Election Campaigns Framing in an Emerging Democracy: Horse race versus Issue Framing in Ghana

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Abstract

Political communication literature has repeatedly documented various forms of framing election campaigns across democracies, although that on Africa, including Ghana, are few. Matters of interest to such studies concern issues, horse race, coverage tone and presidential candidates' media visibility. This paper presents some findings from a qualitative content analytical study that explored political campaign coverage of elections in the Ghanaian media and implications thereof within the context of political communication. Grounded in framing and gatekeeping theories, the study specifically focused on the relationship between two broad categories – issues and horse race framing – in the 2008 and 2012 election campaign coverage in Ghana. And with data from two state-owned and two privately-owned Ghanaian newspapers, the study analyses which categories dominated the press presentation of the various election campaigns. The study demonstrates that coverage of the two elections was issue-based with peace as the most covered issue. However, the data also appears to indicate that horse race has the potential to dominate Ghana's coverage of future elections.

Key words: Framing, Gatekeeping, Horse race, Issues, Election campaigns

Introduction

Democracies are engaging the news media as a critical tool for mobilizing citizens to pay attention to politicians during political election campaigns. One significant principle of democracy is holding frequent, free and fair elections for citizens to elect their political leaders. It is, therefore, crucial for electorates to become aware of activities of political parties, candidates and issues they articulate. Strömbäck and Kaid (2008) argue that election news coverage is critical for democratic societies since it is a prerequisite for a well-informed voter. News media may

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decide to present election stories using the horse race frame or issues frame (Capella and Jamieson, 1997). The frames used by election reporters may help shape electorates' perceptions about candidates and parties contesting to be elected.

In 1957, Anthony Downs credited and described election campaigning as a "market place of ideas." Election-campaigns frames as horse race or issues and the contribution of journalists as well as the mass media in this enterprise are not new, especially in advanced democracies. However, exploring the nature of election campaign framing in an emerging democracy such as Ghana still remains an emerging field of study. From the above, it becomes interesting guided by framing and gatekeeping theories as to which of the frames, issues or horse race, dominated the fifth and sixth election-campaigns coverage in an emerging democracy such as Ghana, which came back to multiparty democratic governance in 1992.

Theoretical framework

Framing, also referred to as 'representation' in media, comes with two aspects. These are selection (or accessing of sources or claims-makers) and presentation (or evaluation of arguments or actors) Hansen (1999: 55). Entman (1993: 52) notes: "Framing involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/ or treatment recommendation for the item described."

Framing directs attention to particular information about an issue or event. The reason is for such information to stand out as the essence of communication, and therefore, important. The frames that are set by the media are made possible by the information journalists gather from political elites (Scheufele, 1999: 105; Entman, 2010: 401). The media industry in Ghana, including *Daily Graphic, The Ghanaian Times, Daily Guide and Ghanaian Chronicle,* plays a critical role in framing. In this way, they give various interpretations to issues and events journalists cover taking into consideration factors such as the editorial policy of the media outlet. In doing this, journalists unconsciously end up introducing some bias. According to McQuail (2005: 379), the information that gets to the newsroom has an in-built frame which serves the interest of sources, hence making it unlikely for news to be objective. Framing is a function of gatekeeping, hwnce applying the two theories would better guide the analysis.

Gatekeeping theory, which has been an influential theory in communication research, is critical in the practice of journalism. The theory focuses on the process of selecting stories for each publication, which is a significant practice of gatekeeping in the news media. In effect, the editors who are in charge of the newsroom control the kind of stories that finally get to the consuming audience (Castells, 2011), in this case the voters. Shoemaker and Vos (2009), Folarin (2002) and Herman and Chomsky (2000) suggest that gatekeeping practice is influenced by factors such as finance, professional ethics, ownership, management policy as well as perceived needs and preferences of audience. Palmer (2000: 45) also observes that news values inform the decision as to which stories should go through the gate. In effect, news values which include timeliness, frequency, clarity, proximity, unexpectedness, actions of elites and negativity (Galtung and Ruge, 1970) become guidelines for journalists and editors to work with (Brighton and Foy, 2007: 1). Going by the above, it is understood that the four newspapers sampled for this study might have been influenced by these factors in their decision concerning the campaign stories they published during the 2008 and 2012 elections.

Conceptual definitions
The study is underpinned by two concepts which would enhance the understanding of the analysis. These are game frames (horse race) and issue-based.

Game frames (Horse race)
Game framing appears to be the most popular frame used by journalists especially during election campaigns in advanced democracies. Game or horse race framing is used by journalists in telling campaigns stories usually using the language of competition or game focusing on a candidate's campaign strategy as to who is ahead or behind in the political contest. It is a frame that demonstrates also the self-interests of political actors (Patterson, 1993; Graber, 1993). Iyenger (1991) observes that horse race framing of campaigns is interested in telling the story about the electoral changes of competing election competitors, opinion poll changes of candidates, fund raising activities, delegate counts, and so on, instead of issue positions of competing candidates. In other words, horse race journalism is not interested in focusing citizens' attention on issues raised by competing candidates.

