly as shown in this senior editor's comment:

*You invite media person to a soiree, you need to pay money, you feed them and then you give them small envelopes.*

Interviewees who had contested in the 2016 election noted that the inability to pay for coverage of their campaigns had been a huge challenge to them in terms of projecting themselves to the wider public to increase their voter base. This was particularly voiced by women politicians. One of them comments:

*There was no media group that said "at least let's listen to the women as well." No. We were told to pay small and then they'll do it...but financing is a major hindrance for us women than anything else. Luckily, some of the radio and TV stations [later] decided that they will give chance to every candidate once every three months and they started in about two months to election....so we got the chance in that direction to be able to put our issues forward.*

Locally known as *payola* or '*solli*' from the word 'solidarity', incentive-driven coverage involves event organisers giving money or 'T&T' to journalists for attending their events. It is supposedly meant to cater for the travel expenses of the journalist, but essentially functions as a bribe for covering the story as it more or less guarantees the story being selected. In this sense, '*solli*' seems to act as a form of localised newsworthiness in political news selection. While a few media houses like Joy FM strictly forbid their employees from taking these incentives, the practice has become so institutionalised that it forms part of considerations when salaries are being in majority of media organisations (Amankwah, Ako-Gyima, and Quansah (2017).

The fact that most journalists receive comparatively low salaries makes them quite susceptible to accepting '*solli*'. Skjerdal (2018) also suggests two main reasons for the pervasiveness of incentive-driven coverage in African newsrooms. The professional approach views it as a product of unethical professional attitudes of journalists, while the cultural approach sees it as reflective of "a society where a system of informal gratification is engrained in the local culture and as such does not pose an ethical problem to the journalists" (ibid, 164). This speaks to the societal culture of clientelism so endemic in African societies, and which has enabled and somewhat legitimised the practice, not just in the media but also in other institutions such as politics. Sampaio-Dias (2019) argues that cash for coverage constitutes a media manipulation tool that creates conflict of interest, subverts professionalism of journalists, undermines the media's credibility, and constrains diversity in media content while also weakening democracy.

All interviewees including journalists themselves criticised the dominance of biased reporting among private media as it undermined media credibility and independence. They believed that this sort of reporting was largely due to financial difficulties and ownership of media houses, resulting in a strong political parallelism between the media and politicians. One senior editor explains:

*Media ownership today in Ghana is in the hands of the people we are supposed to be watching and questioning and demanding accountability from. The print, electronic, TV and radio are controlled, owned, managed by politicians and business owners and there's an unholy relationship between the politician and the business owner... So true independent media today in Ghana, I can say, does not exist. Even state-owned media which is supposed to be public service television and radio aren't entirely independent because they survive on state subvention....It is very difficult to be independent-minded, especially when you're working in a media organisation which is aligned to a particular political party.*

Although not specifically mentioned among journalists in Joy FM and Citi FM, both (women) politicians and civil society experts I interviewed criticised the practice whereby journalists accept 'gifts' from politicians for positive coverage, to kill negative stories, or to publish false information about political rivals.

*The climate of the media is faulty. It's not decent to even publish, I mean, I am amazed that in Ghana, you can publish lies about somebody, you can just write anything.*

The perception that news can be bought contributes to loss of trust in the media, which in turn will have serious implications for citizens' democratic participation as much of the political news they receive is from media sources. Studies show that when citizens lose trust in the media, they become apathetic to political processes, reducing their political participation (Tettey 2011).

#### Monetization of news content

One of the key differences that distinguishes private media from state-owned is the prioritisation of commercial interests in the former. In this sense, private media seem more concerned about making profit and less about meeting the needs of citizens in terms of providing political information that is balanced, factual and representative of the Ghanaian political landscape. The tendency to focus on controversial and conflict news has already been noted. This is to ensure their audience's attention is sustained. Other practices include selecting sources who give 'exciting' content as one of the political journalists clarifies:

*In news coverage, who is speaking matters. [You consider] the kind of discourse that the politician can drive, because mind you, in doing that you are guided by what sells.*

A news editor further explains that the preoccupation with infotainment as news is much a product of journalistic demand as it is of audience interests.

*The media will only call you when you oblige, and when you oblige, you do a good job of it. If you don't do a good job of it, they'll not call you again, because you've made their programme boring...Because the reality is that the shows are also to be sold to an audience, so if you bring boring people, the audience themselves will say "Ah you people, what are you doing?" They'll go and complain on Facebook. Yes! So the truth is, yes we're doing news, but it's also a show, and so people have to deliver on that.*

Much as these two quotes show a clear preference for content that 'sells' among the private radio stations, the latter comment also illustrates that this is not just a simple matter of profit-making but rather, a complex negotiation involving media goals and audience interests. Audience and market demands therefore exert much pressure on journalists to adopt certain strategies in covering politics. From a sociological perspective, news is a cultural product shaped by the socio-cultural and political milieu within which it is produced (Schudson 2011). In this regard, it seems that as long as audience interests and market pressures ensure it, infotainment in political journalism among Ghanaian private radio stations (at least) is likely to endure. Thus, it will be amiss to dismiss private media stations like the two sampled here as being solely interested in profits. Besides, it needs bearing in mind that as most (private) media organisations in Ghana as elsewhere in Africa struggle to stay in business (Mabweazara 2018; Schiffrin 2009), a key priority for media houses is to generate income to sustain their existence. One of the civil society experts notes:

*The media is a competitive field in terms of business. They want what will sell so scandalous issues are more saleable than say, analytical issues. And so that is also another problem because we have more of the private media who are struggling. They are also looking for money so most of the time, it is scandalous issues that they publish rather than issues that can change the perception and inclination of the voter.*

Commercialism among African media organisations, it seems, is more a matter of survival than may be the case for countries such as the US whose practice of liberal journalism model is also market oriented. This is one key distinction that sets African media apart from Western media organisations.

