

GHANA'S BROADCASTING CONFUSION: REDRESSING STRUCTURAL DEFICITS IN PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING

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Introduction

It can be suggested that the grand idea underpinning the media's claim to being the 'fourth estate' of government in a democracy is resolved in the Habermasian (Habermas 1989) ethos: the media can add another layer to the checks and balances between the executive, legislative and judicial functions of government by providing a space wherein the governed can participate in the discussions that affect their lives in a direct way. Habermas called this space the *public sphere*, describing it "as a space or place in which social debate happens freely to form public opinion as the best way to achieve social goals" (Tayman 2012, pg. 110). Further, it is suggested that this type of "public communication" has potential to serve as a model for social integration (McCauley et al., 2003: xviii). Thus, the idea is that the public's participation in government can not only rely on the indirect processes of representative government. Whether the use of the media as a participatory mechanism proves to be reactive or proactive depends on the level of sophistication that the media system, within any democracy, can operationalize in bringing the citizen's voice to the fore in a participatory manner. The key is in how well the media, especially that which is designated as publicly-owned, understands this role.

This paper focuses on the key constructs of *ownership, control and access* within the value chain of public service broadcasting, as set out in Tayman (2012), with regards to the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, and links its arguments to the Public Broadcasting Service standards as argued by Banerjee and Seneviratne (2005). It seeks to challenge the current situation in offering an alternative governance system for enabling a more beneficial service in aid of Ghana's social development and suggests a better model of thinking about public service

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broadcasting. This paper analyzes some structural problems and proposes remedies to them within Ghana's circumstances. These circumstances are not uncommon in Africa, and therefore the arguments may well apply to similar countries on the continent.

A 'Public' service

For Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) to serve a 'public', the nature of that public needs to be understood. It is only in stifled contexts that the idea of the PSB is explained as being purposed to provide entertainment, information and education. That is the result of reductive thinking that sees the public as an indistinguishable populace that exists in the rhetoric of politicians and pollsters. That notion de-emphasises the diverse natures, cultural preferences, tastes and intrinsic differences in opinions and beliefs between the groups of people that make up a national community (Lee Artz in McCauley, Peterson et al. 2003). The public is many peoples, desiring many different things, and in the absence of qualitative market demographic information, national policy will be unable to provide reasons for a national PBS that is able to provide and cater to the needs of all. Ghana attempts to circumvent this media choice problem by allowing for a liberalized media policy in the hope that a plural mediascape will both plug market gaps and neutralise the potential for market failure in an environment, hitherto, dominated by the state-media. This fails to critically envision what the public needs from the media it consumes, and to anticipate a more strategic approach for the remit of the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC). Also, knowing the audience is fundamental to programming strategies and gaining an edge on competitors that continue to bleed the corporation by copying its programmes and offering more enticing prospects to its staff (Tayman 2012). Given this context, it becomes critical to examine the structural issues that hinder the GBC and its ability to perform as a PSB, especially, given that the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) has been encouraged to become a public broadcasting service (PBS) even though it is a state-owned media system.

The Ghana Broadcasting Corporation and media in Ghana

The GBC, established as after independence from the remains of Station Zoy and the Gold Coast Broadcasting Unit by Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, was made a public corporation under the National Liberation Council, (NLCD 226) in 1968. Television broadcasting in black and white had been added to radio services in 1965 till colour was enabled twenty years later (Alhassan, 2005). Broadcasting infrastructure deteriorated over years of economic mismanagement when

various military juntas jostled against experimental civilian episodes in rounds of socialist and liberal economic policies. In these years also, the GBC had a monopoly on broadcasting in Ghana and assured governments of implicit control over the most significant media institution that reached across the country through GBC's national network of radio and television repeater stations (Heath, 2001; Panford, 2001). A partial licence to make revenue from “the discharge of its functions” (Section 10.1(c), NLCD 226) in order to augment government's dwindling funding, was also granted at this time. However, this has crept into a full state of dependence on commercialised operations while government funds the staff wage bill, its only regular contribution. Hence, the GBC is neither a PBS nor a state-run operation, in the true meanings of these terms. It exists now in the twilight zone of postponed or shirked responsibility without a publicised strategy to make it purposeful in the spirit within which it was established.

The situation is exacerbated by the liberal media policy that came into being soon after the Fourth Republic Constitution. Many new radio stations, and some television and print media outlets have been established over the almost three decades of civilian rule, and while these have greatly contributed to deepening citizen engagement in the public sphere, there are obvious media market problems in Ghana. It does not require rigorous scientific studies to show that there is an over-production of entertainment content of meagre quality; that the availability of good quality programming is tilted to 'the haves' who consume satellite-based programmes; that local-language programming is automatically disparaged as being 'poor-quality'; that there is an over-concentration of media companies in urban centres with a resultant squeeze on advertising cedis as urban audiences fragment, and that there is poor thinking about what the public really needs and wants from media, both public and private-commercial.

