

Mass Media in Africa's Nascent Democracy: The West African Story

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Abstract

The West African region and indeed Africa has not been very successful when it comes to the entrenchment of democratic values and indeed its gains for the people. Its governance history as well as the peculiar challenges such as poverty, corruption, abuse of office, illiteracy etc that have plagued the region are some of the realities it has had to deal with in its struggle to consolidate democracy. With these realities, the mass media overtime has evolved and remained resilient in its responsibility of providing wholesome information and as a platform for the discussions of political issues for the populace. This work examines the role of the mass media in consolidating democracy in West Africa. It focuses on Ghana and Nigeria; from 1993 and 1999 respectively, till date. The choice of these countries, is informed by the sustenance of their nascent democracies amidst challenges. It employed the secondary method of data analysis through the review of related literatures. Despite progresses made in the region, the media is still faced with challenges such as corruption, partisanship, violence towards journalists, lack of adequately trained media personnel etc. The work establishes that the role of the mass media in disseminating information and engaging citizens in meaningful debates on political issues is key in consolidating democracy in West Africa in subtle yet powerful ways. This study attempts to highlight the efforts of the West African mass media in entrenching democratic values in the region. This is because the absence of a competent media may jeopardize an enduring democracy. A synergy among governments, the mass media and indeed journalists towards tackling these problems faced by the mass media, can further empower the media in performing its role towards democratic consolidation in West Africa.

Keywords: mass media, media, democracy, West Africa, Africa

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960's when most of the African countries attained independence from colonial rule, the history of governance in the West African sub region and indeed Africa has been characterised by the presence and activities of the military. Poverty, corruption, abuse of public office and Illiteracy which have been predominant in the West African region are hitherto other salient problems, which did not encourage the entrenchment of political culture in West Africa. The very weak democratic institutions that couldn't support vibrant and enduring democratic processes, even in states that seemed to be 'democratic', only meant that the military found a conducive environment to thrive. The mass media in all of these confusion, had to remain resilient in its responsibility as a major player towards democratisation of the region.

Thus the growth and development of democracy in West Africa from where it was to what it is shaping into today, only means that the mass media is thriving in its function as a vehicle for the promotion of democracy and as a watchdog of government. 'As early as the 17th century, enlightenment theorists had argued that publicity and openness provide the best protection against tyranny and the excesses of arbitrary rule' Coronel, (2001). This means that the mass media which is the tool to provide these

'publicity and openness' is crucial in any society that wants to be democratic. Without communication, democracy is non-existent. This is because without the avenue to transmit information to the populace, whether through the print, electronic, or social media as we have today, it is virtually impossible to inform and engage people towards fully participating in the democratic processes of their societies. Any society that does not engage the people in its processes of governance is not said to be democratic. This is seen in the description of democracy by Appadorai 68' 'as a system of government under which the people exercise the governing power either directly or through representatives periodically elected by themselves.' This can only be achieved if the people are aware of their rights as well as the political happenings in their society and also seen to actively participate in the democratic processes thereof. And how can they be aware if the media does not bring the information to them? The activities of the media in any society is a reflection of the level of political maturity or immaturity as the case maybe that exist in such a society. As cited by Asare, "Modern governments, especially democratic ones rely so much on the availability and accessibility of information to both the government and the governed" Asare, (2009). A society where there is a wide range of media choices at the disposal of the populace, with journalists freely engaging in their

duties of receiving and transmitting wholesome information is a reflection of a highly democratic society and vice versa. The role of the mass media in informing, educating and thereby influencing public opinion is very key and cannot be overemphasised in any democratic system, because an important element of democracy and rule of law is freedom of speech/expression. If the mass media is able to objectively transmit information across for the consumption of the general public, the public is able to make informed decisions towards participating and contributing to the consolidation of democracy in their society. How freely the mass media is able to operate in any given society is a reflection of how democratic that society is.

Prior to independence and immediately after, a greater number of West Africa's population resided in the rural areas. These population were predominantly illiterates and engaged in mostly subsistent living. The areas were characterised with very bad road networks if the roads were there at all, lack of basic facilities such as hospitals, electricity, schools, pipe borne water etc, lack of transmission gadgets necessary to cover the national territories, etc. This made it very difficult for the mass media which at the time was rather very fragile, to be able to penetrate into these areas where the majority of the population was concentrated. Even though colonialism and subsequent independence, brought in some form of development across the West African region, e.g. education, better roads, hospitals etc these dividends were hardly felt by the rural dwellers. Also, the departure of the colonial masters at independence back to their home countries, created a vacuum which only meant that "western-educated Africans occupying low level administrative posts in the cities automatically assumed the higher level jobs and lifestyle left vacant by their departed European bosses" Moody, (2001).

