

## **COVERAGE OF PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES AND PRESS BIAS IN GHANA**

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### **Abstract**

*The news media in democracies are seen as suppliers of political stories to citizens. And one of the methods by which this activity is performed is by the news gathering and dissemination role of the media. In a situation where selection and presentation of news is based on biased instead of the interest of citizens, the ethics of the profession is questioned. In effect, it is anti-democracy and development. Above all, with regard to Ghana, it amounts to a total disregard of the code of the Ghana Journalists Association. This study examines the extent to which the press was biased in its framing of the previous presidential elections. Using content analysis, the study, which is grounded in the theory of gatekeeping, found out that in 2008 and 2012 election campaigns in Ghana, the press was biased in favour of the NPP's presidential candidate. This result also goes to dispute the trend of incumbency bonus or advantage in Ghanaian political communication.*

### **Introduction**

Undoubtedly the news media institution is key in the development of societies. It is an institution which gathers and processes political, social as well as economic ideas and activities taking place in societies across the globe and disseminate the information among citizens of the world. By this act the news media are engaged in the process of globalization. In effect, the news media are making it possible for citizens across the globe to share ideas and experiences. And by the new enhanced

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information and communication technology, the same information can reach the mass audience at the same time (McQuail, 2005).

In the world today, politics happens to be one area which cannot do without the news media. The institution of politics is one discipline which relies on the media to engage with citizens. Perhaps it is against this background that scholars maintain that the news media are potential tools for civic participation as well as empowerment of citizens. For the past decades, studies have revealed that the media play “the role of a civic teacher” in democracies (McCombs, 2004:51). This is done by setting citizens’ agenda of issues. In effect, the media pass on to the audience issues and events they cover including positive and negative tone of such issues and events. Sen (1999:6) points out: “Political and civil rights give people the opportunity to draw attention forcefully to general needs and to demand appropriate public action. The response of government to the acute suffering of its people often depends on the pressure that is put on it. The exercise of political rights such as voting, criticizing and protesting can make a real difference to the political incentives that operate on a government.”

At the moment democratic societies around the world are engaging the media as a tool for the mobilization of citizens as well as for electoral activities. One significant principle of democracy is for a democratic society to be holding frequent, free and fair elections to elect leaders to govern society. And for the electorates to become aware of political parties, political actors and issues they articulate, the media become an important tool used by political actors to reach out to the voters, who at the end of the day decide who their leaders should be.

In their book, *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*, Bennett and Entman (2001) point out that traditional characteristics of doing politics are still with us from the old fashioned door-to-door canvassing of votes to political party and social movement organization. Such old fashioned mobilization of citizens demands much effort, determination, time and energy on the side of candidates and political parties to achieve a good result. Therefore, political actors find it more convenient to engage the media and journalists to reach out to

citizens with their messages. This is evident not only in developed democracies but also in emerging democracies including Ghana. Stromback and Kaid (2008) make the point that election news coverage is critical for democratic societies since it is a prerequisite for a well-informed voter and also election news coverage add to the enhancement of democratic practices.

In the face of this, the study is interested in exploring the framing of the 2008 and 2012 Ghanaian elections by the state-owned and privately-owned press in Ghana in the context of the presidential candidates and the extent to which the press was biased since bias undermines democracy.

### **The 2008 election**

The 2008 general election was the fifth election since the resurrected multiparty democratic governance in 1992 and the second time that power had been transferred from one democratically elected president to another. The election took place on December 7. According to the Commonwealth Observer Group report, the 2008 election was hard-fought for two reasons: the NDC's desire to come back to power after eight years staying in opposition and the discovery of oil deposits, which was expected to increase the resources at the disposal of the winning candidate and political party. The report on the elections drew attention to the deepening of democratic governance in Ghana which was conducted in an open, transparent and inclusive manner. The Group, therefore, described the 2008 elections as creditable for the African continent to take note of.

The presidential election results declared indicated that neither of the leading candidate, John Atta Mills of the National Democratic Congress and Nana Akufo-Addo of the New Patriotic Party had more than 50 percent of the votes. The former had 47.92 percent while the latter also polled 49.13 percent. Therefore in the absence of a clear winner, and in accordance with Article 63(3) (4) (5) of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, a presidential run-off was slated for December 28, 2008.

### **The 2008 presidential run-off**

Whereas the December 7, 2008 was issues based, the Commonwealth Observer Group report point out that the tone of the run-off campaign moved focus to personality politics and party loyalty. Ethnicity also became a crucial feature and this heightened political tensions in some parts of the country. The concerns expressed by the report include:

- Politically – biased coverage of the elections by some sections of the media;
- The arguably pernicious influence of money and patronage in inducing support.

The run-off witnessed a relatively high voter-turnout, which suggests the determination and interest of Ghanaian citizens in enhancing the democratic credentials of the country through a credible transfer of power. It was eventually won by the NDC candidate, John Atta Mills with 50.23 percent of the vote, defeating NPP candidate Nana Akufo-Addo who has 49.77 percent.