Issue-based
In the context of political election, issues involve "any questions of public policy

which have been or are a matter of controversy and are sources of disagreement between political parties" (Denver, 1990: 20). With issue-based election, the electorates get the opportunity to compare candidates' principles against their own to help them decide as to the candidate to vote for (Campbell, 1964: 98). In effect, issue framing tends to give electorates more information about each candidate. For an issue to create the needed basis for a choice, the electorates must first be concerned about the issue and have some relevant knowledge about such an issue (More, 1999: 245). It is important for the media to provide more than one opinion about a particular issue for the voter to form a solid opinion about (More, 1999: 246). In this case, the way and manner gatekeepers select and frame election campaigns events and issues go a long way in contributing to the decisions that voters make with regard to the candidates they should vote for.

Research methods

For Babbie and Mouton (2001: 49), the choice of methods and their application are informed by the aims and objectives of a study, the nature of the phenomenon under examination and the theory of the researcher. The goal of this research was to explore the nature of election campaigns framing in Ghana. To achieve this goal, a predominantly qualitative analysis was imposed on a content analysis (Rosengren (1981); Berelson, 1952) of newspaper reportage of prominent Ghanaian newspapers to address the objectives of the study. The analysis brings to the fore some revealing trends and understandings regarding media coverage of political campaigns in the country.

Four newspapers were engaged. 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 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 Monday to Saturday editions. Sundays were not included because these newspapers do not appear on the newsstands. The study used a total of 192 newspaper issues (each of the four newspapers contributed 48 of its editions). The

study looked at October and November in which election campaigns in Ghana really gather momentum. Voting normally takes place on December 7. The story types engaged for analysis were (1) Straight news (2) Feature (3) Editorial (4) Comment/opinion (5) Letters-to-the-editor.

Findings and Discussion
Previous study suggests that horse race reporting appears not to be associated with the framing of campaigns in Ghana (Amponsah, 2012). This study is, therefore, interrogating more closely the relative balance of issue and horse race framing during the 2008 and 2012 election campaigns. The overall results are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Top 5 Prominent Themes in the 2008 and 2012 Election Campaigns Coverage by the Press in Ghana

ISSUES	2008	%	2012	%
Peaceful election	153	35.1	91	20.7
Horse race	82	18.8	121	27.5
Education	81	18.6	86	19.5
Economy	81	18.6	45	10.2
Employment	39	8.9	0	0.0
Free SHS	0	0.0	97	22.0
Total	436	100	440	100

Horse race versus Issues – How did the press tell the elections stories?
It is clear from Table 1 that during the 2008 campaign, the four newspapers devoted a greater percentage of their coverage to issues (81.2 %). In the same vein the newspapers also in 2012 election devoted more space to the publication of issues (72.5 %). This means that the newspapers created the opportunity for Ghanaian electorates to become aware of the policies the presidential candidates contesting the elections had in mind to implement when voted to power. And since it is obvious that electorates were interested in transforming their lives, such awareness was necessary for the decisions they took during the elections. For instance, Kwesi Amoafo-Yeboah, an independent presidential candidate in the 2008 election, according to the Ghanaian Chronicle, announced what appeared to

be his master plan to tackle malaria, a disease, which the country is still struggling to manage. Part of the story reads: "Since we know that mosquitoes cause malaria and we know how they breed, we need to focus our resources on dealing with mosquitoes, instead of providing medication for malaria patients" (*Ghanaian Chronicle,* November 14, 2008: 12). The *Daily Graphic* also writes: "The presidential candidate of the Convention people's Party (CPP), Dr. Michael Abu Sakara, who has a solid background in agriculture also thinks that building a self-reliant economy with agriculture as the pivot, ensuring that the country's entrepreneurs compete favourably on the world market as well as enhancing free quality education and efficient exploitation of natural resources were the way forward" (*Daily Graphic,* November 1, 2012). These stories appear to demonstrate the positions of the presidential candidates on critical issues such as malaria and the economy and what they planned to do if voted to power. The gatekeepers of the newspapers might have allowed these stories through their gates because of their conviction that the issues involved were significant and therefore, merited the attention of the electorates.