This transfer into a new lifestyle modelled after the colonial masters which the 'privileged' western-educated Africans enjoyed and were willing to entrench into the African political system, whether military or civilian held out a great deal of control over the ruled and by extension the mass media especially by the military who ruled the region for the most part. 'The mass media having fought very hard for African independence could not close its eyes to Africa's slide into protracted military autocracy, corruption, bad governance, economic exploitation and all manners of misrule meted on the African population by indigenous military leaders' NGARA and ESEBONU, (2012). As that was the only means through which the people became aware of the activities of the military juntas across the region and also the only means the people could clamour for better governance. Therefore they had to struggle to survive. The presence and activities of the military

for many years in the governance of most West African countries particularly Ghana and Nigeria at one point in time or the other only meant that the mass media as a tool for promoting democracy through receiving and transmitting information was extremely debilitated in its function throughout these periods. A classic example would be the activities of the military junta in Nigeria during the Babangida's regime. 'Media houses were shut down with magazines and newspapers confiscated. Journalists were harassed detained and draconian decrees enacted to curtail press freedom' doublegist, (2013). Also, Numerous detentions without trails, numerous death threats, countless physical harassments and mal-handling, destruction or confiscation of a whole publication machineries and vehicles' doublegist (2013) were some of what journalists and media owners had to face. It was during the rule of this same military junta that one of Nigeria's seasoned and celebrated journalists the late Dele Giwa was assassinated in October of 1987 doublegist (2013).

Also the situation was not any different or better in Ghana for example, 'after the democratically- elected People's National Party (PNP) was overthrown by the military, the constitution suspended and the Ghana press commission abolished' (Kweku Rockson). These draconian rules continued in Ghana "When Ft. Lt. Rawlings in the late 1981 seized power for the second time, he formed the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) setting aside the liberal media reforms initiated by president Limann. Under the PNDC, the third constitution, along with the Press Commission, was cancelled and repressive laws brought in" Owusu, (2011/ 2012). In other West African countries these oppressions by the military continued throughout their rule, cutting across the different spheres of the mass media not just limited to the print media but electronic media as well. All these further pushed the people back into the dark age similar to that identified by Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba, as the **parochial political culture** where "People have little knowledge of the political system beyond what happens in their immediate local environment" as quoted by Anifowose and Enemuo, (1999).

Poverty, corruption and illiteracy are other factors that affected the mass media as earlier observed, not only are the people especially the ones in the rural areas not able to read and write, most times they don't even have the purchasing power to access and own the various forms of media from radio, television to newspapers, magazines etc. these are people who barely can afford the required three square meals, proper shelter, clothe themselves, let alone buy newspapers or radio in order to listen to news. The West Africa's mass media though faced with these daunting challenges remained resilient, knowing its very vital function in informing the

people thereby, being a vehicle for the consolidation of democracy in the sub region, because information is power.

With the increase in democratic efforts by most countries in West Africa and indeed Africa, as well as regional and sub-regional organisations such as the African Union, ECOWAS, International Organisations like United Nations, European Union etc, in promoting mass media activities in the region, democracy is gaining popularity in West Africa. As quoted by Karikari, 2010 “The African Union, ECOWAS, etc have adopted binding protocols and declaration advancing press freedom and freedom of expression”. These have aided in the growth and advancements of mass media operations in Africa and West Africa in particular. The mass media has evolved over the years, and with that comes advancement even in its functions. Not only is the mass media engaged in the receiving and transmission of information to the public from the government and vice versa thereby serving as a bridge and channel of communication, but also serves as a watchdog, reminding the government of its promises to the people, making it more accountable as well as providing a platform where the people can be engaged in meaningful discussions, thereby participating in the governance of their society. This has placed the media at a very strategic position as far as democracy is concerned. According to Philip Lee, ‘People can only participate and make their wishes known if public communication is made an integral part of political democracy. He argues further that ‘For democracy to be functional it ‘demands a system of constant interaction with all the people accessibility at all levels, a public ethos which allows conflicting ideas to contend, and which provides for full participation in reaching consensus on socio-cultural, economic and political goals.’ Lee, (1995). This defines the function of the mass media in a democratic society.

MASS MEDIA: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To try to define the mass media seems very simple and straight forward, but the evolution of the mass media over the years, also brings a shift from the conventional definition to a more comprehensive one; one that captures its meaning within the scope of what the mass media has evolved into today. ‘Mass media refer to any agency, modern or traditional, that operates for the articulation and dissemination of ideas and information, generally with intent to influence or control an audience or the institutions that constitute legalised power and authority’. Obasanjo and Mabogunje, (1992). According to Chris Livesey, ‘Mass media refer to channels of communication that involve transmitting information in some way, shape or form to a large numbers of people’ Livesey, (2011). Also for Steven Coleman,

‘Mass media means the technology that is intended to reach a mass audience. It is the primary means of communication used to reach the vast majority of the general public. The most common platforms for mass media are newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the internet’. From this few definitions it is clear that mass media involves some form of communication whether written, spoken or visual broadcast that is purposed to reach a large audience towards either informing or educating the populace thereby influencing their opinions on issues. However with the advent of the internet and mobile cellular phones, the definition of Mass Media should also evolve such that mass media refers to the *interactive* means or channel of transmitting or passing across ideas and information to a large number of people in order to inform and thereby influence the opinions of the people. This definition is informed by the fact that with the newspaper and magazines, and to a large extent the radio and television, information is only one dimensional ‘In the sense that those communicating a message to an audience do not receive simultaneous feedback from that audience’ Livesey, (2011). But with the advent of the cellular phones and other mobile devices using platforms such as the Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instant messaging, etc., a more interactive platform is obtained whereby both those informing and the audience receiving the information are interacting and exchanging views even on real time basis. For example by clicking on the thumbs up or thumbs down icon on such platforms like that of the Facebook, Twitter etc people are able to give or share their opinions on certain issues. This makes the whole process of communication not just informative but interactive thereby providing a richer communication and a well informed and educated audience. This has made the mass media a very integral part of every society. ‘As the general public typically relies on the mass media to provide information regarding political issues, social issues, entertainment and news in pop culture’ (Steven Coleman,).