### **The 2012 election**

The December 7, 2012 general elections happened to be the sixth presidential and parliamentary elections since 1992. On July 24, 2012 when President Atta Mills suddenly died, the then Vice President John Mahama was immediately sworn in as the President of the country. In June 2012, the Electoral Commission told the country that 45 new electoral constituencies were going to be established following the announcement of the 2010 census figures and also the establishment of new districts. This was met with a protest from some stakeholders and therefore the Electoral Commission was challenged in the Supreme Court. However, the decision of the Electoral Commission was finally upheld in October 2012. Immediately after this attention shifted to the nomination of candidates and election campaign activities. There were eight presidential candidates, with running mates, with seven representing political parties and an independent presidential candidate.

The two main political parties, the NPP and NDC, promised to utilise the resources of the country including the new-found oil for an industrial revolution to enhance education, create employments, provide

better health services and also improve infrastructure. One major area of divergence, according to the Commonwealth Observation Group report, was education. As the NPP promised free Senior High School education immediately if it came to office, NDC on its part noted that the NPP's promise was unrealistic and that if the NDC was voted back to power its educational policy would include the phasing-in of free Senior High School education over a twenty- year period. When in December 7, 2012 the election was held, the incumbent, John Mahama of NDC won with 50.70 percent and was sworn in as the president of the country. Among some of the concerns that the report recorded was the abuse of incumbency.

Although the democratization process of Ghana has been described as a political success story in Africa (Gyimah-Boadi, 2008; Ninsin, 1998), Aning (2012) of the international Peacekeeping Training in Accra, cautions Ghanaians: "politicians in Ghana are still in the business of deliberately preaching hatred, busily exploiting ethnicity, regionalism and religious groups just to win power and we sit here and think that Ghana's democratic credentials are intact." With such attitude of Ghanaian politicians, one would expect the media to be fair and give equal coverage to all candidates. And for the media to be fair and give equal coverage to all candidates the issue of why and how election campaign stories are selected become critical.

### **Gatekeeping theory**

Over 50 years now, gatekeeping has been an influential theory in communication research. The term, 'gatekeeping,' coined by Kurt Lewin in 1947 was applied by David Manning White in the practice of journalism. White's research as far back as 1950 referred to as 'Mr Gates' study explored the habit of a newspaper editor's selection of the news. White's interest was in what news stories were given space and which stories were denied space in a publishing. In other words, the editorial criteria that informed what make up news worthiness was the focus of his research interest. As he watched the US wire editor at the *Peoria Star* working on a copy, it occurred to White to ask 'Mr Gates' to

record his decision-making process, which he did by keeping track of his decision-making process for a week.

With his observation of the editor, White was convinced that the editor's decisions were "highly subjective" considering what went into the news. According to White (1950: 386), one-third of the news stories did not get space because the editor did not find them fit for publication, while the two-thirds did not also get space due to limited space. In other words, in the study, 90 percent of the stories did not find space, which goes to show how powerful editors as gatekeepers are in terms of what stories the public read.

The editor remains the main gatekeeper in the news media. Editors decide the kind of stories that should go to the public as well as what emphasis to give stories. As practitioners see their responsibility as a professional one, scholars suggest that there are some practices which go to influence the decisions of gatekeepers. These include personal ideologies and values, economic control, individual taste or bias as well as organizational and structural procedures (Hartley, 2002: 94; Hiebert et al. 1985: 139-140). With these the unwanted information is taken out by the gatekeeper. The medium also has its own ethics and policies which help the editor to decide the news items to publish or broadcast.

What is news and how news is selected, constructed and presented have for some time now attracted the attention of scholars. It is the view of Evans (2000: 2-9) that news values are the first requirement for selection of news. Also Palmer (2000: 45) observes that news values are what inform the decisions as to which material to include. Galtung and Ruge (1970) identify some features of events which singly or in combination could influence their being reported in the news media: These features, which constitute news values include: timeliness, frequency, threshold, clarity, cultural proximity, unexpectedness, actions of elites and negativity.

### **The concept of media bias**

Media bias is a term used to describe “perceived inaccuracies to be found within media representations” (Hartley, 2002: 17). The concept is usually referred to in relation to news and current affairs stories. Claims to bias indicate that some opinions have been privileged over other coverage of issues or events. Report of media bias may be understood on the basis that the mass media establishment is expected and can be objective in covering the news. However, Langer (1998: 17) points out that news and any form of media representation need to be seen as a ‘signifying practice.’ In other words, news become real by the examination of selection and presentation rather than trying to invoke news in abstract and arguable external requirement of ‘objectivity.’

As it may be acknowledged that journalists in their practice of the profession can and desire to report the truth, Gunter (1997: 11) argues that “can ever be anything more than relative.” In effect, news stories must be understood as a journalist presenting not facts, but rather a selection of discourse through which to express one’s thought on an issue or event. Which means understanding the representations that make up the news is possible through critical discussions instead of claims of bias.

In their study, *Media Bias in Presidential Elections: A Meta-Analysis*, D’Alessio and Allen (2000) identify three media biases. These are gatekeeping bias, coverage bias and statement bias. Gatekeeping bias is an approach where journalists and editors select from a number of potential stories to be supplied to the public. This form is motivated by the study of Manning White (1950) where the editor selected among stories provided to him by his wire service. Coverage bias is giving more space, airtime or attention to some issues or events in contrast to others. To illustrate this point, two newspapers covering the same event, may happen that one newspaper would give such a story more attention than the other. The third form of media bias is statement bias. This form of bias applies to a tendency to use more favourable statements at the expense of another or unfavourable statements to refer to one political party or candidate. For the purpose of this study, bias will be measured

by the physical amount of stories each candidate received as well as focusing on whether the stories were favourable for a candidate or unfavourable for a candidate. With such understanding and application of content analysis method it is expected that the issue of incumbency advantage or otherwise will also emerge. This will allow for the determination of whether the state-owned press is still in the game of giving incumbency coverage advantage as previous studies claim.