Strategic value of public broadcasting

In a growing democracy, the arguments for a democratised media are moot. However, to justify the existence for public-owned media requires strategic thinking about media content values and the value of the public media. For anything to have value its intrinsic qualities must be apparent to its owner, who should be able to discriminate between it and other things like it. It is the owner who must exercise a purposeful intention for keeping or disposing of that value. A recognised social value must therefore be evidenced for the existence of a public media system; immediate and apparent to the public who should own the system. Ownership, in this sense, means that the public sanctions programmes and has

right of use and unfettered “access” (Lee Artz, cited in McCauley, et al., 2003: 5) to both the media system and the content it creates. It is only in this way that the public can exert the rights of an owner. Characteristically, public ownership is often through a structure of public funding and supervision that grants both financial and political independence, and assures freedom of expression in order to protect the integrity of the Habermasian project implicit in public-owned media. The public media system then becomes able to respond directly to the needs of the public and creates a space in which the public participates in “discussions” and “debates” (ibid.); the decisions and exchanges of ideas necessary for social development. Proceeding on the premise that the media provide modern societies with a public sphere, then public media systems are needed because they can make content of social value, but not attractive to commercial media, within the context of communal social realities. Such content is often educative and informational and generates public debate. By resolving these conflicting social experiences, and through learning narratives, a PBS helps push forward social development. Thus, when the intended owners of the PBS are disconnected from it, then it cannot perform for them in any meaningful manner beyond the typical private and commercial media that relies more on providing sensational and entertaining content. The PBS purpose will then become doubtful to both the technician who works within that system, as well as the public.

GBC and the PBS challenge

In Tayman (2012), the study shows that television producers at GBC often quote the purpose of public service broadcasting as being “to educate, to inform and to entertain”. This displacement, by what may be called Reithan 'content values', of a corporate *raison d'etre* may either be the result of poorly communicated strategic plans or the evidence of the disconnect between functional aims and the means by which to achieve them. The critical difference between these values and purpose was rendered by Dr. Nkrumah himself:

“Ghana's Television...will not cater for cheap entertainment, sensationalism and commercialism. Its paramount objective will be education in the broadest purest sense. It will supplement our educational programme and foster a lively interest in the world around us. Television must assist in our social transformation” (Ghartey-Tagoe 2010, pg 78).

Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, at the inauguration of the television wing of the GBC set forward a vision expressing the optimism that television would engage with and

enable social change and development. The purpose was to create a state-owned media system that would embed in the national transformation process. Ghana Television (GTV) would, in particular, emphasize on “traditions, culture values, and the way of life of the people” (Asante 1996, pg. 125), and give to the post-colonial citizen an experience that would help transform their understanding of their place in the world. GTv, at that time, had an intense programming schedule with a wide-audience appeal, gender-sensitive programming that was informative and educative, and it was available to viewers all over the country. At village centres local language translators were used to explain content (Horne 2002), and the Ghana Sanyo Akasanoma project provided citizens with television and radio sets they could buy (Horne 2002; Ansu-Kyeremeh and Karikari 1998) so they could enjoy the local content programming that was at the heart of the GBC's services. The purpose of the GBC, therefore, remains thus: to participate in social development by enabling citizen's voices within the context of their social realities so they can discuss, engage and participate, through the public-owned media, with the world around them in ways that would promote their social development. To effectively do these will mean dealing decisively with the following problems:

Issues of ownership and control

The fundamental problem with the GBC is the lack of real political insulation between it and political authority. While there are sometimes overt attempts to influence programming (Tayman 2012), the real problem with assuring the independence of GBC lies in its governing law, which is a hang-over from a military regime. The National Liberation Council Decree 226 mandates the Head of State to select the Chairman, Director-General and some board members. The government may also to take over control of the GBC in a perceived national emergency. In the current Republic, these overhangs are carried over as “consultation” with the National Media Commission (NMC). The NMC is not completely independent as it also has on it a personal representative of the President. This means that all ruling governments, within tenure, get a chance to put 'yes men' on the NMC Board who can strongly indicate where the favour of the President may lie. Consequently, frequent agitations to dismiss Board members by GBC staff, as it has been with every government since the first Fourth Republic government, point acutely to this governance problem. More importantly, the public as consumers do not, either directly or through representatives, have any input in the selection of the GBC Board which consequently, merely, represents specific interest groups in the current law.

Thus, setting a 'public' determined agenda for programming becomes challenging. Programming, the selection, production and scheduling of media content by a broadcaster, requires an inherent understanding of the audiences' preferences and cannot be done successfully without this. An audience research focus is fundamental to successful media programming, especially for content that is delivered in real-time and not on-demand.

Issues of access and content values

While independence and public ownership are structural fundamentals to get right, the public's use of the broadcasting system is essential. Universal access to the broadcasts of GBC is not complete and the situation will be compounded by the switch to digital terrestrial television. That cut-off date was set to be in the year 2015 and the continued delay points to the problems inherent in signing up to the protocol without clearly communicating, thereafter, a clear switch-off programme that would provide measures to ensure that citizens could either acquire digital set top boxes or digital ready television sets in other not to be caught out of digital migration. Access costs for the ordinary person, especially the rural poor, will effectively cut them off from enjoying that public good. There are no definite figures on the number of television sets in use within the country, but most broadcast reception appliances are imported, even though local assemblage has started. These appliances are still not affordable for most people, adding complexity to the problem of universal access in the near future.