As shown in Table 1, although in both 2008 and 2012 campaigns, issues framing dominated the coverage by a significant margin, we cannot lose sight of the fact that on the basis of single theme framing, horse race came second in 2008 election with 18.8 percent surging ahead of crucial themes such as education, economy and employment. Horse race also in 2012 election surged ahead of individual issues coverage and became the dominant frame of coverage with 27.5 percent. This also means that the four newspapers in their coverage made it possible for the electorates to become aware of which presidential candidate was ahead and who was behind in the political contest. The *Ghanaian Chronicle* of Thursday, November 1, 2012 published an election campaign story with the headline, "NDC will win the election massively" then writes: "Mr. Edward Kusi Ayarkwah, District Chief Executive (DCE) of Sekyere South and the parliamentary aspirant of the ruling National Democratic Congress (NDC) in the Sekyere South constituency, has said the ruling NDC is poised to win the December 7 general elections hands down." Again on outcome predictions as horse race coverage, the *Daily Graphic* of November 5, 2008 with the headline, "Fianoo predicts massive win for NPP at Keta" has it that: "The parliamentary candidate of the New Patriotic Party (NPP), in the Keta Constituency, Mr. Kodjoe Fianoo, has predicted a massive win for the NPP because of its numerous achievement." It is also interesting to note that as critical issues such as peaceful election, economy and employment had their coverage decreased in 2012 election campaign, horse race framing coverage increased by 8.7 percent.

The findings of this current study, therefore, suggests that the Ghanaian press including the most prestigious newspaper in the country, the *Daily Graphic,* seems to be adding horse race framing of elections to its political communication practice. While the horse race framing has always been associated with the advanced democracies such as the United States' campaign coverage, it has been relatively rare with Ghana's election campaigns coverage over the years. For example, Amponsah (2012) observes that in the Ghanaian context, especially with the state-owned newspaper (Daily Graphic), horse race framing of election was not one of the issues identified. Thus, the 2008 and 2012 election campaigns coverage by the press indicate a new trend in election campaign coverage in Ghana, a country which has experienced six multiparty elections since the restoration of democratic governance in 1992. The following examples of opinion polls results framing will illustrate this point better, with headlines in bold:

- RI predicts victory for Akufo-Addo. The lead reads: With barely 15 days to the 2012 general election, an opinion poll conducted by Research International is predicting a first round victory for the 2012 presidential candidate of the New Patriotic Party, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo (*Daily Graphic,* November 21, 2012)

- Akufo-Addo leads polls. Sections of the story read: "The Danquah Institute, Ghana's leading centre for research and political analysis, has conducted a nationwide survey of voters' intentions ahead of the general elections in December... Judging by these figures the NPP candidate is expected to win the popular votes by a clear margin almost one quarter of electorate in the first round (*Daily Guide,* November 14, 2008)

In effect, one can, therefore, infer that horse race framing is now becoming an issue and part of Ghana's political communication concepts, which should attract the attention of election-campaign researchers in the country.

Yet, horse race journalism, as a practice, has received conflicting reactions among scholars. Some scholars have declared horse race journalism as variously problematic and low quality coverage which, but for commercial interests, journalists would not engage in (Beckmann and Buhr, 2001; de Vresse and Semetko, 2002; Rosenstiel, 2005; Petry and Bastien, 2008). The practice is also described as too entertaining which displaces discourse of substantive policy issues (Iyengar et. al. 2004). However, these scholars and others acknowledge that horse race frames of, for instance, opinion polls, stimulate attention to politics.

This is because horse race framing could make reading the story very exciting. These scholars also suggest that opinion polls are important political information in multiparty democracies since opinion polls lead to strategic voting. Yet, there are some scholars who believe that the perceived effect of horse race framing of elections is just an exaggeration (Newton, 2006). On his part, Patterson (2005) argues that public opinion polls play a significant role in campaign framing.

In Ghana, opinion poll stories during election times are usually few, but when published they always attracted debate with political parties' officials running from one media house to another either discrediting the results of the polls or insisting on the validity of the result, depending on which party such polls would favor or go against. The party, which appeared disadvantaged would use technicalities to question the basis of such results. For instance, with the headline, "NDC Polls Bogus" the *Daily Guide* of Monday November 17, 2008 writes, "Mr. Gabby Asare Otchere-Darko, Executive Director of the Danquah Institute, has described as bogus and misleading an opinion poll advertised on media networks over the weekend." The story, which used Otchere-Darko as the only source, gave him the opportunity to discuss the poll's result in which he discredited the poll as based on a wrong margin of error, questionable sample size and questionnaire used for the opinion poll. The story, which had no author, did not do any interpretation of the poll. Another opinion poll in the Daily Guide of the same edition with the headline, "Nana leads latest polls" just presented the results of the poll with no interpretation. Such presentation of opinion poll stories in the newspapers in Ghana goes to discredit those stories. This act increases the level of cynicism towards politicians as well as the political process in general. It is also likely to add to low confidence in the newspapers campaigns stories.

