

Integrity and Intrigue: Ghanaian Press Performance in the 2016 Campaign

Jennifer Hasty¹

Abstract

How did the Ghanaian news media serve the interests of democracy during the 2016 campaign?. This paper examines the performance of two Ghanaian daily newspapers in the context of the campaign, identifying the specific and strategic forms of public discourse that constitute the 'house style' of each newspaper. I look at the structure and content of news stories, with attention to language, mood, sources, and perspectives represented. Emphasizing themes of peace and unity, Daily Graphic continued to foreground the public pronouncements of officials at formal events. Daily Guide challenged government rhetoric with contentious stories designed to undermine ruling-party legitimacy. Both newspapers tended to represent their own distinct set of perspectives and interests, giving less attention to alternatives. Both papers make important contributions to Ghana's lively public sphere. As they strive for greater balance and complexity in their news coverage, journalists may consider increased consultation with independent civil society groups carrying out analyses of socially relevant topics.

Keywords: Journalism, Ghanaian newspapers, election campaigns, democracy, publicsphere

Introduction

The news media play a crucial role in the democratic process, providing information to the public on the full spectrum of candidates and policies while facilitating public participation in debates over major issues (ACE, 2013; Norris and Odugbemi, 2009). In the US, media scholars have concluded that the American news media failed in its responsibility to support the democratic process in the

¹Professor Jennifer Hasty is a lecturer in African Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Her book, *The Press and Political Culture in Ghana* is an ethnography of state and private journalism in the context of democratization in the late 1990s. Currently, she is a Fulbright Specialist engaged in work on investigative journalism and government accountability, in association with the African Center for International Law and Accountability. She has recently been named an ACILA Scholar.

2016 presidential campaign season (Patterson, 2016; Zarawik, 2016). So focused on sensational comments and negative controversy, the media neglected its duty to inform the public about the real issues at stake or promote dialogue among interest groups in our increasingly factionalized society. As a media scholar and newspaper reader, I can attest to the relentless negativity and herd mentality of the American news media. Early on in the campaign, it was clear that The New York Times had picked Hillary Clinton as its favorite, dismissing and under-reporting on other popular figures such as Bernie Sanders while sneering incredulously (and continuously) at Donald Trump. And though their editorial positions were not always clear, the mainstream media in general focused tightly on the personalities and scandals (real and potential) surrounding those two candidates rather than educating the public or furthering democratic dialogue.

The Ghanaian situation

In Ghana, the news media have played an important role in promoting and consolidating democracy since the early 1990s. As a reporter for Ghanaian newspapers during the 1996 presidential campaign, I witnessed firsthand the sincere desire among many journalists to give voice to diverse political perspectives and support free and fair elections (Hasty, 2005). In their review of the role of the media in the 2012 presidential and parliamentary campaign, the Center for Democracy and Development concluded that the media provided a platform for intense political discussions between political parties while educating the public (CDD, 2015).

And yet, many Ghanaians complain that the news media in their country is susceptible to the same problems plaguing the American news media. Civil society leaders have complained to me that journalists too often focus on superficial and scandalous incidents, failing to provide the sort of policy analysis that would facilitate the democratic process and government accountability. And despite sincere commitments to objectivity, the journalists I worked with at state and private newspapers were subject to workplace pressures that shaped their reporting to give voice to certain narratives and interest groups while silencing others.

So how did the Ghanaian news media perform this time around? Supported by a grant from the Fulbright Specialist Program, I came to Ghana this past October to work with the Africa Center for International Law and Accountability (ACILA) on media issues in the context of the 2016 campaign. Through lectures and public discussions, we worked to promote the exercise of a vigorous and responsible

press. Curious about media coverage of candidates and major issues, I collected the major newspapers every day and read them closely, also listening to news reports and discussions on the major radio stations, particularly *Joy FM* and *Class FM*. And I gave talks at the Ghana Institute of Journalism and the School of Communication Studies where students asked me some very revealing questions about the practice of journalism in their own country and elsewhere. I also appeared on radio and television, in conversation with media practitioners and political operatives.