Furthermore, citizen participation in content production from within local communities is non-existent. They have no way of being a part of the system in contributing to content-making either as originators, although some institutions and social organisations may infrequently gain access to present 'public service' messages. Since inception, the efforts at nation-building have incorporated the GBC into governments and their development agenda. It functions in the belief that electronic mass communication use could inject, by 'hypodermic effect', a catalysis of social and national development and continues to produce programming that reflects this (McCauley et al., 2003; Buckley, et al., 2005). This approach is an outcome of the post-colonial situation in which the media was expected to play a role in an emancipation project to catch up with the advanced world (Napoli 1996) and alternative participatory models of social development have not been explored as useful tools in developing more participatory programming efforts (Tayman 2012). In this inability to decentralise content production, GBC loses ground to new arrivals especially in the use of local

languages. Language serves as the basis for creating meaning and is therefore a signifier of embedded representations of culture, identity, experience, aspiration, and knowledge, and when used in both its verbal and non-verbal codes is able to “symbolise” and “embody” a “cultural reality” (Kramersch, 2008: 2). The preponderance of English as a dominant programming language limits GBC's role in the exchange of critical ideas for social development (Kramersch, 2008; Falola, 2004).

These are key structural deficits that must be redressed in order to set the balance right for the ethos of the organisation; to make the right programming decisions to meet the needs of a 'national public'.

Getting the balance right

To get the balance right requires reparation of the nature of the GBC. A modern public media organisation can offer a platform on which the meshing of a public sphere and social capital can enable social development (Tayman, 2012). To enable that requires addressing these problems with ownership, control and access:

Firstly, a 'public service' institution must exist in law. The NLCD 226 needs to be replaced and the confusion that exists in the notion that public and state are necessarily conjoined cleared up. Also, recruitment for Board members ought to represent the interests of citizens as consumers. Parliament, through a balanced Select Committee could appoint Board members to reflect national demographics and media management experience. Members should be persons who have done work in the culture-industry in order to ensure reasonable understanding among themselves and in their accounting to the public of what is required to reflect the public's interests, tastes and cultures. Such an arrangement would also offer a more practical means of political insulation than is provided by the NMC. The NMC itself could continue as an advisory body to Parliament. Parliament, being better resourced than the NMC, could commission independent studies to collate views on the performance of GBC within set periods to offer better direction and supervision of the PSB mandate.

Secondly, public media must reflect both local interests and national circumstance. Investing in strong local programme-making is only a vehicle over

which information, education and entertainment values can be imbued. Programming itself must be dictated by the needs of the citizen audience as a market that is discriminatory. The strength of traditional PSB has been in offering innovative, family-focused, content with excellent production values. Knowing the audience is fundamental to deciding which programmes are critical and need public funding, and which programmes could survive in a competitive search for advertising cedis. The problem with the current GBC model is that programme producers have to assume both global knowledge of subjects and the pulse of the national sentiment and interest. Also, programmes are determined and scheduled without measured information. This is both inefficient in its use of public funding and misleading to citizens and any foreigner who would assume these choices to be a valid representation of the national media culture. The GBC's Audience Research Department ought to be a crucial department whose contributions should advice producer and management decisions on what and how to create and improve programmes to meet the needs of its intended audiences. The unit currently fails to provide support in a consistent and periodic manner (Tayman, 2012) and this has rendered it both a dinosaur and a pigeon; it has no relevance and merely provides disguised employment. As traditional PSB loses ground to themed channels that offer more focused programming to specific audience groups in the new digital broadcasting environment; in which both satellite and the internet bring much more plural platforms and content but excludes some citizens, it becomes critical to invest in both audience research and technical training for personnel to create an informed synergy to build up content for diverse national communities, in reflection of their social realities, that the rest of the broadcasting industry can emulate.

Lastly, within the new digital terrestrial broadcasting environment, GBC must take steps to validate a PSB status by ensuring that no one is cut off from accessing its programmes, especially as it needs television licensing fees to help it survive. For example, by setting up community centres for communal viewing opportunity, along with multi-layered audio services to provide local dialect audio translations for non-native language programmes, as well as commentary on events of national and cultural importance it will be fulfilling a universal access. The high consumption of cheaply assembled electronic gadgets, the market that RLG and Groupe Ndoum are exploiting, proves that a Public-Private partnership like the Ghana-Sanyo model is still needed and could provide added revenue to the corporation.

Conclusion

The GBC needs to be reformed to make it fit for its consumers both in purpose and in the strictest media market economics sense possible. To fail in either will result in the eventual collapse of the system over time. This is the situation at GBC now. By any measure of key values, it fails to adequately account for its continued existence in its present state. It needs to redress this balance and provide a more relevant service in the standards of good public service broadcasting. It needs to be aware of market gaps and plan to address these in the new media environment.

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