

Proliferation and impact of FM radio in northern Ghana

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Abstract

FM radio is the most powerful mass communication tool in the media landscape of Ghana. Besides its profit seeking interest and funded advertising, it disseminates information to the rural communities for development purposes. There have been growing number of FM radio stations in the Tamale Metropolis since 1995. The paper set out a platform to identify the motivation behind the rising number of FM radio stations in the Metropolis, their programme content and impact on the people, type of audiences and the limitation of FM radio stations in the Tamale Metropolis of Northern Ghana. An interview was conducted with 40 respondents purposively selected. These sampled respondents include opinion leaders, religious clergy, chiefs, and media professionals all drawn from Tamale Metropolis of Northern Ghana. The paper concludes that FM radio is an important tool for information dissemination to be relied on. The paper recommended that since FM radio is more popular among the audiences in both urban and rural areas is proper to employ experienced hands in their programmes and, more refined language should be used to transmit information to target audiences.

Keywords: proliferation, FM radio, impact, privately-owned and northern Ghana

1. Introduction

Contemporary, the media industry in Ghana has lip-frogged, radio listenership has increased and audience size is getting larger. In the last two decades, FM radio has achieved a steady growth in Ghana and Tamale Metropolis is no exception.

However, in recent years, FM radio has emerged under private ownership. A total of 10 private FM radio stations are operational reaching out to a vast listeners in the metropolis while others are waiting for transmission ^[1].

In Ghana, there are currently 412 FM radio stations and ten of the stations are situated in Tamale ^[1]. Though, in certain parts of the country, especially in the capital cities, some political groups used FM radio stations as a propaganda tool but in the rural settings, it is being used as development tool for the rural folks. Heavy investments have been put into FM radio by businessmen to maximise profit due to its vibrant nature in the media industry in Ghana today.

This study aimed at identifying the factors behind the growth of private FM radio stations, the type of audiences, programme content and to examine the limitations of the FM radio stations in the Tamale Metropolis of Northern Ghana. Much research has not been conducted on the listenership of FM radio in the Metropolis. However, this study aims to fill the knowledge gap on the current issue.

1.1 Study Area

The present study covered Tamale Metropolis of Northern Ghana. Geographically, Tamale Metropolis was established by a Legislative Instrument (L.I. 2068). It is strategically located at the centre of the Northern Region of Ghana. The Metropolis shares boundaries with the Sagnarigu District to the North-West, Mion District to the East, East Gonja to the South and Central Gonja to the South West ^[2].

Tamale Metropolis has a total land size of 646.9 sq. km. (Geographically, the Metropolis lies between latitude 9°16 and 9° 34 North and longitudes 0° 36 and 0° 57 west.) There are 116 Communities in the Metropolis of which 41 Communities representing (35%) are urban, 15 (13%) being peri-urban and 60 (52%) of them being rural in nature ^[2].

Historically, the Northern Regions of Ghana has larger land cover with less population sizes. The Region begun experiencing high population growth in the late 1995. Tamale Metropolis has a total population of 223,252 with 111,109 (49.7%) males and 112,143 (50.3%) females. This implies, there are more females than males in the Metropolis. A vast majority (80.00%) of population are living in the rural areas as against 20.00 per cent in urban areas ^[3].

2. Methodology

The study adopted qualitative methods and an In-Depth interview was used for gathering data spanning from January, 2016 to March, 2016. An In-Depth Interviews is regarded as an appropriate method for data gathering with qualitative approach for interpretation purposes. The method is necessary to identify and measure the details of impact created by the mass media ^[4]. It is a tool that can serve the demand of theoretical approach for qualitative data. Thus, interview was used to gather information for the study. Accordingly, a purposive sample method was followed, taking 40 different respondents from Tamale Metropolis of Northern ^[5]. The primary consideration of using purposive sampling technique is the researcher's judgement as to who can provide the best information to achieve the objectives of the study ^[6]. Thus, researcher only goes to people deemed likely to have the required information and are willing to share it.

He further claimed that purposive sampling is useful when constructing historical reality, describing a phenomenon or

developing something only a little is known about ^[6]. Purposive sampling strategy is more common in qualitative research in that since it allows researcher to select a predetermined number of people who, in their judgement, are in the best position of providing the needed information. Thus, the sampled population comprised of chiefs, opinion leaders, media professionals and religious clergy.

3. Review of Literature and Discussions

3.1 Motivation for the Growth of FM Radio stations

For the past two decades, the growth of FM radio in Ghana was stifled by socio-economic and political factors. Today, the deregulation and media pluralism coupled with the newly emerged social class with much desire for information have made FM radio waves closer to the people on the global scene. These social class are the most effective stakeholders in the Ghanaian media industry.