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE MASS MEDIA IN WEST AFRICA

Ever since man lived within a community there has been the need for interaction, to pass on one information or the other within the society both near and far across a large group of people. This need brought about various forms of communication within the West African region cutting across verbal and non-verbal means. ‘Though in a limited form, this media carried out all the existing functions of the mass communication today: information, education, entertainment, enlightenment and surveillance’ (Ezeh). These indigenous means of communication were created by Africans, in Africa for Africans. Examples include peer groups, age grades, talking drums, town criers, etc in different ways such as

folklore, songs, proverbs, stories, riddles etc. In West Africa, like any other region or society, the mass media has evolved and is still evolving from what is was before, during and after the colonial times to what we have today, regardless of the region's peculiar challenges of colonialism, military dictatorship, bad governance etc. West Africa has even been among the regions that championed the course for promoting the existence of a vibrant mass media in Africa. According to Faringer, 1991, 'The first newspaper published for and by Africans, then, emerged in the British West African colonies of Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast and later Nigeria.' In the former British colonies of West Africa the press dates back more than 175 years, while in the former French colonies and in East Africa it is less than a century old" Esipisu and Kariithi, (2007). No doubt the West African press has been in the forefront towards establishing and promoting an enduring press within the African continent.

In February 1801, the first known newspaper in black Africa (East and West Africa) was printed Esipisu and Kariithi, (2007). 'Sierra Leone started Africa's first newspaper, the Royal Gazette and Sierra Leone Advertiser' Esipisu and Kariithi, (2007). The wave in the growth of newspapers and indeed mass media in west Africa later moved towards Ghana and Nigeria respectively 'In 1822,(21 years) after the first newspaper was published in Sierra Leone, the semi-official hand written Royal Gold Coast gazette was founded in Accra, capital of what was then the Gold Coast(now Ghana)' Esipisu and Kariithi, (2007) . According to them 'Nigeria's first ever newspaper the weekly Iwe Ihorin was founded by Reverend Henry Townsend in 1859 and printed by missionaries'. Also the "Elolombe Ya Kamerun"(The Cameroon Sun) a mission paper was established in 1908'(kaylehope.com) "The earliest newspapers, of the 19th century West Africa circulating among the indigenous populations began as religious publications published by missionaries' Nyamnjoh,(2005). The involvement of the missionaries in the press especially the early newspapers, was the beginning of the survival and growth of the press and mass media by extension, in West Africa.

As time passed, the environment became increasingly conducive for the growth, expansion and entrenchment of the mass media along different lines in West Africa and Africa as a continent. This was particularly evident in the British colonies who were to an extent more tolerable towards indigenous media than their French counterparts. It therefore provided yet another platform through which the fight for independence began. 'Elite, western-educated West Africans including diaspora returning from North America and the West Indies began to publish claims for independence in the local media' Kintz, (2015). It

became evident that the mass media if allowed to grow and develop further, could serve as a very powerful tool for the emancipation of Africans towards achieving their independence. Even though the press in this case the early newspapers established by the missionaries provided a bedrock for the growth and expansion of media in West Africa, the intention from the beginning was not for the political benefit of the Africans in any way as rightly buttressed by Nyamnjoh 2005, 'The press was largely a European creation to serve the information, education and entertainment needs of the large settler communities, leaving the black readership at the mercy of an irrelevant content and /or in search of alternative channels of communication'. Faringer, 1999, argues that 'The African press emerged under colonialism and during the following two centuries, its development closely followed that of the press in Europe and North America. The colonial power she asserts, 'Strongly influenced the development of journalism on the African continent, by introducing a rather authoritarian press concept and restricting the growth of an indigenous press' Esipisu and Kariithi, (2007).

This perhaps was to cripple the indigenous media from waxing stronger as it became evident it could serve as a powerful tool for the emancipation and clamour for independence by Africans in the West African region and indeed Africa as a continent. As suggested by Nyamnjoh, 2005, 'This rigid control of the press, made it particularly difficult for African elites to articulate their anti-colonial struggles via the mass media, especially as broadcasting was invariably under much tighter control by colonialists'. The resilience of the press continued regardless all through the colonial period and even unto the post-colonial era where the colonial masters still maintained a form of indirect control over their colonies, but not as stringent as it was during the colonial period.

