



POLICY BRIEF

CRITICAL STEPS IN ENSURING RESPONSIBLE MEDIA COVERAGE OF ELECTIONS 2020

BACKGROUND

For any country that thrives on democracy, the media's role of informing citizens and creating platforms that allow for divergent views to be shared is vital. Through the media, citizens are able to make informed decisions that affect different aspects of their lives, including making political choices during elections. The media has a constitutional right, derived from Article 21 of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana to operate without any impediment. It is this constitutional right that enables the media to play their watchdog role of ensuring accountability from public officials. However, there have been instances where the media have abused their freedom leading to conflict and unnecessary tensions as in the case of the Rwandan genocide between the Hutus and Tutsis in 1994.

In Ghana, just as the case may be in other countries, political tensions are heightened during elections which could either be suppressed or escalated into conflict and violence depending on how the media operates. It has been observed with much concern, how the media sensationalizes political issues since Ghana went back to the ballot in 1992, and especially during election years where they seek to set the agenda based on the political ideologies they subscribe to. This situation, has worsened with the proliferation of local language-speaking media who have the arduous task of translating and interpreting issues from the English language to local languages to the large number of semi-literate and illiterate audiences in Ghana. In light of this, the key question is, how do we ensure that media houses, both English and local language speaking, produce balanced and accurate reports of issues pre, during and post elections 2020.

Thus, this policy brief seeks to advocate for a holistic approach to finding solutions by focusing on effective ways the media in Ghana can operate to promote peaceful elections.

PENPLUSBYTES WEBINAR SERIES-A FIRST STEP TO APPROACHING THE ISSUES

Penplusbytes launched a weekly Webinar Series to engage with and tackle emerging issues in Ghana's election 2020 from an interdisciplinary perspective, so as to find solutions to the multifaceted issues of inclusivity, legitimacy and acceptance of fair election results in Ghana. The Webinar Series interrogated ways in which technology, pointed advocacy, as well as civic education can ensure there are no unfair restrictions placed on segments of the society, especially people with disabilities, young persons, the elderly and the vulnerable. Penplusbytes convened a weekly panel of a diverse group of individuals, including tech experts, leading scholars and thinkers, policy makers and occasionally politicians. Each session had interesting revelations that are worth the time and attention of the government, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), donor agencies, as well as individuals who have an interest in ensuring equity in elections.

The fourth Webinar titled, 'Media Reportage and Elections, finding a Balance' had Charles Ayiku Nii Ayiku Ayiku, Lecturer, Faculty of information and Technology & Communications Studies, University of Professional Studies, Accra, Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny, Communications Team Lead, CDD-Ghana and Abdul Hayi Moomen, News Editor, GBC.

The fifth webinar which was titled 'Local Media's Reportage on Elections 2020: The Editors' Perspective' had as lead discussants Lawyer Zakaria Tanko Musah, Lecturer/Legal Counsel, Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ), Mr. Akwasi Agyeman, News & Current Affairs Editor, Adom FM./Phd Candidate Institute of African studies, University of Ghana and Mr. Isaac Kwesi Mintah, Editor/Programs Manager, Lorldorlonyo FM, Hohoe.

The 6th in the series, 'Responsible Media Coverage of Elections; Multiple perspectives' sought to find specific solutions to help the work of key media regulatory bodies in Ghana; brought on Mrs. Linda Asante-Agyei, Vice President, GJA, Mr. George Sarpong, Executive Secretary, NMC, Ms. Rosalind K. Amoh, Deputy Editor, Daily Graphic, Mr. Kwasi Agyeman, News & Current Affairs Editor, Adom FM. Altogether, more than 1000 persons participated in the discussions both on Zoom and on Face book Live over a three week period.

1

Employment structure of media personnel

Local media tend to employ persons who may not necessarily have the professional training in journalism but rather those who are fluent in the local language. This is evident usually in their style of reporting. Most local media personnel cannot write the local language they speak and that is also a challenge to their translation of content from the English language to the Twi language

2

Newsroom Practice

Currently there are very few, if any, media houses who have dedicated or special desks for elections reportage in newsrooms. This allows for pressure to mount on journalists who are expected to cover everyday news and also the unique news that emerges in any election year. This often leads to wrongful reportage and spreading of false news.