Besides, most influential Ghanaian population of these newly emerged social class has been using media as propaganda tool to re-affirm their political positions that has been triggered by a media boom through FM radio in Ghana. Free global opportunities have open up more chances for businesses in most countries in the media industry for both print and electronic media in the world. This has been confirmed by the respondents ^[7].

The present study also revealed that, the failure of state owned media to live up to listener's expectations is a major root cause for the growth of privately owned FM stations in Ghana. Majority of the people believe that the colonial governments were motivated to establish the first radio station in Ghana for their propaganda activities in favour of the ruling governments as well as their ideologies ^[8].

Understanding the changing attitudes of listeners especially in the urban communities is highly discouraging. Majority of the respondents' opined that the state-owned radio stations sometimes takes an authoritative posture towards the audiences for both radio and television. Majority of the respondents firmly believe radio works as the mouth piece of the state and this led to the mistrust among the audiences in the state-owned radio ^[9]. Out of dissatisfaction of government controlled media in the yester years has also created an increased demand for private FM radio stations ^[10].

Technological advancement has called for the motivation in the growth of FM radio in Ghana. The study indicated that majority of the respondents (70%) have accessed to more than one mobile-hand sets. It is observed that FM radio operation mode has both clarity and sound quality, even cell phones with radio listening devices have expand the accessibility of FM radio listenership^[11].

The increasing number of vehicles has accelerated the growth of FM radio listenership. Expansion of road transportation with the free market economy has led to more private ownership of vehicles in Ghana. As a result, there were good number of vehicles on the road and highways of the capital cities in the country ^[12]. Of these, majority of the respondent's own vehicles with radio listening devices. In all, 80.00 per cent of the audiences of these FM were car owners and drivers. Thus, this changed has played a very important role in the development and growth of privately owned FM radio in Ghana.

3.2 Programme Content and Impact of FM Radio Stations

All over the world, FM radio has known to have given much emphasis to entertainment in their programmes structure. Out of 10 FM radio stations in the Metropolis, one-third of the stations have given priority to music and cultural programmes while the rest spent most of their air time on advertisements as indicated by the respondents. FM radio stations promotes community information dissemination towards productive ventures ^[13].

Music is one of the most popular programme among the listeners. Privately owned FM radio stations, besides entertainment are not allowed to air news item in most of the Asian countries like India and Bangladesh. However, in Ghana, the reverse is the case. The responses showed that about 24.00 per cent of air time is devoted to music based programmes, 32.00 per cent on cultural programmes, 23.00 per cent on religious programmes and 21.00 per cent for news and sports programmes. Thus, the results revealed that cultural programmes take much of the air time than other programmes in the metropolis ^[13].

In Ghana, FM stations have maintained comparatively traditional approach towards cultural programmes of which Dagbani, Gonja and English has a good number of listeners. Besides these three principal languages, FM radio stations broadcast a number of other languages. Contrary to the observations that Asian countries does not allow privately owned FM radio stations to broadcast news, FM radio stations broadcast news updates on important events besides major news bulletins in Ghana. The news programmes are more popular among the listeners in the Metropolis as respondent's opined ^[13, 14].

The finding further indicated that, Discussion Programmes (Talk shows) on issues pertinent to national interest, majority of the listeners tune in on hourly bases for news update. This is very popular among the listeners in the Metropolis. On the programmes, FM radio station transmits traffic updates in the capital cities whereas, in the rural settings, FM radio stations disseminates information on issues such as health, agriculture, education, good governance and environmental awareness to the rural folk that has direct effects on their lives.

3.3 Type of Audience

Radio is no longer a status symbol of late. Radio is now easily accessible and has earned some mass flavour due to technological advancement. Most listeners of FM radio are between the age groups of 15-56 years in the Metropolis. Although, there were some listeners on either side of the age limit, the target age group of most FM radio stations are between the age group of 18-35^[9]. It is further observed that this age group are the active and the largest adult population. This age group constitutes about 65.00 per cent of the total population in the Metropolis and predominantly occupied in agricultural activities in the rural settings ^[11].

On the gender perspectives in the Metropolis, the female is almost equal to male population. The population and housing census report that Tamale Metropolis has a total population of 223,252 with 111,109 (49.7%) males and 112,143 (50.3%) females. This has invariably opposed to the observations in the Asian countries like India and Bangladesh ^[3, 11].

Further, the data has shown that FM radio stations in the Metropolis have three slots of their prime times. Most FM radio stations have their prime time's ranging from 7.00 am – 9.00 am in the morning ^[15]. According to the respondents, about 75.00 per cent listened to FM radio in the morning and evening. The prime times of most of the FM radio stations in the Metropolis are between the hours of 7:00 am – 9:00 am with a majority listenership, 3.00 pm – 5.00 pm with less listenership. Further, between 7.00 pm – 9.00 pm had the highest listenership in the Metropolis.