It is clear from the content analysis of this study that Ghanaian journalists are also becoming interested in reporting on crowd at rallies. For instance, with the headline, "Bawku gives Mills a rousing welcome" the story reads: "Business and social activities at Bawku came to a halt last Sunday when the flagbearer of the National Democratic Congress (NDC), Prof. John Evans Atta Mills arrived in the town amidst acrobatic displays by motorcycles, bicycles and cars" (*Ghanaian Chronicle,* Tuesday, November 18, 2008). The *Daily Graphic* of Monday, October 29, 2012 also with the headline, "Big welcome for Akufo-Addo, Bawumia" reports: "A large number of New Patriotic Party (NPP) supporters and other residents of Tamale, the capital town of the Northern Region, last Friday treated Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo and Dr. Mahamudu Bawumia to a tumultuous welcome that lasted over four hours." The second paragraph also reads: "A sea of motorbike

riders seated in either twos or threes and others in cars and buses filled to capacity met the two on the outskirts of the city about 10 miles away from Tamale amid drumming and dancing." The *Daily Guide* of Wednesday, November7, 2012 has a story which draws attention to the crowd which reads: "The large crowd, boldly clad in NPP T-shirts and paraphernalia, threw the schedule of the tour of Nana Addo out of gear as they stampeded him."

Specific themes of the campaigns

The overall findings of this study show that considering the five prominent themes captured in the 2008 and 2012 campaigns by the press in Ghana, the issue framing exceeded 80 percent in 2008 and also exceeded 70 percent in 2012 campaigns news content in the four papers. In their coverage, the various newspapers selected and represented stories on different issues that formed the campaign messages of the presidential candidates and parties as a way for them to win votes. Issues such as peaceful election, education, economy, employment and free Senior High School received more coverage. As peaceful election dominated the issues in 2008, it was rather horse race journalism, which included candidates' endorsements that dominated the 2012 election campaign coverage. For instance, with the title of a feature article, Actualisation of Nana Addo's vision on education, the concluding part of the story says:

> "Undoubtedly, the free secondary school policy is possible. It will succeed for as long as the government has the political will to do it. The NPP government under Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo does not only have the political will to do it, but has the commitment and the desire to make it happen"(*Daily Graphic,* November 5, 2012).

A letter-to-the-editor with the title President Mahama, you were tops also reads:

> I congratulate you President John Dramani Mahama on your great performance during the recent IEA debate in Tamale on October 30, 2012. Your performance, devoid of literacy technicalities was clear, comprehensive and very easy to understand even by primary school kids" (*Daily Graphic,* Friday, November 16, 2012).

Since the issue of peace dominated the campaigns of the various presidential candidates, the study will discuss it to determine why the four newspapers had to give it the kind of coverage it received during the elections.

Peace: The issue the press wanted Ghanaians to think about

In 2008 the dominant campaign issue that could easily go through the gates of all the four newspapers was unsurprisingly peace. Peace as Table 1 displays, received 153 stories representing a significant 35.1 percent. Peace might have dominated because of the election violence that erupted in some of African countries such as Libya, Egypt and Cote d'Ivoire which led to deaths and high level of structural destruction in recent times. What might have also contributed to the dominance of peace were the high levels of intolerance, including the use of vile and insulting language against political opponents, especially during phone-ins programs on radio broadcasts; the hiring by the major political parties of so-called "macho men' or party foot soldiers' to promote the interests of a candidate and a party and discourage opponents through intimidation and violent measures as well as reluctance to prosecute offenders for serious electoral offences, particularly if the offenders belonged to the ruling party. All these created tension within the country to the extent that the gatekeepers of The *Ghanaian Times* of October 7, 2008 allowed through its gate a feature by Professor Kwesi Yankah with the title, **Prof. Kwesi Yankah wonders: Will Ghana survive Dec '08?** Part of the story is as follows:

> In Ghana... the war drums have been loud enough in recent times. From gun shots ringing at registration centres, gun shots at political rallies, to arson and inter-party killings at Gushiegu, to clashes at Berekum, and stories on stocking of arms by various ethnic groups and political parties. Day in day out, newspaper headlines have been chilling and convey the impression that all is not well with the nation Ghana.

It was probably this scary situation that might have motivated traditional leaders, religious leaders, Ghana Journalists Association, National Media Commission, The National Peace Council and other interest groups to campaign for peaceful election in the country. For example, lines such as the following became common in the narratives: *Right Reverend Emmanuel Arongo, Anglican Bishop of Tamale, has called on the NDC and NPP to discourage their supporters from fighting and mudslinging each other (The Ghanaian Times,* October 3, 2008) and *The chief of Apam, Obotantam Nana Edu-Effrim X, has challenged politicians to demonstrate their commitment to peace by taking disciplinary action against any of their members whose actions and utterances can disturb the peace of the country (Daily Graphic,* October 2, 2012). Another report has the headline, **Campaign for peaceful polls intensified.** Part of the story reads: *With barely six weeks to the*

general election in December, non-governmental, religious and faith-based organisations and civil society groups have intensified their campaign for peaceful elections (Daily Graphic, October 22, 2012). In another story Kabral Blay-Amihere, the chairman of the National Media Commission charged the media to "provide accurate reportage to ensure peaceful, free and fair 2012 election" (*Daily Guide,* November 1, 2012).