So for this evaluation of the role of the press in elections, I turned to the newspapers I collected in those eighteen days and created a manageable sample for a kind of intensive, qualitative analysis. I examined two newspapers in particular. First, I chose *Daily Graphic*, whose broad circulation and venerable history make it the national newspaper of record in Ghana. I should also note that I've worked for *Daily Graphic* (*Graphic*), though a long time ago, and I've written about the style and practice of journalism at *Graphic* in a book and several articles. Second, I chose a paper I had no previous knowledge about, *Daily Guide* (*Guide*), a paper that seemed to be very widely read and much discussed on the radio (and perhaps now, after the elections, for obvious reasons). The period under examination is Monday, October 3rd to Saturday, October 15th, a very small slice of the 2016 campaign season in Ghana. Some might argue that such a small sample limits the sort of conclusions one can draw; but a strategically manageable sample allows for deeper reading and more comparative analysis. And looking over the sample, the internal consistencies of political coverage in both newspapers suggests that even such a small sample may give fairly representative results. I sat down and reread both newspapers carefully, a project I thought would take a few hours but wound up consuming the better part of two weeks. I focused on coverage of the political campaigns and the upcoming elections.

As I'm an anthropologist by training, my method is a sort of "thick description" of news texts, analyzing the overarching narratives and journalistic forms in each newspaper while providing the political and professional context necessary to account for those particularities. I look carefully at the structure and content of news stories with attention to language, mood, sources, and perspectives represented. My analysis is fundamentally motivated by the question of democratic functionality, that is: How did the Ghanaian news media serve the interests of democracy during the 2016 campaign?

The Keepers of Consensus: House Style at *Daily Graphic*

For as long as I've been studying the press in Ghana, the 'house style' of *Graphic* has foregrounded the formal pronouncements of public figures. Back in the Rawlings period, stories emanated mostly from government officials speaking at official government events such as the launch of some new development project like a dam or a *gari*² processing plant. Stories were written according to a sort of rubric, the lead quote from the most prominent official at the event. Then a “neck” explaining the context. Often, the remainder of the story was structured in a chain of quotes from most to least important speaker at the event. I know from experience that these stories are frequently based on the printed speeches handed out at public events as well as official news releases and open letters and, a little less often, interviews with the newsmakers themselves. *Graphic* journalists are not usually encouraged to seek out a diversity of political and intellectual perspectives to comment on the pronouncements and initiatives covered in the *Graphic* stories.

The sample from October 2016 shows just how resilient this style has been over the past twenty years. Most of the stories that appear in the newspaper still emanate from the formal pronouncements of public figures, with some variation nowadays. Quite frequently, stories still open with lead quotes but now we also see a different sort of lead, with the basic details of the event related in the opening paragraph (a where/when-lead rather than a who-lead). Also, we occasionally get some background context supplied a few paragraphs into the story—not often, but more often now than in the past.

A big difference these days is that *Graphic* now applies its news rubric (the who-lead and chain of quotes) to a more diverse spectrum of public figures, including politicians and party officials from all of the national political parties as well as popular pastors, civil society leaders, and NGO officials. Examples include, “Mahama Biggest Threat to Ghana's Future, says Akufo-Addo,”³ a story appearing on page 17 on October 3rd. From that same edition, on page 19 we have “Stop Prophesying Election Outcome—Dr Boadi Nyamekye,” in which a pastor criticized other pastors who were giving election predictions in their sermons. Nyamekye went on to urge people to pray for the strength to meet the post-election

²Gari is traditional Ghanaian food produced from cassava.

³During the 2016 elections in Ghana, (John Dramani) Mahama was the President of Ghana and presidential candidate for the National Democratic Congress (NDC), the ruling political party at the time, while (Nana Addo Dankwa) Akufo-Addo led the biggest opposition political party, the New Patriotic Party (NPP), to the elections.

challenges facing the nation. I could go on and on in this vein, as most stories in *Graphic* are all about the comments of a limited number of speakers at a formal event.

There is something to be said for this 'house style' of newswriting. A lot, actually. This kind of story gives the speakers at an event a clear way to convey their messages to a larger public, reaching beyond the small number of people who could actually attend to the larger audience who might be affected or interested in the issues discussed. It shows respect for the speakers and the messages and concern for the audience of Ghanaian citizens, allowing them the space to have their say. And the careful attention to the precise words of public sources bears out *Graphic's* commitment to the homily inscribed on the masthead, "Truth & Accuracy Every Day."

Readers of *Graphic* are no doubt familiar with a certain sensation that comes from everyday immersion in the newspaper. For those who read it only occasionally or read it alongside other news sources, let me tell you that reading a whole pile of *Graphic* "at one go" gives the reader a certain feeling, a tranquil and assured feeling, a feeling of calm about nation and future. For readers who might be feeling agitated or disturbed, a deep reading of *Graphic* serves to set the mind at ease. It's almost as good as meditation. Here's what I mean.