The data also indicated that, the prime time programmes are mostly on development issues towards orientation of the listeners. These programmes includes health, education, farming information and policies on good governance. These programmes involved experts on round table discussion while listeners engaged through phone-in programmes for their feedback.

3.4 Limitation of FM radio

Despite the role played by the private FM radio stations in Ghana, the proliferation of these media stations have been criticized on several grounds. Privately owned FM radio stations are said to have set up as commercial entities. Besides their commercial interest, they should act as the observer of natural truth in line with media ethics. The study observed that this duty is not been performed at the optimum level rather maintained some good ties with the power class, businessmen, industrialists and politicians.

FM radio stations depends much on businesses for survival through advertisements. Thus, most FM radio stations have been silence on the misdeeds of their clients. The study further posited that FM radio stations do not gets the whole truth out even in their news bulletins ^[16]. However, this tendency also prevails in other parts of the world.

Media today is part of the corporate class and capitalist group of which private radio stations are no exception. However, majority of the respondents maintained that profit seeking is rather their main concern than the information functions ^[9].

Another criticism leveled against private FM radio stations is the use of vulgar languages. Joy Online News (June 29, 2016), one of the private FM radio station in the national capital, Accra (Montie FM) had its panellists, director and the host of the station, been found guilty of contempt, defying and lowering the authority of the court, and bringing it into disrepute for issuing death threats against the justices of the supreme court. This incident happened on the eve of the anniversary of Martyrs Day. This day is commemorated every year to mark the murder of three High Court judges and a military officer in 1982 during the days of the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) in Ghana ^[17].

Besides news and information based FM stations in Ghana, FM radio stations are obsessed by profit making endeavor and also left the poorer communities out of coverage as a result, restricting them from maximizing their profit potentials in the rural areas ^[9].

Another assertion against privately owned FM radio stations all over the world is the influence and distortion of language structure of a given society. FM radio stations are interested in establishing some kind of language in each country that is influenced mostly by western culture ^[18]. This is not far-fetched in the Tamale Metropolis of Northern Ghana as shown in the study. Majority of the respondents maintained

that the standard of languages among the dominant tribes in the Metropolis such as Dagbani, Gonja and other minority have been distorted and distasteful.

FM radio stations are promoting stardom syndromes in the society by instigating the youth to become pop music star, pushing education down the ladder. This makes the young generation considered music stars as their role models ^[19]. Today, even radio jockeys are considered as celebrities. The study further showed that majority of the youth between the age group of 18-25 have become musician in the Metropolis.

As such, instead of transmitting information for productive ventures, FM radio stations rather engaged on political argument. The tendency is the most negative instead of playing more effective role in the society due to its popularity and accessibility among the listeners. Nonetheless, there is no much educational programmes to address the menace of the present generation as anticipated, though, the youth are the target group ^[20].

In terms of media policy perspective, privately owned FM radio stations have been criticised. Though, the deregulation of the media in Ghana have allowed privately owned media but more of the FM stations did not follow the media policy. It is further observed that privately owned FM radio stations hardly pay their employees a recognised salaries. This led to lack of professionalism in the private media industry ^[11].

Eronini (2007) pointed that privately owned FM radio stations do not train their employees to get the required skills. As a result, most commercial radio stations employees are either non-professional or para-professionals ^[10]. This tendency undoubtedly restrict the development of FM radio in the Tamale metropolis of Northern Ghana.

4. Conclusion

In Ghana, privately owned FM radio stations have held on to the most important position in the media environment. Its two decade of growth have shown some success in the media industry in the country. The proliferation and growth coupled with listenership have also seen tremendously increased over the years. However, whether FM radio have fully performed the optimum role of mass media in terms of education and information to the people.

It is undeniable fact that privately owned FM radio stations have excelled only in commercial and individualism. The present study suggest that private FM stations should go a long way in broadcasting the need based local programmes. They should also educate and enrich the rural listeners on issue pertinent to their development and wellbeing of the communities in the rural areas.

The study suggests that there should be a policy regulation of setting up of FM radio stations. This is important the fact that FM radios are used for the cause of rural development, are there others uses apart from its profit motives. More so, what regulations are put in place to ensure that FM radio stations do not promote hatred speeches. This would ensure FM radios rather dwelled much on public debates, social issues and civic education.

It further adds that since FM radio is more popular among the audiences in both urban and rural areas, it is proper to employ experienced hands in their programmes and, more refined language should be used to transmit information to target audiences. This could help reduce vulgar language amongst the radio stations in the Northern Regions of Ghana.

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