It is interesting to note that a week to the voting in 2012, the eight presidential candidates were made to commit themselves to peaceful conduct in the lead up, during and after the elections by signing an agreement pact to that effect. The Commonwealth Observer Group (2012) reports: "with the level of intolerance, which manifested itself in several ways, witnessed by the Chief Justice, traditional and civil society leaders and security chiefs, in the week preceding the 2012 election, presidential candidates had to sign the Kumasi Declaration under which leaders publicly committed themselves to taking a stand against election violence, impunity and injustice"

Peace, therefore, became a major campaign message for the gatekeepers of the media to find it necessary to frame and allowed it through their gates many times. As captured in the Commonwealth Observer Group report, in the lead up to the 2012 election, the National Media Commission maintained regular dialogue with the media, calling on them to discharge their duties responsibly to ensure a peaceful election. The numerous appeals, the political tension in the country during the elections and the memory of election conflicts of some African societies might have influenced the editors and journalists to settle on peaceful election as a major campaign story. Since the way editors and journalists select stories and how they represent them are often as a result of their political convictions, the newspapers, with their political convictions and lessons from McCombs and Shaw (1972; 1993), made peace an agenda whereby the press did not only tell people what to think about, but also to think about peaceful election as not to engage in political violence no matter the outcome of the elections.

By framing and projecting the issue of peaceful election and highlighting information about it, the press made the issue the subject of communication in the public sphere in the country. In the letter-to-the-editor section of *The Ghanaian Times* of Monday, October 29, 2012, the paper published a letter calling for peaceful election: *For the December 7 election to be peaceful, let's all watch our utterances, especially on radio. Let's not incite tribal politics and let's choose our*

words carefully bearing in mind that we have only one Ghana. In effect, the newspapers enhanced the significance of peace for it to become a dominant feature for public discourse in the public sphere. As Kuypers (2002: 7) points out, "facts remain neutral until framed; thus, how the press frames an issue or event will affect public understanding of that issue or event. Callaghan (2005: XI) argues that with framing, the media and the politicians can determine for the citizens boundaries within which an issue is to be debated. Therefore, with the Ghanaian political actors talking about the need for violence free elections and the press framing it in their publications, the attention of Ghanaians was focused on the subject of peace. From the above and the fact that any time an election is approaching in Ghana, there is threat of election violence, which makes the issue of peace an important matter.

Does peace matter as a campaign issue in Ghana?

Since the 1990s, crime has become an electoral issue in South Africa and public safety has become an electoral issue in Nigeria so has peace also become an election issue in Ghana. Despite Ghana's reputation for peaceful transitions, previous elections have come dangerously close to violence, therefore, peace was more of an issue, which competed with other issues such as economy, employment, health and education. Article 3 of the UNESCO Media Declaration notes: "the mass media have an important contribution to make to the strengthening of peace and international understanding and countering racism, apartheid and incitement to war" (UNESCO, 1979).

Probably, Ghana's practice of multiparty democracy presents the world of academia with interesting and distinctive aspect of election journalism for scholars in political communication as well as political science to take interest in and study. This is because it appears from this study that some significant conventional positions of election campaign coverage are not applicable to the Ghanaian experience of political communication. An example is the dominance of peace in the coverage of the 2008 and 2012 campaigns in contrast to the dominance of economy, health, immigration, job creation and now fighting ISIS in the advanced democracies across the globe. This goes to strengthen the argument for de-Westernising studies since conditions in various societies are not the same. Hence, the needs and aspirations of citizens across democracies differ to a large extent. In an emerging democracy such as Ghana, which is struggling in its democratization process, because of the huge interest of political elites to have power and control, any time an election is approaching there is high tension and

signs of electoral violence.

Based on the above, it appears peace as an election campaign issue matter and that it is desirable. The benefit of placing it high on campaign agenda and for it to find space in the public sphere of developing democracies with weak democratic institutions coupled with elites who believe they should be presidents at all cost is enormous. Finally, peace as a campaign issue is important since it may take a while for Ghana to have the rules, habits and institutions of competitive politics well established. It is worth noting that citizens or voters would choose issues which appear to represent their interests. Therefore, citizens must have some flexibility depending on existing conditions to choose any issue that they deem fit would enhance their democracy. For any issue to become public policy for candidates to make it their campaign message, voters should first be concerned about the issue and have some relevant information about such an issue (More, 1999: 245). During the two elections, the situation in the country demanded that peace should be an issue of great importance. Therefore, it is expected that like the issue of economy or crime control policies, it is also possible to have peace enforcement policies as a major campaign agenda once that is what would satisfy the citizens and ensure their well-being.