As the African press struggled to survive amidst stringent conditions due to its believe in its function as channel of disseminating information to the general public, it further became entrenched as a powerful tool in the hands of the African Nationalist leaders. By creating English as the lingua franca in the British colonies of Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone etc, it became easy to spread information in English whereby it could be widely understood among the Anglophone West African countries and French among the francophone West African countries. Nationalist such as Jomoh Kenyatta, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Kwame Nkrumah etc were prominent in their use of the press in the struggle for the emancipation and independence of West Africa and indeed Africa from their colonists for example "Nnamdi Azikiwe launched the west Africa pilot in Lagos in 1937" Esipisu and Kariithi, (2007),

“Kwame Nkurumah also founded his evening news in Accra in 1948” Barton, (1979). This encouraged the growth of more indigenous press within the West African region and beyond; the ushering of what Jimmy Ocitti in his article termed “The second theory of the press, which is The Libertarian Model; where individuals begin to demand more political freedom. The attainment of independence in the West African region and indeed Africa was largely due to the activities of the indigenous press and even after independence the media continued to grow as agents of nation building as well as political development. ‘Ghana’s former Attorney- General and Minister of Justice Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo in her assessment also said ‘The press played a significant role in the anti- colonial struggle, mobilizing nationalists’ consciousness and exposing the oppression and inequities under colonialism.’ Owusu, (2011)

Broadcast Media later sprang in the wave of media development and growth within the West African region. The 19th and 20th centuries brought in advancements in the channels, size, speed and availability of information to the West African populace. People who could read and write or could afford to buy a radio set or a television set were better informed as to the happenings around them; and could therefore make more informed decisions. Hence were able to form their opinions about certain issues around and about them. ‘Radio and television broadcast can be received (provided you have a receiver) throughout most of Africa, and literacy is not a requirement as it is for newspaper consumption’ Ott, (1998). This development provided a wider scope for the mass media as a tool for communication and information as more people were getting educated, they could listen and watch and make sense of what they are listening to or watching as the case may be.

For West Africa and indeed its democracy, the greatest breakthrough was the new media namely: satellite, cellular/mobile phones, internet and other new information technologies, with social network platforms like Instant Messaging, Facebook, Twitter, You Tube etc, these have become the most convenient, cheaper and easier way to inform and thereby influence people’s political decisions. From Morocco to South Africa, Mauritania to Ethiopia, Senegal to Nigeria, these new media make available to West Africans and indeed Africans, stories and happenings across the sub region, continent and beyond whether through text, pictures or videos with just a click of a button. More rightly observed by Ott, (1998), ‘The electronic media has given a larger percentage of constituents than ever before the ability to easily and quickly transmit their options on public policy issues to their representatives. At the same time in the same vein, the opportunity costs of

participation are reduced’. He also added that ‘This media has empowered ordinary citizens to participate more directly in the democratic process of their society’. According to Essoungou, (2010) he asserted that Facebook has been the most visited social media platform in most of Africa; ‘This usage cut across the regular African citizens to philosophers and even to political leaders’. He also added that “Journalists across the continent are increasingly using the mobile phone as their primary reporting tool needed to collect text, photo and video in order to broadcast their content’. Essoungou, (2010). The proliferation of these media devices within the West African region has made the region a flourishing market for industries and marketers of these products. Report shows that ‘Nearly two-third: 65% of households in 23 countries in sub Saharan African had at least one mobile phone in 2013, with median growth of 27% since 2008’. Tortora, (2014). The spread and acceptance of the new media among the West African populace outweighs that of any of the traditional media in the history of mass media in West Africa. This is because today it is a lot easier for digital media such as the cellular phones to penetrate into the remote areas in the Western African region with more variety in terms of whether text, pictures or videos and even cheaper than the traditional media such as the periodicals: newspapers magazines, and the broadcast: radio and television, that would require one to be able to read and write, buy daily or weekly or monthly as the case may be or buy radio sets and batteries or satellite for the television sets.

MASS MEDIA AND THE GROWTH OF DEMOCRACY IN WEST AFRICA

Before now in most of West Africa whether the Anglophone, Francophone or even the Lusophone countries, the major link between the government and the people have been the traditional media (newspapers, magazines, radios and televisions). These were mainly owned by the government or a few affluent individuals, operating within stringent conditions given by the military dictators at the time. This made the penetration of and access to information very limited; more discouraging was the fact that only those who could read and write and also who could afford to buy them had access to the information. An atmosphere not conducive for the growth of democratic governance. ‘The role of the mass media in educating and informing the populace cannot be over emphasised especially in a region like west Africa’. This he argued is because ‘Most of the people in this region are illiterates and therefore do not know their freedom and rights as well as their duties especially with regards to democratic activities as well as the expectations of government to protect those rights on their behalf’. Lansner,(2006). Today however, thousands of public and private media exist across the sub region. Ranging from the traditional to the recent and the most sophisticated social media

