

# The Media's Impact on Democratisation and Conflicts in Africa: An Analysis of Recent Trends

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**Abstract:** The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the end of the Cold War, did not have an effect only on the Germans whose countries were re-united, or the combatants of the Cold War – the United States and the Soviet Union. Rather, the effects of these events affected many countries worldwide, especially developing countries who have since witnessed an unprecedented political and democratic reawakening.

As the wave of democratisation continues to move across Africa, conflicts have almost become a by-product, where people, divided on ethnicity and/or religion, fight to establish their presence and dominance in government. One institution associated with the democratisation process and conflicts in Africa is the media. This article reviews some of the democratic processes that have taken place in Africa and the associated conflicts and the role the media have played in both. The article thus contributes to the literature on both democracy in Africa and its associated conflicts and the media's role. It concludes that, whereas the media played key roles in some conflicts, they have played crucial roles in the promotion of democracy in Africa.

**Keywords:** Democratisation, Conflicts, Media Interface, Africa, Democratic Governance, Public Discourse.

## INTRODUCTION

The period since 1989 has witnessed a swift transformation of many African countries from military dictatorship and autocratic rule to democratic governance. Developing countries and transition economies have witnessed an unprecedented political and democratic reawakening. Many of the oppressive, dictatorial, totalitarian, and autocratic regimes around the world have since disappeared giving way to democratic governments.

Many developing countries, especially in Africa and Latin America, had been under military regimes before *democratisation* processes began. The coming into office of most of the military regimes were preceded by bitter conflicts, with military take-over of governments in Africa becoming a fashion immediately after the independence of most of the countries in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is important to note, however, that the roots of almost all major political conflicts pre-dated the post-independence governance system with most of the pre- and immediate post-independence political conflicts taking ethnic and, in some few instances, religious dimensions, especially when the ethnicity or religion of political leaders became a contributory factor, and when some ethnic groups felt excluded from government. Conflicts thus become a by-product or a precursor of democratisation in post-independent African countries and the media had always been a key player.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

All over the world the relationship between the media and democratic processes has been fundamental to the strengthening of governance institutions and the advancement of society, with the media either cheering on authoritarian leaders who perform 'impressive' formalities that validate and reinforce their grasp on power (Sorensen, 2019) or challenge their legitimacy.

As Carothers (2002) notes, a democratisation process hardly runs in a linear path predictably to liberal democracy because there are always contending descriptions and interpretations of what democracy is (Vltmer, 2011; Whitehead, 2002). History shows that over a period, the crystallisation of geographical impacts results into peculiar political, institutional, and cultural residues which influence media framing and that the type of regime and level of democratisation is key to media framing of political conflicts as press freedom is key to democracy. Bias, emotionalization, and polarisation impact the quality of media coverage (Vladisavljevic and Vltmer, 2017).

Democracy-related conflicts entail extensive realignment of hierarchy, moral standards, and assets which usually generate conflicts between those benefiting from the prevailing regimes and those seeking reforms. On the other side, the media with their own interests and favourites become an active participant of the conflicts (Vladisavljevic and Vltmer, 2017). As Bennett (2005) argues, the media do not restrict themselves to merely reflecting what happens

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but rather offer certain interpretations to selected events and topics while disregarding others and giving or denying access to their preferred actors while taking sides in ensuing debates.

Vladislavljjevic and Voltmer (2017) argue that it is difficult for journalists to provide contextual information and analysis because of the constraints they work under, but this author disagrees with this assessment based on their observation of news reportage for over three decades and from personal experience as a practising journalist and media trainer. The bias in media analysis of events in many cases during conflicts stem from the personal interests, and political and ideological affiliations of journalists to the different camps of the combatants. For instance, currently in Ghana, one needs to read from many sources before getting the real truth of issues due to the clear polarisation of the media into NDC (ruling party) and NPP (opposition party) media, including journalists in the state media who are supposed to be neutral.

Voltmer *et al.* (2019) citing Cederman *et al.* (2010), Mann (2005), and Mansfield and Snyder (1995) note that violent conflicts and civil wars had followed the introduction of competitive elections in Africa, but this author holds a contrary view. Wars and conflicts in Africa and many parts of the world never started only after the introduction of competitive elections but rather preceded the transition from authoritarian rules to elective governance. What makes the situation complex, however, is the role of the media in the conflicts as they shape conflicts in their own design through their gatekeeping role. They therefore determine whose side to align, whose voice is excluded from the public discourse, and whose is heard.