It is more than half a century ago when Key argued that "unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense" (Key, 1961: 7). Lasswell (1941: 15) has long observed that "open interplay of opinion and policy is the distinguishing mark of popular rule." In effect, mass opinion is supposed to be the final determinant of political and economic actions. Based on this, if the mass views of Ghanaians point to peace, before, during and after election, then such mass views should have a place in shaping a policy, which would address peace in the country. Then such a policy, during elections, would find space among campaign issues for election reporters to cover it and editors to allow it through their gates many times.

Why the dominance of issues framing?
The question that cannot be ignored in a study like this is why issue framing such as the economy, peace and education appears to be ahead of horse race framing of campaigns in Ghana? As the findings of this study have indicated, the Ghanaian situation contrasts for example that of the United States, which is noted for horse race framing. As has been observed, journalism practice is influenced by the political system, media system as well as socio-economic situation of societies

(Strömbäck and Kaid, 2008). Therefore, one can make the suggestion that the issue framing of campaign dominance in Ghana may be due in part to variables such as the history and socio-economic situation in the country.

One reason that could explain the dominance of issue over horse race framing of campaigns in the country may be the nature of journalism practice. The profession has been subjected to all manner of governmental controls throughout the greater part of its development. The practice has been that the media depended on official sources for information they would need to frame events or ideas. In such an atmosphere, which clearly undermines the media autonomy, it is difficult for journalists to embark on horse race journalism. This is because horse race framing of an event such as election allows journalists to engage in interpretation, which in most cases demand that journalists add their personal views unconstrained by the journalistic principle of objectivity to the stories that they frame for electorates (Jamieson, 2001: 39).

Another contributing factor to the dominance of issue framing over horse race framing is the socio-economic conditions of the country. Ghana, like many other developing societies, has a considerable number of it citizens living in poverty. Many communities lack basic needs such as portable water, health facilities, educational facilities, balanced diet and jobs. With such a level of poverty, it makes sense that electorates would demand from the various parties and leaders' policies that could help improve their standard of living.

Thus, presidential candidates and parties in mounting the campaign platform would raise issues that would win the electorates to their side. To win votes, "Dr. Paa Kwesi Nduom, presidential candidate of the Progressive People's Party (PPP), has called on Ghanaians to vote the party into power to make the nation a better place to live in. He says the PPP has come to rescue Ghanaians from economic hardship" (*The Ghanaian Times,* October 29, 2012). To this end, Ghanaian journalists in order to meet the expectation of citizens would therefore, frame and select more stories on issues since they have also learnt that one responsibility of journalism is to help mobilize the society to put in place structures that would help create a sustainable road out of poverty for better conditions of life for citizens. Although the findings of this study show that Ghanaian election campaign coverage is issues-based, one cannot ignore the fact that horse race framing is emerging in the political communication of the country. Indeed, it appears to have the potential of dominating campaign coverage in Ghana as is the case in

developed democracies.

Horse race: Why should it matter?

Framing politics as horse race has become a significant concept in the field of political communication research. Framing of election campaigns as horse race is seen as virtually overshadowing real political substance and issues. In fact a number of scholars including De Vreese (2005) and Valentino et al (2001) suggest that covering politics as horse race event instead of a competition among issues undermine politics and democracy. This, they argue, is leading to cynicism making the public care less about politics as well as political actors. Lilleker (2006: 63) observes that "politics is seen to lack efficacy and politicians are largely given a low rating on issues of public trust." This, Lilleker explains, is because voters are becoming sceptical about politicians, their motives and actions.

It is understood that the decisions that gatekeepers arrive at as to which issues should go through the gate are crucial indeed. This is because those decisions go to impact public agenda as well as media agenda. In the same vein, the way and manner issues are framed impact public agenda and media agenda as well. For an issue to receive significant amount of coverage, the gatekeepers should consider such an issue to be relatively important and interesting, therefore, fit for the consumption of citizens. After all, gatekeepers "have increased their power over who gets access and over terms of access for politicians to the public" … because "it is they who set the agenda for political debate" (McQuail, 2005: 527). For instance, election campaign activities happen to occupy a central point in the public as well as media agenda in democratic societies including Ghana. It is, therefore, necessary for studies to be conducted into election campaigns to examine the attention the media are giving to such events as well as the trend of the coverage.

Operationalizing horse race framing, I reconstruct the description of Aalberg et al. (2011: 6) of horse race and examine how the horse race coverage of campaigns is gradually gaining grounds in political communication of Ghana. Aalberg et al.'s interpretation of horse race framing involves opinion polls, actual and forecast election outcomes as well as language of winners and losers. However, my understanding of horse race journalism from literature can also include stories focusing on crowd attendance at rallies (Iyenger, 1991). Crowd attendance also indicates, which candidate has the largest followers, which can be used as a measure of who is winning or otherwise. For instance, with the headline, **NPP**

attracts big crowd in Ho, the news story reads:

> Turnout was very encouraging and underlined the in-roads being made by the NPP in a region considered to be the 'World Bank' of the main majority party, the National Democratic Congress (NDC). If the crowd here is anything to go by, then it is clear that there is a new wind of change in the Volta region" (*Daily Graphic,* Wednesday, November 26, 2008).