As mentioned earlier, private radio stations have a strong appetite for controversial and conflict news. This is because such stories provide more compelling narratives that have a higher chance of attracting audiences. In the absence of such, journalists are known to generate conflict themselves in shows. For example, a government official can be called live during a news broadcast and questioned on a current issue, after which another with an opposing view is brought in to 'respond' to what has been said, creating a pseudo-conflict. This practice of pitting political opponents together and giving them time to 'respond' to each other is quite common among not just radio but on television as well. It sensationalises politics in ways that scholars have argued contribute to a 'watering down' of politics (Reinemann et al 2011), which in turn creates political apathy among citizens.

Women politicians admitted that the penchant for controversy and conflict in the news served as a deterrent to media appearances as they felt the media were more interested in entertaining audiences than educating them. This suggests that the range of political views shared on the news is not likely to be fully representative of the society as certain people would have been excluded. When this happens, citizens lose valuable contributions that may have been important for their democratic development. If the media are expected to provide accurate, fact-based information to enable citizens fulfil their democratic mandate, then these practices in political reporting are more likely to hinder rather than facilitate democratic processes, particularly if they result in discouraging certain politicians from being seen and heard in the media. They not only serve to undermine the media's role as a space that ensures equal access to persons (Dahlgren 2018), but also contribute to perpetuating the masculinisation of politics.

#### The technological affordances of radio

The way media technology plays out in political news production on radio is that it allows journalists to create sound bites which they can then (re)play at will. The lack of visuals, which take time to prepare, and the affordances of radio make it easier for politicians to be interviewed or to create sound bites from press releases which journalists can subsequently co-opt for the hourly news for example. This is an advantage that broadcast media like radio has over print. In this regard, radio seems to lend itself more easily to news media logic because of the technological affordances that allow the taping of such things as sound bites. One of the news editors explained how this works:

*There are some popular individuals who give exciting sound bites, who like to talk anytime you call them. So you might get say the minister responsible for the matter at hand or you might get a political party's spokesperson who is exciting to listen to, who would give you your sound bites and draw traction to your website or page.*

Sound bites allow journalists and politicians to capture the essence of an issue in a dramatic and sensational manner, thereby creating more interesting news content that meets the commercial needs of radio stations. Nonetheless, studies show that sound bites decrease politicians' access to the public sphere while forcing them to speak in ways that cater to the needs of the media not the public per se (Farnsworth and Lichter 2011). Again, because of

their concise nature, sound bites can easily be taken out of context and manipulated for other purposes. For example, in their 2016 election coverage, Joy FM often played funny sound bites of aspects of particular politicians' campaign speeches. A popular example was one in which the former president John Mahama referred to himself as 'a dead goat'. As it was taken out of context, it seemed from the sound bite that he was referring to himself as a dead goat rather than making a comparison. Thus, sound bites can be manipulated to create negative impressions about politicians which then deters them from engaging with the media. From this, it can also be assumed that politicians who cannot 'talk' in sound bites may not be regarded as newsworthy and therefore may be excluded from the news even if they have something valuable to say. Given the low likelihood that many politicians will not fit the criteria of rank, charisma and communication competence, it seems that journalists in the private radio stations sampled here operate with a limited set of political sources as throughout the interviews, the same sources kept being mentioned. If we consider that representativeness and inclusion are key features of democracy, then the practice of source recruitment from a limited pool of politicians because most others fail to fit a certain media-based criteria is not one that is likely to facilitate democratic processes.

### Conclusion

The popularity of radio in Ghana gives it immense power to shape public opinion. Yet, radio is also the medium that seems to allow abusive behaviour from panellists and audiences. Emerging democracies like Ghana face more difficulties than their established counterparts because they grapple with managing challenges with media abundance while also working to strengthen their fragile democracies (Votmer, 2013). Because of this unique challenge, popular media like radio seems to be a prime space with great potential to either facilitate or seriously hinder democratic efforts. This paper has shown that to a large extent, the news media logic that guides production of political news among private radio stations may be doing the latter rather than the former as they confine political discourse to a limited set of views which is not representative of the political reality, project a narrow view of politics, and curtail plurality in media content. The importance of equal media access to all politicians is illustrated by the fact that it is mandated by law according to Ghana's 1992 constitution. Despite this legal provision however, the reality is that the media space is not a level-playing field (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2017) as certain groups, particularly women politicians, are often marginalised or excluded from the news. In a young democracy like Ghana, this is a worrying trend that needs addressing if democracy is to be consolidated. To do this, further study is needed, including expanding the research to other media platforms, so that we can better understand these political news production practices and their impact on democratic processes with a view to minimising the negative impact.

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