which makes use of cellular phones, satellite and the internet. The use of these media cuts across the different stake holders within the society; Electoral Umpires, Political Parties/Politicians, Citizens and Civil Society Groups all rely on the mass media in the pursuit of their course. Formal education brought about by the colonial masters has also taken a huge leap in West Africa, this continued even after independence in diverse ways, today thousands of schools and tertiary institutions exist across the region providing children and adults opportunity to get formal education, sometimes even free. For example in Nigeria with the introduction of the Free Basic Education system, more children enrol in government schools in order to be able to read and write free of charge. With the increase in campaign and practice of democratisation within and outside the West African region the environment is further becoming more conducive for the proliferation of mass media and in particular, social media as instruments or channels through which information, political education, interactions, and platforms for meaningful political debates can be obtained. This development has provided a very easy and convenient way of bringing in the West African populace especially the youths into the political space. This is largely because the nature of social media is such that it is very attractive to the youths and hence it is mostly dominated by them. Lansner also added 'Today, new ICTs are rapidly changing how people, culture and countries access and exchange information they have reduced the power of single sources of information' and by implication the power of media monopoly.

Thomas R. Lansner cited Graham Murdock a British sociologist, who suggests that the media can promote democratic culture by fulfilling four basic conditions:

*Establishing space for free expression beyond commercial and government influence.

*Offering free public accessibility.

*Maintaining an arena that exposes and negotiates differences and provides the possibility of achieving consensus on the common good through exposition of diverse and inclusive programs and perspectives.

*Providing communications aimed at the audience's role as citizens rather than consumers.

Therefore if the West African media should operate within these parameters, which are centred and focused on informing and educating the audience, it will indeed serve to promote representative and participatory governance thereby serving as major institutions for building and consolidating democracy.

GHANA

The growth and consolidation of democracy in Ghana since her liberation from military dictatorship could not have been successful without the active role of the mass media. Today 'The international community

heralds Ghana as one of the symbols of procedural democracy in Africa'. Kalyango and Adu-Kumi, (2013). This is as a result of the resilience of the media throughout a chequered political history. 'The media landscape evolved when the 1992 Republican Constitution- which appears to have brought an end to series of coup d'états by the military- guaranteed multi- party democracy which took effect in January 1993' Owusu, (2011/12). The Ghanaian democratic environment has since provided a conducive environment for the mass media especially the independent media to thrive. Since the return of democracy, efforts have been made by the government and other independent media agencies towards this course for example according to Owusu who cited Blay-Amihere and Karikari, 'In the first parliament of the Fourth Republic- which was virtually one- party dominated as a result of opposition parties decision to boycott parliament after the 1992 general elections- a few private newspapers- the Free Press, Ghanaian Chronicle, Ghanaian Voice, The Independent, etc courageously and steadfastly filled the void and provided an alternative platform for public debate'. Owusu, (2011/12). Also in Ghana, 1995 was a watershed for broadcast media as rightly observed by Asare, 'For the first time in the history of the country the long standing monopoly held by the state owned Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) was broken'. Owusu, (2011/12). In this same year, frequencies were allocated both for radio and television broadcast. 'In 2008, the National Communication Authority of Ghana authorised over 104 television stations to operate, with five of them being free-to-air independent commercial TV stations. Also, the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) was under consideration for transformation into a public service broadcaster' Kalyango and Adu-Kumi, (2013).

The evolution and transformation of the mass media provided a very high threshold for the growth and consolidation of democracy in Ghana as Cited by the Ghanaian NMC's (National Media Commission) chairman who stated that 'Our democracy is stronger and growing because we have a free press and free speech' Owusu, (2011/12). He also added, 'Currently in virtually every district of Ghana, there is a local radio, and newspapers with national reach are also available. Access to television is not hard to come by'. This indeed provides for the Ghanaians an atmosphere which gives them a sense of belonging and participation in the democratic process of their country - 'Once the independent media started operating, radio positioned itself in the centre stage and started playing a pivotal role in the democratic and civil society building process. Freedom of expression and public participation in civil discourse became the norm, paving the way for people to engage in open discussion of issues on civic and political matters without being afraid of any

governmental consequence 'Asare, (2009). The growth and entrenchment of the new media mainly the mobile phones, internet etc has also played a phenomenal role in the democratic progress of Ghana as observed by Small, 'During Ghana's 2012 election campaign, politicians, media outlets, elections observers, non-governmental organisations and fund raisers all hopped on the mobile band wagon, using the technology in their own way, to meet their own needs' Small, (2015). This has become the trend as journalists within the West African region and indeed across the world are constantly relying on mobile phones and other mobile devices as primary sources of getting instant messages, pictures and videos as they broadcast information to their audience. The new media with particular reference to the mobile phones and other mobile devices have aided enthusiasm, participation, knowledge and quick response on the part of citizens before, during and even after the electoral process. This Owusu buttressed by saying 'The media since 1992 has been seen to facilitate participatory democracy'. It has become very convenient and easy to educate citizens on social media platforms on civic and political issues through campaign jingles for candidates,' election campaigns, political parties' logos, voter behaviour, voter rights and responsibilities, actual voting dates, general rules of the game etc through text, pictures and even videos, thereby being a first-hand tool for the political education of the populace.

