



BOOK REVIEW OF JENNIFER HASTY'S (2005). *THE PRESS AND POLITICAL CULTURE IN GHANA*. BLOOMINGTON: INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS.

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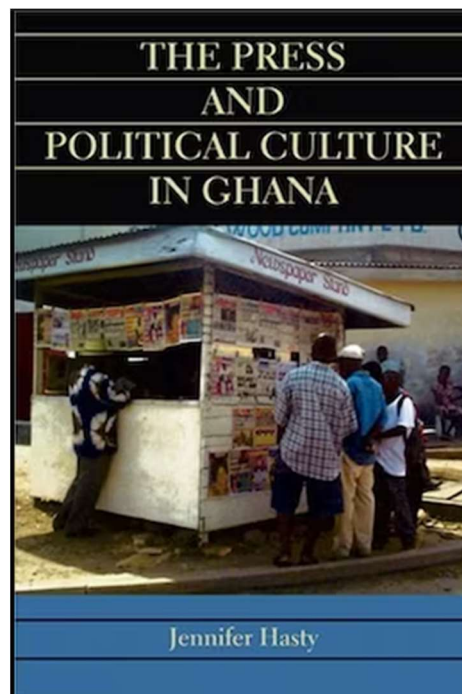
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Abstract

The press and political culture in Ghana by Jennifer Hasty takes important steps towards examining Ghana's news discourse in the 1990s. The culmination of Ghana's liberalization process, dynamics that evolved in its political contestation, and the process of establishing democracy are all characterized by this time period. The book's central claim is that "Ghana's press project a unified voice, which stems from the diverse and contentious processes that engage the nation in local and international debates and are characterized by the production of news that is influenced by politics and popular culture, which is largely determined by the state.

Keywords: Press, Political Culture, Nationalism, Propaganda, Media.





Introduction

Jennifer Hasty in her book “the press and political culture in Ghana” makes critical steps towards exploring Ghana’s news discourse in the 1990s. This period also characterizes the consolidation of Ghana’s liberalization process and dynamics that emerged in its political contestation, as well as the journey towards consolidation of democracy. The main thesis of the book is that “Ghana’s press project a unified voice, which stems from the multifarious and contentious processes which join the country in local and global debates and are characterized by the production of news that is influenced by politics and popular culture which is mostly determined by the state” (p.1). This according to Hasty is expressed in the civic culture and politics, and the role performed by the state press in constituting the socio-political, cultural, and national identities. She sees the state press as representing the voice of the ruling government, and the private press as a tool used for partisan opposition politics. From this context, she points out that the house-style and editorial orientation of the press is greatly influenced by the state and the government of the day. Through this, the press, particularly the state newspapers such as, the *Daily Graphic* is seen to in a way hide under the so-called principle of national development and state cohesion, in denying the public news headlines and stories that concern abuse from the political elite, human rights violations, and political corruption.

Hasty does well in exploring the articulation of “the press’ dialectical structure as it moves through changes from a rule from colonial dictatorship, then to an anti-colonial nationalism, and finally to an unstable post-colonial period” (p.5). The book also employs the “Habermasian theory”, with its attempts to locate the press within government and civil society, with a focus on the exploitation of the power of the discursive procedures within a political legitimacy in terms of gaining a hold on the public domain. “Habermasian theory” in this sense encompasses the point that eventually social order depends on the ability that actors have, in recognizing intersubjectively the validity of varying claims through which social and political cooperation is built” (Habermas, 1989). This is discussed by Hasty in highlighting how the style of governance during the 1980s and 1990s, employed the state press in constructing Flt. Lt. J.J. Rawlings’ charisma as president during that time. It is evident in how the press could be used in legitimizing government and reinforce government actions as identified by Habermas, (1989, p. 181-2).

Discussion

The book is significant for the media history class and historiography in general- considering Hasty’s use of a historiographical, as well as a narrative methodology, that traces and examines the historical shifts in a paradigm that encompassed the newspaper industry in Ghana at the time. With her tracing of the historical dynamics of the newspapers, dating from the colonial to the post-



colonial era, the reader is provided with the opportunity to understand how the newspaper was used in the different periods, namely the colonial and post-colonial. This considered the roles that newspapers took during the colonial era, when the colonial government controlled the press, down to the post-colonial period, where the state controlled the press. For Hasty, the newspaper occupies a key nexus of the news discourse in Ghana, and this encompasses modes of information, socio-political communication, and genres of mass media. Newspaper's centrality in this regard could be arguable to some extent, considering the proliferation of Frequency Modulation (FM) stations, following the liberalization that came within the country's airwaves in the mid-1990s, as well as the popularity that came within broadcasting in the form of phone-in pattern.