3

Specialized courses at communication institutions for local media personnel

Media and journalism institutions do not design special courses in local language reporting for journalists who work for, or hope to work for local media houses. Journalists who work for both English speaking and Local language media, often do not have basic training in political reporting. This means that they report political issues coloured by their biases and other worldviews, which in most cases bring about unnecessary tensions especially during election periods.

4

Media Ownership Control and Commercialization

Media houses are owned by businesswomen/men and politicians who use these platforms to champion their personal interests. Although there is nothing wrong with a politician owning a media house, journalists who work in these media houses should be allowed to operate professionally and the GJA ought to find ways to make this mandatory. The National Communications Authority (NCA) should also publish the names of the real owners of media houses in Ghana to ensure transparency in their operations.

5

Regulation of the media/Enactment of media laws

Media personnel should be licensed to practice, just like lawyers are called to the bar, to bring sanity to this area of work. Further, all journalists should be certified before they can operate. A law should also be enacted that makes bloggers and other non-trained media personnel obliged to follow laid down tenets and ethics before they proceed with their sensational reportage. While all these may be debatable, it is important for the purposes of quality information for the citizens.

KEY ISSUES/CONCERNS

6

Intensify Media and Information Literacy (MIL)

The campaign for a media and information literate citizenry should be heightened. MIL among citizens will enable them critically scrutinize the work of the media. The MIL campaigns targeting the youth should be extended to politicians.

7

Stakeholder Efforts

The NMC and GJA must collaborate effectively to play an invaluable role in election reportage by the media. This collaboration will ensure intensified oversight by regulators on what media houses do during the election period.

8

Enforcement of Rules/Regulations

All media houses MUST enrol their reporters under the umbrella of the Ghana Journalists Association and there should be clear punitive measures for media personnel who disregard the code of ethics of the Association. Indeed, only journalists trained on elections reportage should be allowed to report on elections. This approach would not only ensure media houses train their reporters on professional ways of reporting on electoral happenings, but also ensure a balanced and accurate reportage towards peaceful elections.

9

Call for specialized courses at communication institutions for local media personnel

Media houses hardly organize in-house, on-the-job or external profession trainings for journalists. Journalists should be trained to how to report on elections. By way of evaluation, periodic townhall meetings should also be organized for citizens to share their views on how the media is operating. This platform would afford the media a great opportunity to explain the nature of their work to citizens and also enable them to work on their shortfalls. This is very crucial because the media exists for the greater good of the masses hence, they should have a say in what the media does especially if it does not inure to their benefit.

10

Distinct codes of ethics for English Broadcasts and Local Language broadcasts

The GJA's codes of ethics should be reviewed to include the nuances of the local language used in broadcast media since it has become the part of the media landscape in Ghana. By so doing, we could have a distinct code of ethics for especially local language media in addition to the existing ones. The GJA should also collaborate with media managers to have intensive training on these codes of ethics for journalists to ensure their professionalism.



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CONCLUSIONS

Whereas the importance and impact of the media's role in elections cannot be underestimated, there appears to be a gap in capacity building of media personnel in covering elections, as well as a collaborative effort of stakeholders in bringing sanity to the media space which could have dire consequences on our democracy if not critically addressed. Stakeholders need to take policy actions that will ensure that the media in their coverage of the elections are circumspect. For instance, Policy Action 9 {Continuous capacity building Funding for media trainings of media personnel and Continuous Personal development (CPD)} should, as a matter of urgency, be implemented to ensure that journalists who are going to be assigned to cover the 2020 Ghana elections are well equipped and competent in elections reporting.

ABOUT PENPLUSBYTES



Penplusbytes is a not-for-profit organization driving change through innovations in four key areas: using new digital technologies to enable good governance and accountability, investigating new media which drive innovations, enhancing oversight for effective utilisation of mining, oil and gas revenue and conducting research to improve health and environmental outcomes.

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