Citizens on the other hand can also send their feedbacks, opinions through the same means to agencies and authorities concerned. According to Small, (2015) 'On the day of the 2012 election, a coalition of 4000 independent election observers equipped with basic mobile phones reduced fraud at the stations where they were deployed by about 60%'. He continued that 'Throughout the day each observer sent coded SMS messages about voter conduct and vote tallies to an 'observation centre' in the capital which used the data to cross-check official vote counts'. Small also added that 'Another initiative, The African Elections Project, allowed individuals to report cases of electoral violence via SMS' Small, (2015). Thus Owusu pointed out that, 'The NMC's chairman credited citizens' participation during the elections to the media freedom enjoyed by the citizens in public discourse debate'. He added that 'Currently Ghana has a diverse media sector with about 200 authorised FM stations, 12 private television stations and hundreds of newspapers' in fact he also buttressed that 'Ghana's standing in the comity of nations is high as the country with the freest press in Africa'. This clearly shows why Ghana has enjoyed the longest relatively peaceful democracy in the West African region from 1992-2012 (vibeghana.com/ghana/political-history-of-ghana). And presently, still enjoying democracy under President John Dramani Mahama who was re-

elected in 2014. Democracy is indeed being consolidated in Ghana since its liberation from military autocracy, media has grown and therefore provided an enabling environment for participatory democracy to thrive.

According to Kalyango and Adu-Kumi, (2013) the 'Media's keen watchdog role and mass mobilization are believed to have contributed to somewhat fair, transparent and competitive elections and the subsequent alternation of power' Also as rightly put by Temin and Smith, (2002) 'The electoral process in Ghana certainly would not have proceeded so smoothly or successfully without the lively contribution of the media. It is no coincidence that one of Africa's most democratic countries is also home to some of the most vibrant and outspoken media outlets on the continent'. This is an example other West African countries and indeed African countries should emulate.

NIGERIA

In a multi ethnic and multi-party country like Nigeria political activities are bound to be flurry. The electorates, political parties, electoral umpire and the politicians all bask in the euphoria of the political activities. It becomes imperative that the mass media lives up to its responsibility of disseminating wholesome information it receives, to the populace and also engaging the people in meaningful debates on political matters thereby helping them make informed decisions. This the Nigerian media has tried to achieve since Nigeria's independence. As rightly quoted by Oboh and Hudson, (2011) who cited Davies, (1993) 'Understandably therefore, the press has not only opposed and exposed anti-democratic tendencies at different times, it has also played the watchdog with a view to promoting and safeguarding democratisation'. They further added that 'In particular, the Nigerian press exposed the dubious democratisation programme of the military governments in Nigeria' like the 'Manipulated adoption of a single candidate by five different political parties under General Sani Abacha'. Oboh and Hudson (2011). Nigeria since 1999 has experienced a rather slow but uninterrupted democratic progress having liberated itself from the clutches of military dictatorship that has plagued the nation for decades alongside daunting challenges of corruption, bad governance, poverty, and the most recent security challenges (boko haram insurgency) especially in the North Eastern part of the country, illiteracy etc. This has been possible through inter alia the efforts of the mass media. As rightly put by Bamidele, 'Doubtless the watchdog role of the mass media was at work throughout the transition period'. He further added that 'All aspects of the transition to democracy in Nigeria (1998-1999) and subsequent elections were extensively covered and intensely reported by the media'. Bamidele, (2015).

Also worthy of note is the provision in the Nigerian constitution that states 'Every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference' (1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria), which provided yet a more conducive environment for mass media to thrive. This development helped Nigerians become aware and also engage in the democratic processes of their country. As the new democratically elected president Olusegun Obasanjo came into power in 1999, it paved the way for a new air of democratic leadership in the country. Leadership that was to bring forth democratic principles such as freedom of expression, speech, freedom of association and all other gains that come with democracy. The media throughout these years of nascent democracy, continued in its role as the "fourth pillar" in entrenching democracy for example when President Obasanjo and his allies began the so called 'third term agenda' in order to secure for himself an extension in office, a development that was in defiance of the existing constitution, the media was not in the dark. This the 'third termites' hoped to achieve through an amendment of the constitution, the media remained resolute in its course of informing, educating, and providing platforms for Nigerians to air their views on the political developments.

As rightly noted by Ibrahim and Egwu 'No sooner had Obasanjo settled down to his second term in office than the media were awash with speculation that a move was afoot to amend the constitution in order to extend the length of time a president could stay in office'. The media did not relent but rose to the occasion to fight for and protect the rather very delicate democracy which Nigeria needed to so badly safeguard. The media provided ample opportunities for citizens to become aware of what was going on for example, 'The media were in the vanguard of the mobilization of public opinion and in building the critical mass needed to defeat the Constitutional Amendment Bill in the National Assembly' Ibrahim and Egwu, (2006) they also added that 'The 2007 Movement also operated powerful propaganda machinery, by means of which it mobilized citizens and countered the strategies of the 'third termites'. They established a joint platform of the senate and the National Assembly under Chukwumerije and it was on this platform that the group addressed media houses, granted interviews, addressed press conferences and placed advertorials in newspapers' Ibrahim and Egwu, (2006). No doubt the efforts of the media by helping to thwart this third term agenda, provided an enabling environment for democratic progress rather than what was becoming a trend in West Africa and indeed Africa- a situation where leaders whether elected or not would want to remain in power for as long as possible. 'The media