In Ghana, Volta region is referred to as the 'World Bank' of the NDC because during the 2008 election, the party's presidential candidate had a significant 82.46 percent votes in that region, and during the 2012 election also the party's candidate increased the percentage of votes to 85.47 percent. The Ashanti region is also considered the 'World Bank' of NPP because during the 2008 election, Nana Akufo-Addo, the presidential candidate, had 72.53 percent votes and in the 2012 election the presidential candidate had 70.86 percent votes. Therefore, 'World Bank' as a political term in Ghana means a region that remains loyal and during elections overwhelmingly casts its votes for a particular candidate or a political party. Besides this, candidate/party endorsements will also form part of my interpretation of horse race for this study. For instance, the editorial of the *Ghanaian Chronicle* of Friday, October 12, 2012 reads:

> It is cheerful to take note of the recognition given by former President Rawlings that Nana Akufo-Addo could be president of the Republic of Ghana by the time the 2012 presidential election was over.

Therefore these two characteristics will form part of my operationalization of the concept of horse race framing for this study. This is because these other characteristics also give the impression as to who is winning the race in Ghana.

To illustrate this point further, images of huge crowds at political campaign rallies in Ghana become a topic for radio discussion on political programs with officials of political parties openly boasting as to the number of supporters their party has in a particular community. Therefore, political parties make conscious efforts to mobilize huge crowd to attend a party's rallies. If a particular newspaper publishes a campaign rally event story without pictures depicting huge crowd at the rally, the next day or two the same newspaper would be pressured to publish pictures of the same rally with captions. In order for a party to attract huge crowd to its rallies to demonstrate its strength in the race, buses are made available, party branded T

shirts, popular comedians as well as musicians are engaged to perform at these rallies, which are well publicized. This strategy is obviously to paint a good picture as to which candidate or party is winning the political race in the political drama in the country.

Also, images in newspapers depicting a presidential candidate in a hand shake with a traditional ruler seems significant during campaigns in the country. Therefore, when a presidential candidate enters any community for a campaign rally, the first point of call is the chief's palace. Such a political drama depicting a chief in a hand shake with a presidential candidate is staged to demonstrate that the candidate is being endorsed by the chief. Such newspaper images are needed by the parties to suggest to the chief's subjects that the candidate is in the good books of their chief, hence the chief is indirectly telling them to vote for the candidate who has earned such a royal hand shake. Such images usually get space in the newspapers, which become an agenda for heated debates on radio political programs. In Ghana, because citizens appear to hold traditional rulers in high esteem, such pictures are also projected to suggest which presidential candidate is ahead of the race. One reason why political communication researchers in Ghana would need to pay some attention to horse race framing, the study argues, is that the concept appears to be contributing to a two-party political system.

Horse race framing: The press promoting a two-party political system

It does appear that horse race framing of election campaigns in Ghana could be contributing to the promotion of a two-party democratic governance. Kean (2002: 13) makes the point that citizens in advanced democracies are turning their back on formal politics. This, Kean explains, is due to a loss of trust in politicians. These societies include countries with virtually two-political party governance. Thus, there is course for concern in an emerging democracy such as Ghana, which appears to be promoting a two-political party democracy. Crick (2002: 11) also argues that the practice of democracy in the United States and the United Kingdom is becoming populist because politicians only appeal to public opinion instead of providing a coherent public discourse of policies of public good. Crick's observation should also be of concern to emerging democracies such as Ghana. On his part, McNair (2003: 24) points out that the apathy of citizens can be attributed to citizens believing that there is no remarkable difference in terms of policy with regard to two or among various political parties presented to voters for them to make a choice. Again, McNair's argument should be of concern to Ghana. The observation of these four scholars should alert the societies of the challenges

of two-political party governance.

To illustrate the point above concerning the promotion of a two-political party system in Ghana by the press is the practice of developing a story from the angle of who is ahead the race, focusing the story on the presidential candidates of the two main parties (i.e. National Democratic Congress and New Patriotic Party). In this way, the two parties ended up amassing more coverage thereby squeezing the minor parties out of campaign coverage. Since opinion polls can lead to which candidates are likely to get access to the press, "candidates who perform poorly in polls are less likely to garner coverage and have a tougher time increasing their visibility and with it their standing in polls, which pushes them further out of the media spotlight" (Jamieson, 2001: 208). Secondly, developing a news story from the angle of crowd attendance at political rallies focused more attention on the two main parties in the country. This is because these two parties always drew huge crowds to their rallies and because they also have the resources, they held more rallies across the country. This added to their intense media visibility. Thirdly, developing an election story around outcome predictions as well as candidate or party endorsements ended up focusing on the two main parties since they were the parties likely to win the elections, the outcome predictions as well as endorsements went in their favour. This also added to their intense visibility.