### **Content analysis**

Content analysis was applied in examining newspaper journalism in Ghana with regards to election campaigns framing since it has been proven to be an effective tool for the analysis of information. According to Berelson (1952: 18), content analysis “is a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.” It is very often used for the analysis of media texts such as newspaper stories, radio and television reports as well as visual content in photographic, film and television images (Sparks, 2002:20).

### **Getting at the sample**

As a comparative study, this paper engaged four newspapers in Ghana. These included the *Daily Graphic*, *The Ghanaian Times*, *Daily Guide* and *Ghanaian Chronicle*. These were targeted for the study as by and large they constitute the most prestigious newspapers in Ghana. The four newspapers, which were purposively selected have consistently emerged as the top Ghanaian newspapers in terms of circulation. They have been attracting attention for selection for studies including election campaigns coverage. The *Daily Graphic* and *The Ghanaian Times* are state-owned whereas the *Daily Guide* and *Ghanaian Chronicle* are privately-owned newspapers.

The time period chosen to analyse the four newspapers to show the trend of election campaigns framing by the press was from October 1 to November 31, 2008 and October 1 to November 31, 2012 using the Mondays to Saturday editions. Sundays were not included because these newspapers do not appear on the newsstands. The study, therefore, using a total of 192 newspaper editions, which means each of the four newspapers contributed 48 of its editions. These were purposively



selected for the study. I am looking at October and November were selected because election campaigns in Ghana really gather momentum for the actual election voting to take place on December 7.

### **The content unit of analysis**

The coding procedure was first the placement of the content into various story types in order to show which story types was most used by the press in covering election campaigns in Ghana. The story types were made up of: (1) Straight news (2) Feature/profile (3) Editorial (4) Comment/opinion (5) Interview (6) Letters-to-the-editor. Second, content was categorized into ten major topics. These included: (1) Setting, (2) Theme, (3) Actors (4) Reporter evaluation of actors (5) Evaluating actor (6) Actor evaluation (7) Evaluated actor (8) Tone towards actors (9) Policy (10) Headline. These were to determine whether or not the press was biased in its coverage and also if there was incumbency advantage.

### **The Press: Really biased?**

It may appear that the press in Ghana prefers the presidential candidate of NPP, Nana Addo over any other candidates. Hence, his intense Ghanaian press visibility. The marked dominance of framing of Nana Addo by the privately-owned newspapers in the country during the 2008 election seems to give credence to this claim. Table 1 is, therefore, to help us interrogate this claim to assist us find out the extent of press bias in the coverage of election campaigns in Ghana since bias coverage of election appears to undermine democracy. Bias here simply means more coverage as well as more positive coverage for a particular presidential candidate to the detriment of other presidential candidates.

**Table 1: A Comparison of the Frequency of Appearance of the Presidential Candidates in the 2008 and 2012 Election Campaign in Ghana**

PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES	PAPER							
	Chronicle 2008	%	Daily Graphic 2008	%	Daily Guide 2008	%	Times 2008	%
Presidential candidate of NPP, Nana Akufo-Addo	22	<b>50.0</b>	25	<b>34.7</b>	40	<b>61.5</b>	16	<b>30.8</b>
Presidential candidate of NDC, Prof. Atta Mills	11	<b>25.0</b>	22	<b>30.6</b>	15	<b>23.1</b>	13	<b>25.0</b>
Presidential candidate of CPP, Dr Paa Kwesi Nduom	7	<b>15.9</b>	10	<b>13.9</b>	5	<b>7.7</b>	11	<b>21.2</b>
Independent presidential candidate, Kwesi Amofo-Yeboah	2	<b>4.6</b>	4	<b>5.6</b>	2	<b>3.1</b>	2	<b>3.9</b>
Presidential candidate of PNC, Dr Edward Mahama	1	<b>2.3</b>	5	<b>6.9</b>	2	<b>3.1</b>	8	<b>15.4</b>
Presidential candidate of RPD, Kwabena Adjei	1	<b>2.3</b>	3	<b>4.2</b>	0	<b>0.0</b>	0	<b>0</b>
Presidential candidate of DFP, Mr Emmanuel Ansah-Antwi	0	<b>0</b>	2	<b>2.8</b>	0	<b>0.0</b>	1	<b>1.9</b>
Presidential candidate of DPP, Thomas Ward-Brew	0	<b>0</b>	1	<b>1.4</b>	1	<b>1.5</b>	1	<b>1.9</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100</b>

PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES	PAPER							
	Chronicles 2012	%	Daily Graphic 2012	%	Daily Guide 2012	%	Times 2012	%
Presidential candidate of NPP, Nana Akufo-Addo	20	<b>45.0</b>	31	<b>28.4</b>	40	<b>66.7</b>	13	<b>28.3</b>
Presidential candidate of NDC, President John Mahama	21	<b>47.0</b>	25	<b>22.9</b>	12	<b>20.0</b>	17	<b>37.0</b>
Presidential candidate of PPP, Dr Paa Kwesi Nduom	1	<b>2.3</b>	19	<b>17.4</b>	0	<b>0.0</b>	10	<b>21.7</b>
Presidential candidate of PNC, Hassan Ayariga	0	<b>0.0</b>	16	<b>14.7</b>	3	<b>5.0</b>	0	<b>0.0</b>

Presidential candidate of CPP, Dr Abu Sakara	2	4.6	11	10.1	2	3.3	3	6.5
Independent presidential candidate, Kwesi Amofo-Yeboah	0	0.0	4	3.7	0	0.0	0	0.0
Independent presidential candidate, Jacob Osei Yeboah	0	0.0	2	1.8	0	0.0	0	0.0
Presidential candidate of UFP, Akwesi Addai	0	0.0	1	0.9	0	0.0	0	0.0
Independent presidential candidate, John Atta-Kesson	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	4.4
Independent presidential candidate, Mr Kwesi Amofo-Yeboah	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	5.0	1	2.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>100</b>

Results concerning the frequency of coverage for various presidential candidates over the research period are presented in Table 1. The results indicate that the newspapers put the incumbent party NPP's candidate, Nana Akufo-Addo on top of the coverage. The *Ghanaian Chronicle* gave Nana Akufo-Addo 50 percent stories and Atta Mills 25 percent. There is 25 percent difference.

Nana Akufo-Addo again scored 60.6 percent stories and Atta Mills 24.2 percent in the *Daily Guide*, giving a difference of 36.4 percent. The *Daily Graphic* also put Nana Akufo-Addo ahead with 34.7 percent with Atta Mills recording 30.6 percent. This is a difference of 4.2 percent. *The Ghanaian Times* also recorded for Nana Akufo-Addo 30.8 percent stories while Atta Mills scored 25.0 percent, giving a difference of 5.8 percent. Though the difference percentage points between Nana Akufo-Addo and Atta Mills with regard to the *Daily Graphic* and *The Ghanaian Times* publications may not be high, the difference percentage points between the two candidates with regard to the publications of the *Ghanaian Chronicle* and the *Daily Guide* is rather high to suggest that the press gave more stories to Nana Akufo-Addo during the 2008 election.

Also from October through November 2012, of the stories studied about presidential candidates in the four papers the incumbent president John Mahama of NDC received 47.0 percent stories in the *Ghanaian Chronicle* while Nana Akufo-Addo had 45.0 percent. The difference in percentage is 2 percent. As John Mahama recorded 37.0 percent stories in *The Ghanaian Times*, Nana Akufo-Addo had 28.3 percent representing a difference percentage of 8.7 percent. Although the percentage difference may not be big, the incumbent had an edge. The *Daily Graphic* on its part gave Mahama, 22.9 percent stories, Nana Akufo-Addo received 28.4 percent also representing a difference of 5.3 percent stories. With the coverage of the *Daily Guide* Mahama received 20 percent mentions while Nana Akufo-Addo also scored 66.7 percent with a difference of 46.7 percentage. Though with regard to the *Daily Graphic* the percentage difference between Nana Akufo-Addo and John Mahama is not big, the percent difference between the two candidates is significant with regard to the coverage of the *Daily Guide*. This gave Nana Akufo-Addo a significant edge.

Judging from the percentage difference points between the two candidates of the two main political parties in Ghana, one gets the sense that Nana Akufo-Addo of NPP in 2008 and 2012 elections received more press attention than the other political opponents. This revelation goes to confirm previous findings of election campaign studies that Ghanaian media give NPP's candidate more media appearances. As seen in Table 1 regarding 2012, it appears the NDC's presidential candidate, Mahama generated moderately more appearances in the *Ghanaian Chronicle* and *The Ghanaian Times* than the party's candidate Atta Mills in 2008. This probably is because some of the coverage was focused not on the president as a political campaigner, but as the country's chief executive. Abramowitz et al. (2006:77) identify two kinds of advantages which go in favour of incumbent candidates, which may account for their reelection. One, there is an advantage that comes from holding office and second, campaign-related advantage. According to scholars such as Campbell (2002; 2003), the second advantage appears stronger in the sense that challengers are not in the position to compete financially with incumbents.

It is however, worthy of note that the overall significant difference in percentage points between the candidates of NDC and NPP with regard to the coverage of the two privately-owned newspapers, the *Ghanaian Chronicle* and the *Daily Guide* may be due to the fact that the founders of these two papers happen to be members of the NPP. Freddie Blay, the founder of the *Daily Guide* became the Deputy Speaker of parliament between 2004 and 2008 on the ticket of NPP. He is now the First National vice president of the NPP. His wife is the Managing Editor of the paper. Kofi Coomson, the founder of *the Ghanaian Chronicle* contested the NPP's Member of Parliament primaries in 2008 but lost to the incumbent MP. The study, therefore, argues that being the owners of these two papers their influence were likely to affect the election stories that went through the gates. As members of the NPP, during election campaign contest, the candidate of their party will be a significant newsmaker. Also with Gina Blay as the Managing Editor of the *Daily Guide*, she has the responsibility to ensure the nature and flow of information to the public. She, therefore, might have influenced the election campaign stories that ended up going through the gates and supplied to the Ghanaian voters.