The nation conveyed in the pages of *Graphic* is a world of knowledgeable, well-meaning experts delivering cool assurances of peace and development to grateful citizens, often accompanied by real donations and projects to benefit needy communities. Each story illustrates how a set of these expert officials are all linked together in consensus over social values and fundamental goals of governance. During the campaign, the different political parties each had different messages and each one wanted to beat the others, to be sure; but their differences were presented indirectly, in separate stories, never as direct confrontation on a single issue.

For instance, towards the end of the sample, when NPP and NDC were getting markedly more coverage than the smaller parties, *Graphic* positioned one story on a speech by Mahama side-by-side with a story covering a speech by Akufo-Addo (some American editors call this 'tomb-stoning,' when you put stories side-by-side like this, and it's only used in unusual circumstances to make a certain comparative point). The Mahama story was full of the rhetoric of NDC officials and the Akufo-Addo story was full of the rhetoric of NPP officials. Each story presented a little

rhetorical world, internally coherent and unchallenged. They were certainly speaking ABOUT one another as candidates, but no one in the Mahama camp was asked to comment on Akufo-Addo's speech or agenda and vice versa. Thus, there was no push-back or alternative perspective given to the assertions of the politicians. And there were no intermediary voices from civil society or academia giving commentary or alternative perspective within each story. For instance, as Akufo-Addo repeatedly emphasized the importance of industrialization to job-growth, a *Graphic* journalist might've consulted a Ghanaian economist or someone from the Institute for Economic Affairs to add a perspective from outside the party. This did not happen in *Graphic*'s coverage of the campaign.

This is not to say that *Graphic* didn't publicize the perspectives of civil society intellectuals and organizations. To the credit of the newspaper, *Graphic* gave prominent coverage to the timely reports of IMANI Ghana and the NCCE (the National Council for Civic Education) on political and electoral matters. The front page of the October 7th issue of *Graphic* featured a lead story on IMANI Ghana's finding that the NDC had met 52.9 per cent of the promises enumerated in its 2012 manifesto. The news story covered the report in great detail. As a side note, this and subsequent coverage highlighted the particular details of the report that made the NDC government look good, while strategically overlooking the more critical points. But more on the advantages of incumbency later.

Furthering the diversity of perspectives in the paper, the editorials, columns, and feature stories of the newspaper did serve as sites for evaluating and analyzing the content of the campaign. For example, a column by the former NPP minister, Elizabeth Ohene, evaluated the decision by the Electoral Commission to disqualify twelve presidential candidates, expressing dismay at a process that privileged bureaucratic detail while shutting out so many voices from the political process.

So, a diversity of political and intellectual views were and are expressed in the pages of *Graphic*. But a very strict division is observed between straight news and features stories (including editorials and columns). At *Graphic*, the kind of juxtaposition and comparison of perspectives necessary for real analysis of the news is strictly forbidden in straight news stories. The overall message is that true and accurate news is essentially what important people say on-the-record. What it all really means for Ghanaians is left to the opinion section.

Politics is a heated, divisive, and potentially violent business, a fact known only too well by African journalists throughout the continent (Nyamnjoh, 2005; Monga,

1996). *Graphic* has adopted a very genteel, very cautious way of presenting the political world to its readers and I'm sure this is the thinking behind the 'house style' of *Graphic*. Themes of peace, negotiation, and moderation are emphasized in stories throughout the paper.

For instance, the October 8th edition ran a story headlined, “Strive for Peace in This Year's Election—Ashigbey,” reporting on a speech given by the Managing Director of Graphic communications Group Limited, Accra. In that same edition, the editorial asserts, “Our Peace Cannot Be Compromised,” foregrounding the role of security agencies in containing conflict while urging the political parties “to be circumspect.” A section called “Your Voice,” regularly occurring underneath the lead editorial, features commentary by four Ghanaians (all too frequently men) on the main issue of the editorial. In that issue, four young men address the question, “What should be done to ensure peace in the run up to the elections?” The four contributors suggest the importance of honesty and integrity, religious leaders, and efforts to educate citizens to protect the peace. As these are initiatives already emphasized in *Graphic*, they are fairly non-controversial suggestions and indeed don't really require that anybody do anything that they aren't already doing.

Now peace is a good thing, so is development. And *Graphic* has shown an admirable commitment to both. But I do worry that the 'house style' of journalism at *Graphic* too carefully segregates and insulates separate perspectives, avoiding challenge and confrontation. I'm not suggesting that *Graphic* journalists should insert opinion into their straight news, often called editorializing. I'm just wondering if peace and development might be better served by putting the pronouncements of newsmakers in the critical context that makes them meaningful and consequential, pushing back against those pronouncements with alternative views *in-story*.