Post-conflict regime changes in some instances, provided new opportunities to hitherto marginalised and stigmatised communities to express their identities and campaign for their rights and interests (Voltmer *et al.*, 2019) as happened in Ghana with the coming into power of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) both under Flt-Lt Jerry John Rawlings. However, this breath of fresh air was short-lived especially under the PNDC which soon became authoritarian and dictatorial, cruelly suppressing dissent and the media, and creating what became known as the 'culture of silence' where arrests and detention of journalists became very rampant. Voltmer (2019) posit that restrictions on courts are difficult to achieve (but the PNDC managed to control the courts

as well), but attacks on the independence of the press are a regular attribute of post-transitional politics, where access to information is denied and journalists are censored. Physical attacks on journalists and media houses became the order of the day in Ghana from 1982 to 1993 and even into the first term of Rawlings as elected President.

Arblaster (2002) argues that the consequences of struggles directly influence the media's role in conflicts, adding that the domination of the political environment by the authorities makes the media find it difficult to play an independent role, whereas the lack of control by the authorities provides the media with a much greater array of sources and perspectives from which to choose, providing opportunities for challengers to promote their own frames to the media.

Iazzolino and Stremlau (2017) question the discourse on media and electoral competition which views the media as either a mouthpiece of the powerful or as a watchdog of power and its democratising role in conflict situations. They argue that the relationship between leadership and media is based on local ideas and hierarchical order that explain boundaries of their autonomy and how they mutually influence each other. Political actors use the media to disseminate information, build consent, create stories, and attack agendas and views of opponents, while the media create public debates for political and social change though their autonomy can be restricted by laws or subtler forms of dissuasion.

Media freedom is generally observed as both a yardstick of democratic reforms (McConnell and Becker, 2002) and as a requirement for the appropriate working of democratic institutions (Berman and Witzner, 1997). However, applying western standards to measure situations in other geographical areas does not allow the appreciation of the media's role in prevailing political settings (Iazzolino and Stremlau, 2017). Again, when the media's advancement is only measured in terms of their market liberalisation, the convergence of media ownership might lead to 'oligarchisation' of politics (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008), and state control by the elite. This is what happened in 2000 when the Russian media was restructured after Vladimir Putin took power where the media ownership became practically aligned with state control with a 'two tier media system' with Kremlin-controlled media organisations cohabiting with those with an undefined level of autonomy (Dunn, 2014).

Researchers, policy-makers, journalists, and social scientists all attest to the media being the focal arena for political conflicts, highlighting the important role of the media in events such as the Bosnia war, the Somali conflict, the Gulf war, the Palestinian *intifada*, the Tiananmen Square clashes, the Eastern Europe and Russia protests during the fading days of the Communist regimes. Individual antagonists try to market their own concepts of conflict to the media as a way of marshalling political support for their cause. This, they do because of the media's capacity to set the political agenda, fast-track and amplify political successes and failures, and also rally third parties into a conflict (Arblaster, 2002).

US Senator Hiram Johnson in 1917 opposed the entry of the US into the First World War. In his statement at the Senate, he said: "The first casualty when war comes is truth, and whenever an individual nation seeks to coerce by force of arms another, it always acts and insists that it acts in self-defence" (LEJ, 1929, p. 109). Also, one of America's most independent and revered journalists, I. F. Stone, once said: "All governments lie, but disaster lies in wait for countries whose officials smoke the same hashish they give out" (MacPherson, 2008). The amplification of these statements by the media would mean that journalists would have to be more independent, discerning, and resilient in their work especially during conflicts without taking sides in order to be able to impartially report on them. This is important because even in societies where freedom of expression seems to exist, the media promote the interests of influential elites (Herman and Chomsky, 1988) and in many instances the statements by governments, most of which are lies and propaganda as was the case of the mainstream American media which gullibly swallowed and propagated the lies and propaganda by the Bush Administration over its invasion of Iraq.

## METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on the role of the media in both the democratisation processes and their related conflicts on the African continent. It discusses the roles the media have played to bring about democracy in some countries, as well as the roles played in some of the conflicts. It employs a qualitative research method opting for both actor-based and issue-based method in analysing the media and their roles in the two areas under discussion focusing on recent events in some selected countries. In brief instances, we discuss the term democracy, and the interface between democratisation, conflict, and the media.

## Democracy: What is it?

Democracy can be traced to Ancient Greece, where the term was derived from the Greek word *kratos*, which means 'power' or 'rule', and *demos*, meaning the people (Heywood, 2007 p.72). Thus, the term democracy means rule by the people. According to the Oxford Dictionaries, democracy is "a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives" (Oxford Dictionaries Online). However, it is difficult to apply the above 'definition' to fit contemporary situations. Arblaster (2002) argues that '*democracy*' is a concept with no single precise and agreed definition, has diverse meanings and connotations, and understood differently in the different social and economic systems. For Gallie (1956), it is 'essentially contestable concept'.