Although Nana Akufo-Addo of NPP received more stories in 2008 and 2012, he lost the two presidential contests to Atta Mills of NDC in 2008 and also John Mahama of NDC in 2012. One would have thought that a candidate's intense media appearances would go to win more support for the candidate to be the eventual winner since the candidate would have had a better race, backed by a more effective and efficient organization, better advertising and a more persuasive consistent message. Although the media are argued to influence the outcome of various events (McQuail, 2005: 529), Jamieson and Waldman (2003) note that the outcome of events may be dependent on how those involved in such events frame the event in a way and manner favourable to themselves coupled with the failure of the press to fulfil its investigative role at the time.

In effect the "political content is shaped primarily by the perceptual environment within which campaigns operate" (Arterton, 1984:155). For instance, in Ghana as the NPP appeared to have framed

Nana Akufo-Addo as an elite and a militant, the public interpreted this image as an arrogant and violent person. However, on their part the NDC framed Atta Mills and John Mahama as calm, gentle, modest and sincere personalities. And NDC seemed to have succeeded in getting the media to also project their candidates as such to the extent that Atta Mills was referred to as “king of peace.” And peace appears to be one value Ghanaians cherish.

It is one thing for a presidential candidate to receive intense media appearances and another thing for the presidential candidate to receive favourable media appearances for a positive image in the eyes of electorates during election. In line with this, which of the three presidential candidates (John Atta Mills, John Dramani Mahama and Nana Akufo-Addo) received more favourable press election campaign appearances for him to look good in the eyes of the voters?

### **Good news for whom, bad news for whom?**

Directional balance also referred to as tone has been identified as the most controversial and problematic aspect of press coverage to evaluate in political communication studies (Deacon et al., 2005:31). This is because it is open to political evaluations of political actors or political parties by media gatekeepers. However, it is also accepted as an important thing to assess to find out which candidate is being projected in either positive or negative light by the gatekeepers. Two measures have therefore been applied for the evaluation of the tone across the four newspapers sampled for this study.

The first was applied with regard to policy issues. Therefore, the moment a policy issue was identified in an election campaign story, a code was attached to it. This indicated whether the policy issue was: mainly considered to be ‘good news’ for a particular political actor. For instance, with the headline “Ghana has a date with destiny on Dec. 7 – Bawumia” paragraph 8 of the news story reads: “to rapturous chants of ‘Free SHS’ and ‘we can do it’, Dr. Bawumia stated that the pledge of making secondary education free was key to the development of Ghana into a first class society, adding that Nana Akufo-Addo was committed to ensuring that the policy became a reality, and that education, in

general, received the necessary prioritisation and resources,” (*Ghanaian Chronicle*, Thursday, October 11, 2012).

Secondly, was news that was mainly considered to be bad news for a particular political actor. For instance, paragraph 15 of a story, “Akufo-Addo outlines vision at debate”, reads: “He (Nana Akufo-Addo) took a swipe at President John Mahama for leading an expensive scheme that cost GHc105, 000 to train each Ghanaian doctor in Cuba and reminded the gathering that the Ghana Medical Association had insisted that they could train each doctor at a cost of GHc30, 000 each,” (*Daily Graphic*, Thursday, November 1, 2012).

The second measure, which was applied for positive tone was a code to each politician identified in election campaign stories. The code indicated whether the political actor was mainly presenting his /her policies and views, which sounded positive. For instance, with the headline, “focus is in achieving true universal basic education,” the story reads: “The president said the NDC would establish 10 teacher training colleges to train more teachers to expand the basic education and reduce the cost at the SHS to allow more students into the system,” (*Daily Graphic*, Wednesday, November 1, 2012). Or mainly defending him/herself from attack from political competitors, which would end up projecting one in a positive light. For instance, *Daily Graphic* of Wednesday, November 26, 2008 reports that: “NPP attracts big crowd in HO,” the story reads: “He (Nana Akufo-Addo) said he was not in politics for personal gain. I am a famous lawyer and if I want to make money, I will stay in my chamber,” he remarked.

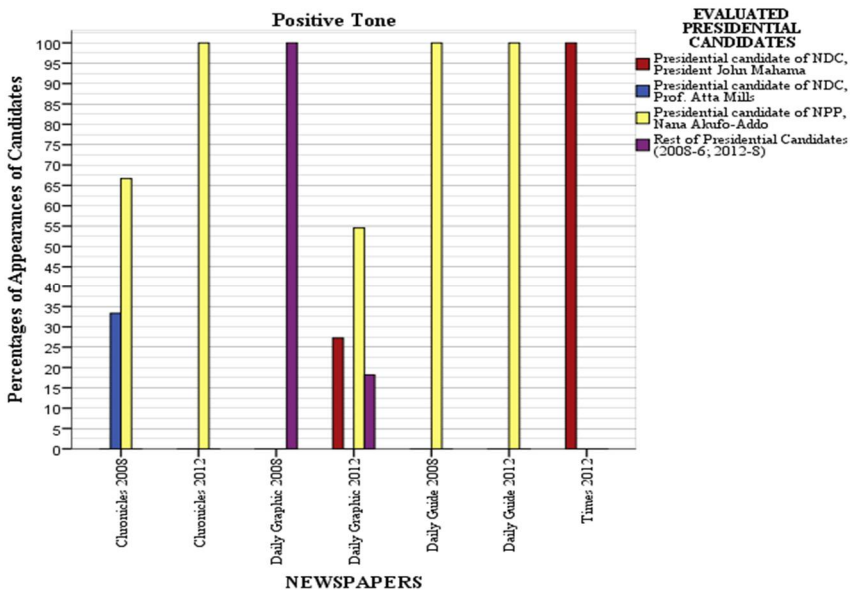
Or stories that mainly attacked the opinions, actions or policies of his/her competitors. For instance, “NPP promises far-fetched,” paragraph 2 of the story reads: “he (referred to NDC MP) said the NPP government could not maintain a 25,000 police force, but its flagbearer, Nana Akufo-Addo, is promising to increase the police force to 50, 000,” (*Daily Graphic*, Wednesday, November 5, 2008).