So for instance, a story on October 12th headline-quotes an IMF official, “Ghana makes progress in management of economy.” The actual body of the story is a little less congratulatory but the idea is that a very important official at a very important global organization is giving Ghana (and presumably the Ghanaian government) a big thumbs-up. This commentary occurred in the context of the great controversy over Vice-Presidential candidate Bawumia's scathing indictment of the economic mismanagement and misrepresentations of the Mahama administration. And yet, the *Graphic* article fails to mention the context that makes the IMF assessment so relevant. With radically different interpretations of the same numbers, the controversy over the performance of the economy became very heated in the

course of the campaign, sparking strong accusations and fiery language on both sides. This and other *Graphic* articles on the economy question might've modelled a more respectful and reasonable approach to understanding these complex issues by drawing alternative perspectives together in a sort of virtual dialogue (that might not have been possible in person).

Time and time again, the discursive segregation of *Graphic's* 'house style' sidestepped the critical and analytical role of media in the democratic process during the campaign. As the political parties released their manifestoes, *Graphic* covered each launch with the standard speeches and document highlights. News stories described the rallies and gave rhetorical snippets from speeches, linking the quotes together in a kind of internal consensus. Never did a journalist consult an outside source to challenge the feasibility of a proposed policy or discuss best practices or what might've been tried in the past to what success (at least not in the sample under analysis). While a lead editorial asserted, "It is time to scrutinize manifestoes," Ghanaians were not provided with the analytical tools to do so in the news stories covering those manifestoes.

A final point I want to make about *Graphic* coverage of the 2016 presidential campaign concerns the representational advantages of incumbency. Consider the political subtext of the following headlines:

"Kwame Nkrumah Circle interchange to be ready end of October," (October 10th, p. 32, color spread).

"FRI inaugurates cassava dryer," (October 11th, back page).

"Mudor waste treatment plant nears completion," (October 12th, p. 32).

"University of Ghana Teaching Hospital project nearly completed," (October 12th, p. 54).

"5 Community-Based Health and Planning Centers Completed in Upper West Region," (October 13th, p. 17).

Almost daily, and sometimes twice or more in a single issue, *Graphic* reminds its readers of the wonderful things the current government is doing for them. These stories not only publicize the uplifting rhetoric of government officials, they frequently feature large color photographs to dramatically illustrate the message of government patronage. To be fair, *Graphic* also runs stories about donations

and benevolent initiatives conducted by foreign governments, NGOs, and private individuals, not just the Ghanaian government. But the most frequent patron by far, in the pages of *Graphic*, is the current administration. And the most frequent objects of government largesse are socially and economically disadvantaged people such as remote village communities, schoolchildren, and people with disabilities.

And it's not just development stories that lend favorable coverage to the incumbent government in the midst of a presidential campaign. On October 4th, *Graphic* ran a story about several groups of new ambassadors who had come to introduce themselves to the President and present their diplomatic credentials, a formality which might seem to lack the basic elements of newsworthiness. And yet, "Prez Mahama receives letter of Credence from Envoys" received a full spread on pages 42-43, featuring six large color photographs of Mahama shaking hands with ambassadors from Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Mali, Hungary, and Germany. The Hungarian ambassador is even bowing in deference to President Mahama.

In academic terms, we might say that *Graphic* is a crucial tool in the everyday articulation of government legitimacy. That is to say, the newspaper shows Ghanaians just how right and proper it is that such a domestically generous and internationally respected leader is in power. In the interests of national stability and cohesion, I do see how important it is for a government to be able to propagate these messages. But in the interests of democracy and a level playing field, I also think it's important to recognize that 'house style' at *Graphic* necessarily yields advantage to the incumbent government in the midst of a presidential campaign.

You might say that incumbency advantage is an unfortunate side effect of a 'house style' devoted to maintaining peace and unity in the national interest. Yes, but you might also say that Ghanaian readers and tax-payers support *Graphic* and deserve a national paper that is mindful of its duty to provide balanced coverage in political campaigns. Now, as a foreigner, I'm not here to tell Ghanaians how to practise journalism. But as a scholar analyzing Ghanaian news media over the past twenty years, I hope it may be useful to point out contradictions between the styles of journalism practised at different newspapers and the forms of political representation that support the democratic process.

Intrigue on the Edge: House Style at Daily Guide

Now let me turn to my close reading of the *Guide* in the same time period, Monday, October 3rd to Saturday, October 15th. After several days of blissing out in the positive rhetoric of *Graphic*, I turned to the *Guide*. Diving into the pile, I was jolted into a much messier, much more volatile political reality. If *Graphic* gives the reader a profound sense of calm, *Guide* delivers an overall sense of intrigue and indignation, inciting political passions with its lively language and contentious themes.