Democracy engrosses conflicts around the allocation and control of power among contesting parties for the modelling of a new political system (Froomkin and Shapiro, 2025; Haugaard, 2021; Hartzell and Hoddie, 2003; Vladisavljevic and Voltmer, 2017). The term democratisation means differently to different societies – the western, the communist-socialists world, and of course emerging economies in the developing world. Hence, whereas in the no-party or one-party states elections are held with candidates selected from ruling parties, in the western world elections are usually conducted based on freedom of the people to form political parties and contest elections based on their party manifestoes. Interestingly people living in all these places describe and believe their systems are democratic.

In the western world, the general belief is that democratisation means a transition from authoritarianism to liberal democracy, under which granting of basic freedoms and political rights, as well as the establishment of popular and competitive elections are held (Przeworski 1991). In Africa, the process of *democratisation* had been with the people for as long as they have lived despite their experiences with feudalism, authoritarian rule, and military dictatorships. Africans had always initiated reforms to their prevailing governance systems long before colonisation. However, with colonisation and its attendant imposition of foreign governance culture and systems, Africans did not have the opportunity to develop their indigenous governance system to suit their growing idiosyncrasies, economic development, and peculiar social life.

The imposition of western-styled *democracy* on Africans was therefore not without problems, particularly with regards to selection of political leaders vis-à-vis the role of chiefs, who had previously exercised executive, legislative, and judicial functions of the state. Another problem born out of colonisation was the forcible partitioning and re-grouping or amalgamation of the hitherto separate, independent, and autonomous states, nations, and kingdoms. These and many other problems therefore became the sources and causes of most conflicts as and when western-styled democratisation process began in communities.

In recent times *democracy* has become the standard demand by western nations and international institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) before offering aid to developing countries. With this demand comes the classification of developing nations, and the prescription by these western nations and the Bretton Woods institutions of their very deceptive, misleading, and false antidote for all economic ills faced by developing countries. For these institutions and western nations, *democracy* is synonymous with 'good governance', which automatically produces socio-economic development, best corporate practices, accountability, transparency, and all-inclusive government (Cole 2008), yet the term 'good governance' still poses definitional problems.

Globally, experience has showed that a government in one country described in some western circles as practising 'good governance' because of that government's strict implementation of prescribed western conditionalities, could in the same breadth be described as authoritarian or non-democratic by some other organisations and countries.

As the wave of democratisation moved across Africa, conflicts became almost a by-product where people, usually divided on ethnic and religious lines, fought to establish their dominance in this newfound governance system. In West Africa, this trend has over the years resulted in some conflicts leading to massive loss of life and sometimes destruction of whole nations. The conflicts which occurred in Liberia (1989-1996, 1999-2003), Sierra Leone (1991-2002) and Cote d'Ivoire (2002-2007, 2010-2011) are good examples.

### The Media Interface

In all modern societies, people communicate or share ideas and experiences and analyse political

events through the media. At any given time, there are compelling circumstances and situations that shape the relationship between politics and the media. In some countries, majority of political discussions are generated and moderated by the media. Particularly, in certain times, like during conflicts, national elections, natural disasters, and epidemics, the media become the main source of information for people. For instance, the vociferous and influential *Wall Street Journal*, while many Americans were against the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, propped the Bush administration to go on. Using its editorials, the paper vigorously said, "the war was good, and the occupation was good – and those who doubted were fools and knaves" (Solomon, 2004, p.49).

Despite this, however, sometimes it is difficult for people to understand the dynamics and relationship between the media and politics. This is so because the relationship between them is understood in different ways by different people, depending on their socio-cultural environment and the issues at stake. It is in this regard that one needs to place in context and generate diverse theoretical positions to bring home the unique relationship between media and politics, and hence democracy. It is in equal dimension that the relationship between media and conflict, especially politics-oriented conflicts, become difficult to understand sometimes.

With democracy come the institutions which are deemed paramount for the survival and efficient operation of governance systems. One of these institutions is the media, which Edmund Burke termed the 'Fourth Estate of the Realm' during a parliamentary debate in 1787 on the opening up of press reporting of the House Commons of Great Britain (Schultz, 1998). The Fourth Estate thus comes after the executive, legislative, and judicial arms of government. Burke's description of the media as the fourth estate emerged after Louis XVI classified and designated the nobles in society, the clergy, and the commoners as the first, second, and third 'estates' respectively.