It is not enough for a presidential candidate to receive intense media visibility. This is because such visibility can contain more negative publicity, which may not help the course of the candidate. But

in this case, Nana Akufo-Addo, who had unsuccessfully ran for president of Ghana in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections as a candidate of the New Patriotic Party did not only receive more coverage during the two elections, he also received more positive coverage from the press adding to the claim that the Ghanaian press is biased during election campaigns.

Graph 1 shows the extent of press bias with regard to positive coverage of the 2008 and 2012 election campaigns in Ghana. The aim here is to concentrate the analysis on the biased nature of the press in Ghana, which according to the 1992 Constitution, the media, especially the state-owned are required to give equal and fair coverage to all candidates during election campaigns. Also the code of the Ghana Journalists Association encourages the media to give equal and fair coverage to all political parties as well as candidates.

**Graph 1: A comparison frequency of positive framing of presidential candidates during the 2008 and 2012 general election campaigns in Ghana**





Judging from Graph 1, Nana Akufo-Addo of the NPP who served as an Attorney General from 2001 to 2003 and also Minister for Foreign Affairs from 2005 to 2007 did not only receive more election campaigns stories, he also recorded the most favourable election campaigns coverage and the least unfavourable election campaigns coverage. To illustrate the point, in 2008 the *Ghanaian Chronicle* gave Nana Akufo-Addo 66.7 percent positive framing and Atta Mills, received 33.3 percent stories showing a difference of 33.4 percentage points.

The *Daily Guide* also recorded 100 percent for Nana Akufo-Addo while Atta Mills, who was the vice-president from 1997 to 2001 and after being two unsuccessful presidential candidate in the 2000 and 2004 as the NDC's candidate, received no favourable story at all. This is a difference of a significant 100 percentage points. The two state-owned papers, the *Daily Graphic* and *The Ghanaian Times* did not report any favourable election campaign stories for any of the candidates in 2008. In other words, the two privately-owned papers favoured the incumbent's political party candidate, Nana Akufo-Addo, who was a Member of Parliament from 1997 to 2005. However, according to the data in Graph 1, the state-owned papers were neutral in their election campaigns coverage.

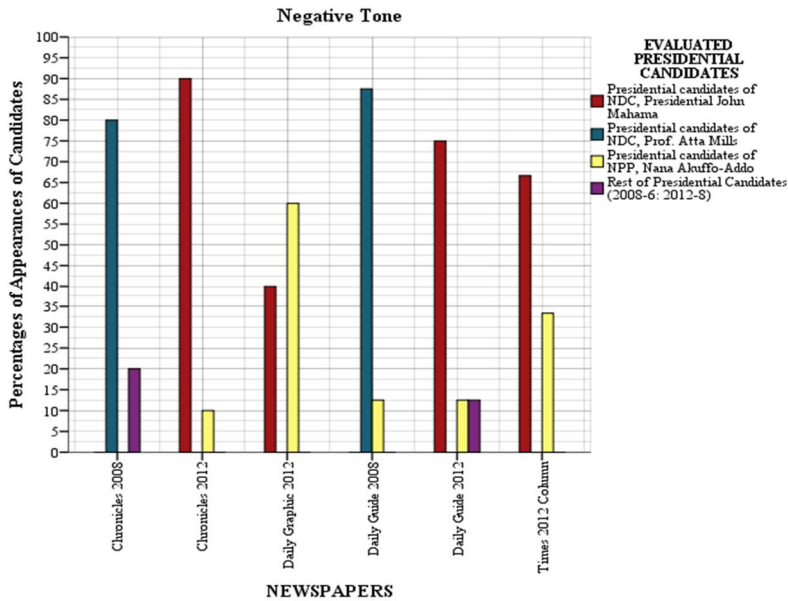
Also during the 2012 election, the *Ghanaian Chronicle* gave Nana Akufo-Addo 100 percent favourable election stories with John Mahama receiving no favourable election story. This is a differential of a significant 100 percentage points. The *Daily Guide* also recorded for Nana Akufo-Addo 100 percent favourable election stories with John Mahama receiving no favourable story. This means a difference of 100 percentage points.