As I mentioned earlier, I intended to limit the purview of my analysis to political stories (more or less), focusing on those stories that directly addressed political figures and campaign issues. In *Graphic*, this meant skimming those stories that dealt with other sorts of issues, such as crime and business. Even so, *Graphic* is a very long newspaper, comparatively speaking, and even when I sifted out the non-political stories, it was a long slog through each 40-page issue.

When I turned to my pile of *Guide*, I thought, “Ah, these newspapers are much shorter. Surely, I will sail through this pile in no time!” Alas. *Guide* is a shorter newspaper but nearly every story is political and even those stories that might seem at first glance to be non-political, on second glance, turn out to have a fairly obvious political subtext.

Like *Graphic*, *Guide* covers the full spectrum of political organizations and activities in Ghana; but unlike *Graphic*, *Guide* uses a wide variety of journalistic techniques in its coverage (including some controversial ones). Which is to say, the style of the newspaper is far less homogenous and seemingly more unpredictable than *Graphic*. Nevertheless, a close reading reveals strong regularities in the kinds of journalistic technique and coverage given to government, business, and the different political parties.

The biggest different in writing style is apparent in the very first paragraph of *Guide*'s news stories. While *Graphic* relies so often on the “who-lead,” that is, a lead paragraph quoting and identifying an important speaker, *Guide* relies much more often on a “what-lead,” that is, a lead paragraph that tells about a newsworthy event or situation. This is frequently followed by a description of the context that makes that event relevant, often a controversy or conflict among political actors. An article appearing on page 2 of the October 8th edition is a good example. While the lead is based on the NPP's perspective, the opening paragraph gives far more attention to the “what” of the story:

“The New Patriotic Party (NPP) is outraged at the Bank of Ghana's (BOG's) decision to buy 72 gold watches with each estimated to cost approximately \$7,000, the equivalent of GHc28,000 as gratis to some of its staff as part of their retirement package.”

The story continues with further detail about the total cost of the policy, only then turning to the NPP's official condemnation of this “reckless use and wanton dissipation of taxpayer's monies.”

Thus, *Guide* jumps right in to do what *Graphic* rarely does (in straight news stories), tell the reader how and why an event is newsworthy, putting it in context with significant details and alternative perspectives. Sometimes this verges on editorializing, mixing opinion into straight news stories. The result is a much more fluid boundary between straight news and opinion.

In American journalism, this framing of news events in-story would be called “edge” (Walsh, 1996). Given the constant coverage of CNN and the ongoing stream of online news, many Americans know about breaking events as they happen. This puts newspapers at a disadvantage compared to CNN and online sources. Why read the newspaper if its stuff you've already heard about? To maintain readership at papers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, editors at those papers urge their reporters to “add value” to the straight reporting of the news by including a controversial context and multiple perspectives. Conflict, of course, is a central element of newsworthiness.

Independent newspapers in Ghana have been faced with similar pressures at least since the mid-1990s when I began studying the press. The daily promulgation of official rhetoric by *Graphic* prompts other news organizations to “add value” to their news stories by attempting to “get behind” that rhetoric and describe “what's really going on.” And now more Ghanaians get their news from radio than anywhere else so the private papers struggle to maintain their importance in the circulation of news through so many nodes in the circuit (newspapers, radio, TV, online sources). So, the domineering force of *Graphic* and the multiplication of news media forms has put pressure on private papers to make their straight news “edgy” enough to attract the attention of readers.

Adding to the pressure to maintain relevance is the problem of access. The style of newswriting at *Guide* is heavily impacted by the availability and willingness of sources to provide the sort of information and commentary that give their news

real edge in the news mediascape. Public speakers at official events are generally quite happy to be quoted verbatim in news stories; so government officials and political actors generally welcome *Graphic* reporters to their events, assured that their rhetoric will not be challenged or undermined in *Graphic's* coverage. But “adding edge” by “getting behind the rhetoric” often means putting a speaker's assertions in a controversial context, including adversarial interpretations and different perspectives. Many newsmakers are not so eager to cooperate in that kind of news story. At least not on-the-record. Though Ghana is a shining example of African democracy, the public sphere is highly politicized and most citizens, high and low, are reluctant to be identified as sources of controversial news, particularly in the context of an unpredictable political climate. Therefore, if news reporters want really “edgy” stories, the ones that sell newspapers and make it into radio and TV discourse, they must resort to anonymous sources.