With their potency, the media have arguably become the main means of mass communication, using television, radio, newspapers, and in recent years the internet. The gatekeeping and framing functions of the media seem universal, yet the news selection and/or framing usually defer in countries due to geographical, political, and economic conditions (de Mooij, 2014). In view of this, they have become an integral part of all political and governance activities,

playing different roles in society in accordance with prevailing conditions. For instance, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the media were the main praise-singers of governments especially during the two world wars and even at the time of the Korean War. The media served as the medium through which governments executed their war game plans while they also served as government propaganda tools.

However, when the prevailing socio-political environment changed, the media also changed to the extent that during the Vietnam War, instead of the media serving as the usual propaganda machines for their governments, they became the main opponents of the war. US war correspondents for instance, began to expose the real situations at the battlefields, which mobilised the American people against their government forcing the US government to pull out of the war. This was the reason some argued that it was the media which lost the Vietnam War for America.

Despite the role played by the American media in the Vietnam War, for which successive American governments and politicians continued to blame the media for the defeat in that war, the same American media later became the main propaganda tools through which America sold and executed the Iraq War I (1991) and II (2003), under the administrations of George Herbert Walker Bush and George Walker Bush respectively. This author observed during the two Iraq wars and how the American and other western media compromised their position as the 'fourth estate' and relegated to the background Montesquieu's theory of separation of powers which meant that each of the four arms of government must be independent of each other in executing their roles and responsibilities to society. The western media never questioned the US and British governments' claim that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction but reported just what the governments' propaganda machines told them. They even referred to the American and British soldiers in their reportage at times as "our boys".

The relationship or interface between power (rulers) and the media has therefore always been fundamental to the fuller understanding of the workings of any civil society or modern democratic governance. Though, it could be argued that the operational record of the media in western countries, has usually been used by many as the measuring rod to grade the media in Africa, yet at certain times the western media's record becomes unworthy to be used as a yardstick because of the way they allowed themselves to be heavily

censored in the name of 'national interest'. It is equally fair to conclude that African countries desirous of promoting democracy need the media to succeed, yet in the absence of democratic governments and institutions, media systems in most African countries are killed or turned into propaganda tools for authoritarian rulers and despots.

For instance, in Uganda, some media organisations experienced the wrought of President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni Tibuhaburwa following the death of Sudanese Vice-President John Garang in 2005. Garang, who had occupied the office for only about seven months from January 9, was killed on July 30, 2005, when the Ugandan presidential helicopter crashed while he was returning to Sudan after talks in Uganda. The incident, which damaged hopes of a regional co-operation based on a Uganda-South Sudan alliance acutely embarrassed Museveni and his government, more so when Museveni and Garang had been political allies since their days together at university.

Garang's death led to widespread speculation on the cause of the crash. Due to the embarrassment to Museveni and his government, he threatened media organisations which alluded to any guilt or complicity on the part of the Ugandan government. On August 10, 2005, he threatened to close *The Daily Monitor*, *The Weekly Observer* and a tabloid, *The Red Pepper*, which published what Museveni termed 'conspiracy theories' about Garang's death. He claimed such speculation was a threat to regional security. "I will no longer tolerate a newspaper which is like a vulture. Any newspaper that plays around with regional security, I will not tolerate it – I will close it", declared Museveni (*IRIN News*, August 2005).

*The Red Pepper* reported that Garang's body was riddled with bullets when it was recovered from the wreckage of the Uganda government helicopter. Museveni considered this as creating an avenue for conspiracy theories but to an opposition Member of Parliament, Aggrey Awori, "it was Museveni himself who opened the floodgates of speculation over the facts behind the crash by saying that it may not have been an accident and could have been the result of some other factors" (*IRIN News*, August 2005).

A day after Museveni's threat, a popular radio station *KFM* had its license withdrawn for broadcasting a debate on Garang's death. Radio presenter Andrew Mwenda was eventually arrested and charged for sedition in connection with comments he made on the

programme. Mwenda had accused the Ugandan government of "incompetence" and said they had put Garang on "a junk helicopter...at night...in poor weather...over an insecure area" (*IRIN News*, August 2005). He also criticised Museveni and called him a failure, a coward and 'a villager', and added that the president's days were numbered if he "goes on a collision course with me" (*Reuters*, 2005).

In most countries where a series of conflicts preceded democratisation, the media became a tool either for the mobilisation of the people against the dictatorial regimes, or for the oppression of the people by the dictators. In the end, the media in some instances became partisan, and thus vulnerable to manipulation, especially by those in authority. When allowed to be manipulated, the media could become the platform for promoting conflicts. Therefore, from whichever angle one looks at the democratisation process taking place in former 'undemocratic' countries, either in Africa, Asia, or Latin America, one is bound to confront the impact of both the media and conflict.