Again the *Daily Graphic* gave Nana Akufo-Addo 54.6 percent favourable stories and John Mahama scored 27.3 percent. The difference is 27.3 percentage points. On its part *The Ghanaian Times* gave John Mahama, 100 percent favourable election campaign stories and Nana Akufo-Addo with no favourable election campaign story at all. Combining the evidence displayed in Graph 1 makes the whole picture clear that Nana Akufo-Addo of NPP stood out as the candidate who the

press projected most in a positive light during the 2008 and 2012 elections. In this case to what extent was the press also negative in its election coverage?

The media have often been accused of being too negative in their election campaign coverage. Graph 2 deals with the extent to which negative coverage of elections dominated the press coverage of the 2008 and 2012 elections in Ghana. Interestingly, the outcome suggests that the press coverage of the two elections was more positive in tone than negative in tone. This result conflicts with most findings in the literature, which indicates the negative tone dominates presidential campaign news coverage (Benoit, Stein & Hansen, 2005; Hart, 2000). The positive tone in the campaigns may be as a result of the chiefs, religious leaders, Ghana Journalists Association, National Media Commission and Women's groups' continuous call for peaceful elections may have influenced and shaped Ghanaians concern for peaceful election. This situation might have also influenced the candidates to stay away from negative utterances as a strategy to appeal to the voters. However, the state-owned press was more negative than the privately-owned press. Graph 2 provides an overview the results of the negative coverage of the two elections. The purpose here is for the study to give an insight into the extent to which Ghanaian press indulged in negative coverage of candidates.

**Graph 2: A comparison of frequency of negative framing of presidential candidates during the 2008 and 2012 general election campaigns in Ghana**



With regard to the unfavourable coverage, the evidence exhibited in Graph 2, indicates that in 2008, the *Ghanaian Chronicle* gave Atta Mills of NDC, 80 percent stories with Nana Akufo-Addo of NPP recording no negative election campaign appearance. This is a difference of 80 percentage points. The *Daily Guide* also scored Atta Mills 87.5 percent negative stories and then recorded 12.5 percent stories for Nana Akufo-Addo showing a difference of 75 percentage points with the two state-owned papers under study giving no negative stories to any of the candidates.

In the 2012 election, the *Ghanaian Chronicle* gave John Mahama of NDC 90 percent with Nana Akufo-Addo scoring 10 percent negative stories yielding a difference of 80 percentage points. The *Daily Guide* on its part, scored John Mahama, 75 percent negative stories while Nana

Akufo-Addo also received 12.5 percent stories. This is a difference of 62.5 percentage points. The *Daily Graphic* gave Nana Akufo-Addo 60 percent negative mentions and John Mahama, 40 percent negative mentions. Thus recording a difference of 20 percentage points. *The Ghanaian Times* on its part reported no negative story about any of the presidential candidates.

In this case, combining all the negative election campaign stories, Nana Akufo-Addo, had the least negative stories. It is also clear that the privately-owned papers under study significantly framed more negative stories against the NDC's presidential candidates in 2008 and 2012 elections. Indeed this finding is a reflection of previous findings. In 2008 the two state-owned papers were neutral. However, in 2012 the *Daily Graphic* framed more negative stories against NPP's candidate, Nana Akufo-Addo. *The Ghanaian Times* was neutral in its coverage.

How and why is the coverage, especially the private papers, so unrelentingly negative towards the candidates of the NDC? The following examples from the coverage may illustrate the point: This unrelenting portrayal of the NDC is difficult to understand. However, one may suggest that it may be as a result of the fact that the NDC was born out of PNDC, which was considered unfriendly to the media. Also the *Daily Guide* and the *Ghanaian Chronicle* owned by members of the main opposition political party, NPP perhaps may want to give NPP an advantage, therefore adopted the strategy of projecting NDC in a negative light with the hope that it would work for the NPP. In this difficulty to explain why the private press would be so negative towards NDC's presidential candidates, it appears that one argument that can be made here is that perhaps Ghanaian journalists to some extent are ceding control of what the citizens learn from election campaign to the voices of politicians. This is because the study shows that journalists in reporting the 2008 and 2012 elections were covering mostly political parties organised events.

This journalistic practice may also be as a result of the value the media place on breaking news. In their desire to abide by the principle of speed, activities of politicians during election campaigns are reported

with minimal quoting of a secondary source. To this end, it is argued that the press is more of a conduit and less as an autonomous reportorial source. However, it is significant to note that the candidates who recorded the most negative election campaigns coverage were rather the winners. With the press giving more coverage and positive coverage to Nana Akufo-Addo, one can, therefore, suggest that the press under study was largely biased in its coverage of the 2008 and 2012 election campaigns. And this bias appears to have manifested itself through gatekeeping as well as individual bias.

Related to the individual bias is gatekeeping bias. According to literature, editors decide on which stories should go through the gates in order to get to the public including the voters who need to vote based on the information they receive through the media on presidential candidates. By the act of deciding which stories should go through the gates, the possibility of creating bias in support of a particular candidate or against a particular candidate or issue is gatekeeping bias. Therefore, editors as well as journalists of the four papers for the study may have their own political bias which, it is argued, might have influenced their coverage of election campaigns of 2008 and 2012. Editors of the four papers for the study might have their own views about political issues and even about which presidential candidate should be voted for to become the president of Ghana. These appear difficult to be prevented from influencing their framing of election campaign events and issues.