This is why you see so many stories in *Guide* beginning with phrases like, “Daily Guide has gathered that...” or “A deep source has revealed that...” or “Information reaching Daily Guide indicates that...” and other such vague turns of phrase. During the 2016 campaign, *Guide* reporters routinely relied on anonymous sources in order to craft their own edgy, controversial 'house style', a direct contrast to the harmonious, attribution-heavy style of *Graphic*. A particularly good example of this is “Minister Blows GHc80,000 on Shatta Wale” from the October 3rd issue, page 3. Here's the lead:

“Daily Guide has gathered that the Minister of Roads and Highways, Inusah Fuseini, who doubles as the Member of Parliament (MP) for Tamale Central, paid an amount of over GHc80,000 to bring the self-acclaimed Dancehall King, Shatta Wale, to perform at the former's campaign launch in Tamale, Northern Regional capital, on Saturday.”

Citing no source at all, the story further reported that fuel coupons featuring the Minister's image and other goodies were handed out to NDC supporters at the rally. An unidentified Tamale resident then complains that residents lack access to potable water and good drainage while such a large sum was paid for a few hours of entertainment. Finally, the story closes with rebuttals by the two main characters in the story, Fuseini and Shatta Wale. In an interview with the reporter, the Minister denied even knowing the musician and said he had nothing to do with bringing him to the rally. Shatta Wale is quoted but his comments seem to have little to do with the central allegations of the story. The musician urged Tamale youth “not to cause politicians to use them to cause violence.”

This story exemplifies the conflicted array of named and anonymous perspectives represented in so many *Guide* stories. While *Graphic* segregates different factional voices in different stories (such as the tombstoning episode), *Guide* more often depicts direct confrontation and contradiction among those different factions within a single story. Fuseini was consulted for his response to the allegations and his outrage even carried over into a follow-up story the next day, “I Never Paid Shatta Wale—Says Minister,” in which the Minister indicates his intent to sue the newspaper for libel.

So *Guide* more often represents multiple factions in the same story but, as the Shatta Wale incident demonstrates, those factions are represented in very different ways. Anonymous sources are represented as populist voices of critique while official government and ruling-party sources are put on the defensive. In another example, *Guide* repeatedly criticized the Police Service for eliminating routine vehicle and document checks during the campaign. Reporters quoted police officials by name, announcing and defending the new policy. In “Police Suspend Vehicle Checks” (October 5, p. 3), *Guide* provides the context that makes this move controversial: “It comes at a time when the governing National Democratic Congress (NDC) is said to have issued lots of motorbikes and unlicensed vehicles to their supporters ahead of the 2016 general elections.” Who is saying this? The allegation is presented as general knowledge. The Public Relations Officer of the Police Service is then confronted with allegations that the new directive is part of a government effort to “win the votes of drivers.” “Not at all,” he says, the Police Service is independent...” And though this story appears on a page devoted to straight news, the story closes with a an edgy, highly-editorialized comment on the PRO's denial: “He denied the fact that the police sometimes take strict instructions from government officials, even though it is an open secret.”

The Shatta Wale story and the police story are similarly structured to challenge the campaign practices of ruling-party politicians while representing oppositional critique as populist (and pro-NPP). In the pages of *Guide*, popular knowledge and opinion align with the NPP; there simply are no populist voices represented in support of the NDC, aside from unruly “thugs” who allegedly assault NPP supporters. And NPP officials are never confronted with allegations against them by their political adversaries. It's always the other way around.

Though one-sided, this narrative was particularly useful for scrutinizing the controversial practices of political patronage that animated the 2016 campaign.

“Parliamentary Aspirant Sprays Cash” reported that a PNC candidate, upon filing his candidacy with the Electoral Commission, proceeded to throw fistfuls of cedis at his jubilant supporters (October 3, p.18). Nursing students interpreted Mahama's promise to bring back their training allowance as an attempt at “deceit and vote buying” and said they would not fall for it (October 14, p.18).

Compare the political message of the above stories with reports of similar practices carried out by NPP officials. “Becky Babes At Sege” (October 11, p.19) reports on the activities of a group supporting the NPP presidential candidate's wife, Rebecca Akufo-Addo. The group visited a part of town “known to be an NDC stronghold,” only to find surprising support from the women there. The last two paragraphs describe a gesture that certainly gives context to those enthusiastic expressions of support:

They were excited upon discovering that Mrs. Rebecca Akufo-Addo had asked Becky's Babes to present some clothes, shoes and bags to them. They received the gifts and expressed profound gratitude to Mrs. Akufo Addo. 'We, the people of Sege, are going to vote massively for Nana Addo and the NPP parliamentary candidate,' they added.”