Factors such as the above, as well as radio's ubiquity at the time and the emergence of large accessible forms of discourses within the broadcast news, could have projected radio to a position that was previously dominated by newspapers. That is, the different forms of media in Ghana could be argued to perform similar functions regarding communication and information dissemination. Nonetheless, this point could still come under some critical debates. For Hasty, "the newspapers in Ghana to an extent constitutes the main terms and structures of recurring themes and the local events, which as a result consumes all within a framework of an ongoing national news narrative" (p.2). Thus, newspapers in Ghana take a role in determining the discursive coverage and agenda on socio-economic and political issues. Newspapers, therefore, have the potential alongside other news media, in determining the extensive coverage of socio-economic and political matters, and the form of sources for the discursive patterns that give room for checking the very activities, trends, and scope of the country's political and social elite, and the steps towards the frame of discursive parameters that characterize the state of affairs.

Furthermore, Hasty's use of the historical shifts within the paradigms that characterizes the newspaper structure and the larger industry in the country is important. She traces the development of newspapers from the colonial era through to the post-colonial. With this, she makes substantial attempts at locating the role played by newspapers in terms of the resistance that came towards the colonial rule, and further looks into the cooptation which is seen in the service of the country's nationalism, and the socio-economic and political consolidation that was expressed in the post-colonial period. Thus, the period in which the state press occupied the position of political propaganda rather than a space that served as a market of ideas.

With this, she gives an account of how the private media was suppressed during the time of Rawlings, Ghana's president in the 1990s. She also examines how the private media was harnessed during this period as an element of dissent, which occurred in the latter days of Rawlings' era. Hence, Hasty points out that the news discourse in Ghana is over-determined by the country's socio-cultural factors, including for instance the role that is played by the "Okyeame" (Linguist) within the court of the customary chief, alongside the democratic underpinnings of the young democracy. Through this, Hasty expresses her understanding of the country's culture vis-



à-vis the complex dynamics, including politics, and socio-economic structures that characterize it. The state press just like the “Okyeame” is therefore used as the mouthpiece of the government, propagating its socio-political propaganda.

The book’s discussion on the newspaper trajectory and political culture is significant because, it examines the processes through which newspapers and journalists within the state and private media are interjected in specific subject matters, that push them to articulate the rhetoric of the government or forced into articulations of discourses that favors national interest. In the case of private media, it could be to articulate discourses that are oppositional and are related to features within human rights and liberal democracy. In doing this, Hasty’s book brings out the durability of the structural culture through which the state media is made to act as the state’s information and communication apparatus, existing to protect the government’s agenda, notwithstanding the changes that have taken place in the country’s political culture. This is elaborated by Hasty with a point that she makes that, “her work and stay in Ghana for a long time, especially in the 1990s reveals that the state media in most cases do not make investigative scoops, which is intended to scrutinize and embarrass the government but always support them, be it autocratic or democratic” (p.1). She further adds that the oppositional discourses of the private press do not necessarily oppose the dominant discussions of the government. The private press rather makes attempts at appropriating the dominant discourses and understandings as a way of seeking a form of accountability on the part of the country’s political elite.

Conclusion

In all, we would say that Hasty’s book is important for the study of media history, particularly the political culture, and media in Ghana. Considering its examination of the processes that characterized the development of the press in Ghana, dating back to the colonial authoritarian rule, through to the anti-colonial nationalism, and unstable post-colonial period, the book provides a historical understanding of the press in relation to a deference culture for government, ignoring the commitment to democratic and liberalism structures that should characterize the media in areas such as equality and freedom of expression. Despite the contributions of the book, We believe it would have been significant, if Hasty had considered an aspect of intertextual examination of some facts on the ways through which communication and information from the newspapers could motivate or frame articulations on news within the other mass media, including television and the radio.

Also, one thing we find surprising is that the book did not consider issues that were related to “mercenary journalism” in the country. “Mercenary journalism” in this context encompasses the systems in which some journalists will not necessarily support the political elite for political gains but for material benefits. “Mercenary journalism” was common in the country at the time and continues to take shape as several exposures have shown. That is, it would have been useful if



the book had considered that also in its analysis of the press and political culture, and the influences from the government of the day, with regards to discursive and house-style patterns.

References

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