Again, various studies on agenda-setting function of the press point to the fact that the media have great influence on political decision making and that they are very influential in telling the general public as to what to think about (Kuypers, 2002: 5). In other words, it is of importance for the news media to be neutral during the coverage of election campaigns else the *Daily Graphic*, *The Ghanaian Times*, the *Daily Guide* and the *Ghanaian Chronicle* would end up telling the voters what to think about. The media can also introduce bias whenever they frame issues in a particular way. Issues are framed as they are told in a style for it to be viewed in a particular way. A number of scholars claim that framing can go a long way to eventually decide how one views a situation (Kuypers, 2002: 7). Codes of ethics often have clauses

forbidding biased news coverage. For instance, the code of ethics of Ghana Journalists' Association states in Article one: "the public have the right to unbiased, accurate, balanced and comprehensive information as well as to express themselves freely through the media" (Amegatcher, 1998: 171).

It is significant for us to recognise that during election campaigns, it is very likely that candidates would push hard to succeed in establishing a sustained and planned relationship with newsmen as well as the various media outlets. To illustrate this point, political parties do request for particular journalists to cover their campaign activities. Former President Kufuor during his presidency was travelling with the *Daily Guide* outside the country. On the President's return, the *Daily Guide* would be full of stories with pictures on President Kufuor. This kind of relationship could go a long way in getting journalists and the media to be biased in their selection and framing of their election campaign stories. Journalists in Ghana may be aware of their own professional code of ethics, Article one which reads: "the duty of every journalist is to write and report the truth bearing in mind his/her duty to serve the public". However a political reporter cannot avoid developing a personal relationship with political actors.

This is because such contacts could help create the space for the reporter to dig out interesting exclusive information which can give an edge to the reporter's media in the coverage of the election campaigns. It is equally significant for candidates to also accept such relationship with newsmen else newsmen may feel snubbed by candidates. This act could lead to a journalist being tempted to select and frame negative stories against a candidate. For instance, during the 2000 election campaign Kufuor then NPP's presidential candidate was able to develop a close relationship with the media. This relationship with the media seem to have been sustained by his successor, Nana Akufo-Addo, who during the 2008 election campaign also developed a close relationship with the media. This appears to have made the journalists to become so attached to the candidates, their personality and their political party.

In a feature, in the *Daily Graphic*, the author writes: “the NPP has a machinery that draws in the media practitioners. Why the NDC is not doing same beats the mind. The present political campaign sees the NPP getting the highest media coverage, not because the party has the best message, for the electorate, but it believes that the media have a big role to play in drumming their messages to the people” (*Daily Graphic*, Thursday, October 9, 2008). This, therefore, may have contributed largely to the favourable framing of their election campaign activities.

One interesting question that develops from the above analysis is: can it be assumed that with the evidence of this study, the news media in Ghana are pro-Akufo-Addo? Is the evidence displayed in the Table and Graphs sufficient enough to point to a rooting by journalists for Nana Akufo-Addo and against the NDC’s candidates, consciously or otherwise? It can be argued that the data appears to suggest that journalists and the press were pro-Nana Akufo-Addo. What this outcome also teaches is that winning media appearances alone do not begat winning elections in Ghana. The NDC would be thankful in part to the relentless effort of the media to frame Nana Akufo-Addo as an elite and at the same time a militant, which projected him as arrogant and a violent person, who encouraged his followers to intimidate his opponents with their rhetoric and sometimes their actions. Meanwhile, the same media projected Atta Mills and John Mahama as calm, peaceful and ordinary citizens with humility. However, the Deputy Communication Director of the NPP, Perry Okudzeto, believes that it was NDC’s strategy to portray Nana Akufo-Addo as a violent and arrogant politician (Interview, February 2012).

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of the data from the four sampled newspapers on coverage of 2008 and 2012 election campaigns show that there is a trend of increasing press personalization as well as increasing concentration of the press coverage on two presidential candidates of the two main political parties. In line with this study the story is also that there is indeed no clear-cut incumbent advantage for the two political parties that have been in government since 1992. However, there is an indication of a big gap between the personalization of the two main political parties

and the other opposition political parties. In effect, the situation is not an increasing visibility of the two presidential candidates of the NDC and NPP, but rather an increasing neglect of the presidential candidates of the smaller political parties. In this case, the press in Ghana is creating the impression that it has an agenda to promote a two-party democratic political system in Ghana.

We also observe from this study that there is no much difference with the levels of personalization of election campaigns and the intense visibility giving to the two presidential candidates of the two main political parties by the state-owned and privately-owned press in Ghana. In sum, there is press personalization of election campaigns in Ghana as well as presidentialisation that is concentration of press attention on the presidential candidates of the two main political parties, National Democratic Congress and New Patriotic Party. All together over the two elections and between the two presidential candidates of the two main parties, NPP's presidential candidate appears to have received more coverage as well as more favourable coverage from the newspapers sampled for this study. This result also goes to dispute previous findings that the state-owned press gives incumbent coverage bonus or advantage. And that coverage of election campaigns in Ghana is more positive in tone. As to how long this interesting revelation of the press no longer giving incumbency bonus or advantage and its positive tone will be sustained only time will tell once multiparty democratic governance is sustained in the country. However, gatekeeping with regard to election stories can be negative to the society. This is because it is only selective stories which will be disseminated by powerful people. In effect, then just a part of the whole picture will be understood by voters and this will undermine Ghana's democratic practice.

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