Similarly, a story on October 13th describes how Vice-Presidential candidate of the NPP, Mahamudu Bawumia, donated “a number of items” to Tamale Senior High School, his alma mater. While Bawumia's ping pong tables were no doubt a big hit among the SHS students, the GHc50,000 cash for renovation of the assembly hall must've been particularly appreciated by parents and faculty. Bawumia further promised to provide the school with an ambulance.

As noted in the analysis of *Graphic*, stories about donation are fairly common in Ghanaian news media. And the public-spirited philanthropy of such donations is a very positive aspect of Ghanaian culture. But it does seem inconsistent to reduce the campaign largesse of NDC politicians to crass “vote-buying” while representing the similarly strategic donations of NPP politicians as unproblematic generosity. Patronage is patronage.

While criticizing the vote-buying patronage of specific NDC politicians, *The Guide* was also keen to undermine the vote-buying patronage of the government in general. As we've seen, *Graphic* ran daily stories celebrating the development projects launched and completed by the state. In the midst of a presidential campaign, these articles conveyed the relentless message that the incumbent

government was providing for the livelihood and well-being of its citizens. Undermining this rhetoric, *Guide* ran a series of articles during the campaign that questioned the very reality of these projects. A striking example is “Mahama Community Day SHS Lost in Ada,” a story that ran on page 15 of the October 4th edition. As the NDC boasted about the number of schools built under the Mills and Mahama administrations, this story described how one such school project never really amounted to anything for the children of Ada. Under a photo of a young man gesturing to a vacant lot, the story tells how “weeds and reptiles have taken over” the site which was supposed to become a new senior high school: “...the schools are nowhere to be found.” The story goes on to detail how the NDC government promised funds (and gin) to compensate local landowners and then failed to follow through. Drawing on another common theme in the pages of *Guide*, the story suggests that NDC in-fighting led to abandonment of the project entirely.

This critique of development rhetoric was threaded through other *Guide* stories during the campaign. Stories described how NDC politicians were touting new bridges, repaved roads, and “an ultra-modern sanitary facility” in the Volta region but such amenities turned out to be “phantom” projects invented “to score political points.” Touring the Kpando Zongo community, residents told NPP officials that they knew nothing about the new public toilets supposedly provided to them, suggesting that maybe the toilets were built somewhere else (October 12, p. 6).

The theme emerging in such stories is that suggest that NDC development projects are often just “create, loot, and share schemes” of economic mismanagement and corruption (October 12, p. 8). That is, not only do the projects never materialize, the funds allocated for them wind up in the pockets of ruling-party politicians. Like the Shatta Wale and Police Service stories, these “critique of development” stories are structured to challenge the rhetoric and practices of NDC officials while representing the voice of “the people” as fundamentally aligned with the NPP.

As it turns out, of course, the majority of voters did support the NPP presidential candidate. I'm not arguing that such stories are distorted or misleading, just that a large minority of Ghanaians are not represented in such strategic constructions of popular opinion. And that the rhetoric and practices of NPP politicians were not subject to the same popular critique. And that *Guide* is a newspaper, not an instrument of party propaganda. Back in the 1990s, private newspapers defended the partisan bias of similar forms of journalism by pointing to the incumbency bias of *Graphic*, indicating that they were just providing balance against the state

media. Point taken. But over the past twenty years, I've spoken with many Ghanaian journalists on both sides of the public-private divide who are eager to break through this dichotomy to provide more balance within their own publications.

The “critique of development” theme in *Guide* was part of an overall campaign to portray the NDC as disorganized, incompetent, corrupt, lawless, and prone to violence. Several stories described confusing situations where two NDC politicians claimed to be the official candidate for the same office in a constituency. In these and other stories, NDC indiscipline led to forms of popular violence. A story on page 7 of October 3rd reports that NDC thugs attacked NPP supporters with cutlasses. Confusion over the voter transfer “turned bloody” when an NPP supporter was stabbed in the back with scissors (October 8, p. 7). On October 10th, a story tells how NDC vigilante group, the “Aluta boys,” were so incensed by the Shatta Wale incident that they stole a van from their own political party.