Although the 1992 constitution of Ghana calls for equal and fair coverage for all candidates and parties during election campaigns, the media continued to focus much attention on two parties, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP). For this reason, Mrs. Yvonne Nduom, the wife of the presidential candidate of the Progressive People's Party (PPP), Paa Kwesi Nduom, lamenting, urged the media to publish the efforts her party was making at bringing about change as a way of propagating its message to the citizens instead of concentrating on the NDC and NPP (*Daily Graphic,* November 7, 2012). Again in the *Daily Graphic* of November 22, 2012, headlined, "Resist schemes to turn Ghana into two-party state" the story reads:

> ...Dr. Nduom cited some journalists and media houses as accomplices to the two-party scheme, saying they sought to promote the interest of only the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) at the expense of other political parties.

As political experiences of the United States and the United Kingdom show, it

appears a two-party system is also emerging in Ghana. The dominance of the two parties can be attributed also to a lack of sufficient political party funding. This does not allow the other parties to function properly and compete with the two main parties in the country. Therefore, during the 2008 and 2012 elections, the two parties, NDC and NPP were in the position to organize campaign activities throughout the country alongside performances by some of the nation's musicians and comedians. In addition to their massive supporters, the two parties easily attracted the media to follow them throughout the country. In effect, the election campaign reporters ended up covering party activities of the NDC and the NPP telling the electorates what the two candidates were saying and doing. According to Cushion (2012: 93), "under PR management, today many politicians remain largely on message, sticking closely to pre-prepared party scripts and participating in strategic designed campaign events." In this case, journalists' stories about election campaigns are on de-spinning campaign tactics and candidates' speeches and statements (Cushion, 2012: 94). In effect, party driven events have largely become sources of campaigns stories, leading to 'protocol' journalism practice in Ghana.

Party driven coverage lacks critical reporting
As the current study shows, Ghana's election campaign coverage was political party driven. What this means is that in presenting and selecting campaigns stories, Ghanaian journalists concentrated more on political campaign events and less on them taking the initiative to do analysis of the candidates' campaign messages or doing investigation to tell the electorates who really the candidates were. With this kind of journalism, which appears to be consistent with what pertains in other democracies, what it means is that journalists would use one source that is the presidential candidate of a party or an official of the same party to tell the election story. Sources of information are critical in the process of telling a journalistic story. Sources add to news stories, which go to shape their meaning and interpretations. It is being suggested that using different sources in news stories impact news framing (Lawrence, 2000; Callahan and Schnell, 2001). The practice of objective journalism demands the use of different sources in news stories. Among a number of major functions of sources include the verification of the news story to make the news story credible, to help avoid suspicion of bias and give news consumers different opinions on a particular subject of interest from different stakeholders in the society (Manning, 2001).

The reliance on politicians, especially presidential candidates, by journalists to

publish a three-quarter page campaign story go to show the extent to which Ghanaian political elites influence and shape media stories including campaign stories. Hallin and Mancini (2004: 233) note: "the production of news is structured around information and interpretation provided by state officials." According to Bennett and Entman (2001), United States media coverage of events including campaigns is noted for intense use of official sources. This means that Ghana is not alone in this kind of journalism practice. However, Lawrence (2010) is of the view that news stories with different sources are a condition for solid news stories. In other words, the four influential newspapers sampled for this study, failed to provide voice to the ordinary Ghanaian citizens and non-partisan experts. This practice of election campaign journalism is undesirable and may undermine democratic governance.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the kind of media frame, specifically horse race or issue frame, that appears to dominate the Ghanaian press in the coverage of election campaigns using the 2008 and 2012 as the benchmark. The study shows that contrary to previous Ghanaian studies that played down the issue of horse race in Ghanaian journalism practice, horse race framing of campaigns is increasingly gaining grounds in the practice of political journalism in Ghana. This trend seems to be contributing to a two-party democratic governance in the country as is the situation in the United States. To illustrates this point here, all the characteristics of horse race framing such as who is winning the race, public opinion polls, focusing on crowd attendance at campaign rallies all go to project the two main political parties in Ghana, the NDC and the NPP with the minor parties appear to being squeezed out of election coverage.

This results indicate that in a developing democracy such as Ghana, issue framing dominates campaigns coverage and peace as a campaign message was framed more and got through the gates many times than even the economy and education. This is inconsistent with the election campaigns coverage trends in the advanced democracies such as the United States, where horse race dominates campaigns coverage with the issue of economy getting more framing. What this demonstrates is that gatekeeping and framing practices with regard to election coverage across democracies cannot be looking similar in form. Since the factors that will influence for instance, gatekeepers of the press in the United States to represent and select election campaign stories appear different from that of Ghana.

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