coverage of the entire third term debate made it possible for citizens to take clear and unmistakable position regarding the immediate and long-term implications of tenure extension for consolidation of democracy by giving coverage to the opposition activity'. Ibrahim and Egwu also added that 'The media rallied public opinion in support of democracy by giving coverage to the opposition activity. Example the live coverage by African Independent Television (AIT) of the proceedings of the National Assembly deliberations on the Constitutional Amendment Bill, in particular made it more difficult for the presidency to manipulate the process successfully'. This was a step in the right direction by the Nigerian mass media and worthy of commendation. In the 2007 elections, which most Nigerians believed was marred with electoral irregularities, the media played its role in providing information that helped even the Nigerian Judiciary in its judgement as quoted by Oboh and Hudson (2011) who cited Omotola (2009), 'It was the video clips and coverage on how some of the major electoral irregularities were carried out by politicians during the voting exercise, which provided the evidence that assisted the electoral tribunals to deliver justice to the claims and objections raised by the aggrieved candidates regarding the electoral process'. The 2011 elections offered yet another opportunity for the social media which was a space predominantly used by the youths, to play an important role in helping to reduce electoral malpractice, rigging, and to some extent electoral violence. This was quoted by PLAC (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre), (2012) when it cited Omokri, (2011) 'The widespread use of the real-time media severely limited electoral malpractices because we found that people were aware that they were on camera and this made them operate at their best behaviour'.

According to PLAC, (2012), 'Four key stake holders in the electoral process (the Independent National Electoral Commission, (INEC), politicians/political parties, the electorate, and the Civil Society Organizations) made extensive use of the social media during the 2011 elections. The use of the social media helped further improve the way the electoral umpire reached out to the public for example 'Through its enhanced communication channels, reports from distant polling units could easily reach INEC officials and responses received within a reasonable time'. PLAC, (2012). Also as cited by the PLAC, (2012) 'However a more interesting aspect of the political mobilization that took place during the 2011 elections was the extra ordinary propensity of social media among the electorates (online electorates) to pass on the information they have received through the social media to the section of the electorates that are not connected to the social media (offline electorates)'. Even during the recent

2015 general elections, the role played by the media especially the new media was phenomenal. It provided a platform that was very convenient for all age groups to use especially the youths who took advantage of it, 'Indeed, social media helped shape the opinions of a lot of youths in the elections and increased the political awareness and consciousness of the youths of Nigeria, be it by offering a platform for candidates to interact directly with the voters or offering a setting to hold virtual town hall meetings' Johnson, (2015). The citizens were encouraged to participate in political discourse before, during and after the elections. Because this type of media is such that provides unprecedented opportunity for a two-way dialogue and interactions between those receiving and giving the information, along with the immediacy of the spread of such information, it became easier for citizens to follow and compare what they had and what was announced officially, this helped greatly in reducing the chances of rigging and falsification of results as in a matter of minutes, results of votes counted at polling units were all over the country for everyone who cares to follow, even on real-time basis.

Today programs like 'Sunday politics', 'Politics Today', 'Sunrise Daily' etc provided by Channels Television in Nigeria has created platforms where political issues are discussed with viewers not just watching but also participating using social media such as Twitter, Facebook etc to send in their feedback on real time basis creating richer and more interactive discussions. The end result is a more informed populace.

CHALLENGES FOR THE WEST AFRICAN MASS MEDIA

Doubtless certain challenges abound which the mass media in West Africa is faced with in the course of its function. This has even made the mass media to be viewed as not credible in its function as the 'fourth pillar'. Corruption which has been an endemic problem in the West African region, is very evident even in the mass media; 'Brown envelop journalism' has been prevalent in Nigeria, a situation where journalists compromise their integrity and indeed that of their profession by collecting money most at times wrapped in brown envelopes in order to write a positive story or withdraw / remove a negative story as the case maybe usually between journalists or those in possession of the information and the political elites, groups or even the leaders themselves. These corrupt tendencies undermine the power and the credibility of the media as the fourth pillar in the sub region. Very related to the corrupt tendencies is Partisanship. The media has sometimes been responsible for fanning flames of discord through biased reportage. Taking sides on political, social or even religious issues, by so doing compromising its role as being neutral/ professional in the

dissemination of wholesome information to the benefit of the society at large. For example according to karikari,(2010), 'Even in Ghana's much-celebrated successful election in 2008, some radio stations incessantly preached violence and mobilised partisan mobs to attack opponents. In all such cases the perpetrating media were owned by or were supporters of powerful persons in governments, political parties or factions of conflicts'. The pattern of media ownership and by extension control is also another problem the West Africa media is faced with. This has been the case ever since the creation of the early media by the colonial masters. They existed and operated only for the benefit of their owners. This unbalanced approach to the profession continued even after independence till today. Those media owned by the government are found to be loyal to their owners in their reportage by giving to the public only the information that show the government in good light as against being the government's watchdog by giving a balanced information to the public, hence making it difficult for the audience to make informed decisions.