In general, *Guide* was far more likely than *Graphic* to report on incidents of popular unrest and political violence in the campaign season. In an ominous tone, the paper reported that three thousand polling stations had been identified by government as “flashpoints” with increased risk for robbery, terrorism, and vigilante violence (October 7, p.6). Various forms of unrest and violence, including gunshots, were reported during the voter transfer exercise. One resident recounted the chaotic violence in Tamale, “My brother I was shocked to see AK 47 with my own eyes shooting Kakakakaka and the police run for cover at the centre” (October 7, p.7). The very terms of the political contest between the NPP and NDC presidential candidates was portrayed in more militant terms, such as the headline “Mahama, Nana Battle for Accra” (October 12, Front Page).

NPP politicians and candidates were most often portrayed as victims of violence or advocates of peace. Emphasizing the equanimity of the NPP candidate in the face of threats of violence, the paper reported that NPP presidential candidate Akufo-Addo's rather cool response when he was struck by a stone during a campaign speech.

“Someone just threw a stone at me, why?” he wondered. But he quickly resumed his delivery, saying “No problem, this is our politics in Ghana.” (October 7, p. 3)

To sum up, the style of journalism practiced at *Guide* foregrounds the factional intrigue and conflict plaguing the national political sphere in direct contrast to the paeans of national harmony and development propagated by *Graphic*. The form and language of *Guide* stories is livelier, more chaotic, suffused with popular and political passions. When those passions are presented in a very systematic way, though, always supporting one political party and never the other, then the newspaper appears strategically blind to the diversity of interests and opinions in Ghanaian society. The result is a newspaper whose functional value in the democratic process is limited by its own editorial policies.

Conclusion

Back to the original question: How did Ghanaian news media serve the interests of democracy in 2016? Both *Daily Graphic* and *Daily Guide* make extremely positive interventions in the Ghanaian public sphere, representing a diversity of perspectives and providing valuable information on political incidents and events. The careful and considered 'house style' of *Graphic* has worked to maintain peace and stability in the midst of a very hotly-contested campaign. The provocative, edgy style of journalism at *Guide* has challenged official government rhetoric and given voice to oppositional views. Editorial policies combine with market forces to form a consumer niche for each newspaper, shaping these distinctive styles of journalism. It may be naive to expect the forms of journalism to change without larger structural changes in patterns of ownership and readership.

In one-on-one interviews, however, journalists do express the desire to write more complex and balanced stories. Judging from the lively debates animating the radio talk shows, there may be room in the Ghanaian public sphere for deeper analysis that combines the full spectrum of social and political perspectives. Civil society groups such as ACILA, IMANI Ghana, and CDD have pioneered efforts to promote government accountability in the public sphere with research and in-depth analysis. ACILA has conducted workshops to train journalists in investigative techniques, promoting a form of journalism designed to promote government accountability through longer, deeper stories. Journalists looking to press the boundaries of 'house style' at their own news organization might consult with those organizations already conducting the sort of sociological analysis necessary for balance and complexity.

Looking at the peaceful elections and political transition, however, Ghanaian journalists have reason to be very proud of their work. *Ayekoo*, Ghanaian journalists. Americans can learn a lot from your example of peace and positivity.

References

- ACE Electoral Knowledge Network. 2013. Media and Elections. Retrieved on 25/04/2017 from: https://eos.cartercenter.org/uploads/document_file/path/323/Media_and_Elections_2013.pdf.
- CDD. 2015. *Final Report on Ghana's 2012 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections*. Retrieved on 25/04/2017 from: <http://www.cddgh.org/publications/Election-Reports/Final-Report-on-Ghanas-2012-Presidential-and-Parliamentary-Elections>.
- Hasty, J. 2005. *The Press and Political Culture in Ghana*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Monga, C. 1996. *The Anthropology of Anger: Civil Society and Democracy in Africa*. Boulder: Lynn Reinner.
- Norris, P. and Odugbemi, S. 2009. "Evaluating Media Performance." In *Public Sentinel: News Media and Governance Reform*. Washington DC: The World Bank.
- Nyamnjoh, F. 2005. *Africa's Media, Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*. London: Zed Books.
- Patterson, T. E. 2016. News Coverage of the 2016 General Election: How the Press Failed the Voters. Retrieved on 25/04/2017 from: https://shorensteincenter.org/news-coverage-2016-general-election/#Introduction_The_Medias_Negative_Bias.
- Walsh, K. T. 1996. *Feeding the Beast: The White House Versus the Press*. New York: Random House.
- Zarawik, D. 2016. "The Biggest Loser of the 2016 Presidential Election? The Media." *Baltimore Sun*, November 4 edition. Retrieved on 25/04/2017 from: <http://www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/tv/z-on-tv-blog/bs-ae-zontv-election-press-fail-20161104-story.html>.