For instance as quoted by Temin and Smith, (2002) a National Democratic Institute report on the 1996 elections had it that "state-owned media provided largely disproportionate coverage of incumbent political contestants and is overwhelmingly positive, while coverage of other political contestants often is not presented in a positive tone, or not presented at all". 'As a result the media serve the interests of the elites or the government in power at the expense of the majority' (Imoh), 2013. Violence towards journalists in the course of their work has been a major problem especially during electioneering. 'Politicians and political parties harass and attack journalists perceived as reporting on them or their interests in a negative manner. During local and state elections, journalists have been intimidated or attacked for covering certain election-related events' (Wikipedia). Another problem is inadequate training of journalists most of the media personnel involved in receiving and disseminating information are not properly trained to disseminate wholesome information to the public or even engage in meaningful and intelligent debates on political issues. With the coming of the new media, anybody can upload pictures or videos and send to the internet for public consumption without proper scrutiny. This reduces their ability to educate the populace correctly and professionally. 'There is a yawning gap in the capacity of media personnel to design and produce political education programmes on democracy'. Imoh, (2013). In highly volatile areas like the North Eastern part of Nigeria because of the insurgency of the Boko Haram, it becomes very risky for journalists and media personnel to operate effectively. For example it was reported that "On 20 January 2012, unknown gunmen killed channels TV reporter

Enenche Akogwu while he was reporting on boko haram attacks and bombings in Kano that day.”(Wikipedia). This is a renowned television station based in Nigeria, operating within and outside the country. Another problem affecting the West African media is poverty. Lack of adequate funds to purchase the necessary gadgets and to pay staff their remunerations is sometimes a problem especially with the privately owned media. This can easily make the journalists to cut corners in the course of their duties, thereby compromising the integrity of the profession. Lack of infrastructure like the epileptic power supply in most of West Africa both in the urban and rural areas has impeded the ability of the electronic media in this case television to reach both the urban and rural areas. So only the affluent who can afford alternative sources of power are able to make the best use of their television sets.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the media to be credible and also be able to win the confidence of the populace as a channel for the dissemination of wholesome information and as the ‘fourth pillar’ in democracy, extensive, periodic and professional training of journalists and other media personnel is paramount. This way journalists are kept abreast with professional reportage, they are aware and appreciate the importance of giving unbiased information, and are able to resist ethnicity, tribalism, regionalism and other forms of bigotry even on religious lines. The challenge of journalists not paid their salaries is another problem especially for the privately owned media, when Owners of these media outlets understand that it is criminal to withhold their staff salaries and other benefits, and that it is the right of the staff when they work to be paid their salaries as and when due, it will become easier for them to be committed in paying them. This is because when they are not paid even the enthusiasm to put in their best becomes a problem as they are not able to meet their basic needs. But when they are financially comfortable, i.e able to afford beyond the normal food, clothing and shelter, they are better equipped mentally and otherwise to engage in meaningful and intelligent debates thereby helping the people make informed decisions on political, social and religious matters.

It is also important that the government provides an enabling environment for the media to thrive by providing stable electricity, good and accessible roads in both urban and rural areas as well as providing a safer environment especially in volatile areas like the North Eastern parts of Nigeria through abating the boko haram insurgency. Violence matted on journalists should be seen as crime against humanity even if it is done by security forces and the police the government should withdraw from punishing journalists that report about political corruption and other disservice by the government.

Journalists in the course of their jobs should also learn to see beyond financial gains the ‘brown envelop journalism’, knowing that their role as the watchdog of the government is priceless in helping to consolidate democracy in West African and indeed Africa. ‘Exemplary performance by the media will strengthen the three other realms and energize society’s fabrics (newsdailyonline.com) 2015.

CONCLUSION

The proliferation of media outlets in West Africa within the past decades have brought in remarkable improvements in the role of mass media towards the consolidation of democracy. The resilience on the part of West African journalists in their cause to promote and entrench democratic values through informing and educating the populace is highly commendable. As buttressed by KariKari, (2010), “No doubt the media’s role has been central in strengthening democracy in those countries where there has been tangible progress in governance and respect for human rights”. The Nigerian constitution which has provided a rather conducive environment for the mass media to operate is also worthy of note. The reality however is that the challenges discussed above are still working as forces against the performance of the mass media in the efforts towards entrenching democracy in the region.

When the mass media is able to freely receive and disseminate wholesome information, without being biased or partisan, thereby educating the people, when the mass media is able to make available platforms that engage the people in the debate and discussion of political issues, then invariably democratic values such as popular participation through awareness is achieved and in turn democracy is being entrenched in west Africa. A synergy between and among the governments, journalists as well as the owners of media outlets towards providing unbiased information to the people, will increase the confidence and loyalty of the people on the media as the “fourth pillar” as well as the voice for the voiceless. It will also enable the media carry out its function without fear or favour. With this in mind, the West African mass media can still boast of a brighter political future ahead.

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