It is a common phenomenon for democratic societies to pride themselves on the existence of free press. We believe that press freedom and free speech are *sine qua non* for any sustainable democratic process. However, for years the issue of the exact roles and functions the media play and their impact on society has been the subject of intense discussion (Lasswell 1948; Siebert *et al.* 1956; Lee 1977; Wright 1985; McQuail 1992; Hindell 1995 in Gilboa 2002a). To Gunther and Mughan (2000), an important obstacle to a deeper understanding of the relationship between the society and the media was the absence of an integrated research agenda, which this article tries to address.

There is no doubt that there exists a relationship between the media and a democratic process, a relationship which is fundamental to the strengthening of democratic institutions and the advancement of society. The impact of this relationship is one of the principal interests of this study, answering the question: How do the media mediate democratic processes. The other question this study addresses is: How do the media perform in conflict situations?

### **Democratisation in West Africa**

As stated earlier, the term *democracy* raises some questions, sometimes very contentious ones about what it exactly means and how best to practise it.

Again, the question arises as to whose judgement on democracy is acceptable? Which system is democratic and who determines it? Is it the western-style multi-party system or the eastern/communist model of elections without political parties which is democratic? And what about Africa where the system of governance did not match any of the two systems, and where chiefs and their council of elders ruled in their own style with acceptable ways of electing leaders?

Presently, for instance, whereas in the United Kingdom elections to the Welsh Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, and the Northern Ireland Assembly, as well as all local councils are contested by political parties and individuals, elections to Ghana's Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies, which are almost similar in nature and function to the UK governance system, are by law non-political (1992 Ghana Constitution). People contest on their own individual merits. Does this make Ghana's system non-democratic? It is important to note that but for colonisation and imposition of foreign culture and governance practices on Africans, the unique African system would have developed.

Generally, it is assumed by many that democratic governance existed where the exercise of the powers of government were placed under prescribed conditions which allow for freedom of speech and expression, the rule of law, uninhibited information flow and freedom to participate in legal political activities of one's choice, as well as freedom of movement and of association.

West Africa is one of the regions in the world which experienced the effects of colonialism. Rightly or wrongly, many have blamed the sub-region's stunted economic and political growth on the adverse effects of colonialism even though majority of the countries gained independence in the 1960s and should have by now disentangled themselves from any negative effects of colonisation.

Since their independence, popular one-man one-vote system of governance has eluded many African countries. Immediately after their independence, many of them adopted the then socialist style of governance, which abhorred political pluralism but favoured the one-party or no-party type of governance. This could be explained by the fact that most of the countries had to wage independence struggles backed by the Soviet Union.

This political system later led to discontent among the citizenry as power became the monopoly of only a few people. With the help of the West, as part of the Cold War tactics, many African elite were educated in western universities and other higher institutions following which they infiltrated the military and succeeded in using coups d'état to topple socialist-inclined one-party governments. These were followed by the introduction of western-styled democratic governments, but as in the case of Ghana and other West African countries, these were intermittently disrupted by the military, who after tasting political power alongside civilians who pushed them into it, now wanted to be on their own as rulers.

Since Ghana's independence in 1957, it has recorded four coups on February 24, 1966, January 13, 1972, June 4, 1979, and December 31, 1981, in addition to one 'palace coup' where the head of state, General I. K. Acheampong was replaced by his deputy, General F. W. K. Akuffo in 1978. Until January 7, 1993, when constitutional democratic governance was installed again for the fourth time, the military had ruled the country for a total of 21 out of the 35 post-independence years. This trend, which created political instability with all its consequences was not restricted to Ghana, but the entire African continent. In some countries, ethnic groups which felt alienated from political power resulted to armed conflict to change the status quo. Though, since the last decade many of the countries in the West African sub-region have adopted democratisation processes, conflicts still rage on in some of them, with the media sometimes initiating the conflicts or fanning the embers.

The development of political structures and institutions for the promotion of democratic growth eluded most West African states due to the prolonged dominance of the military in power. This situation also affected the growth of the media, thus inhibiting them from playing their role in the sustenance of democracy.

### **Political Conflicts**

In Africa, the advent of democratisation gave birth to governance-related conflicts, most times a struggle between those who want power. This is due to the lack of proper preparation by the countries to undertake the processes of democratisation. Democracy is extremely expensive and in most times unaffordable to many African countries. For this reason, the very structures and institutions which are needed to safeguard the processes for democracy are usually not in place.

These institutions include independent judiciary, independent and free media, efficient civil service, and other independent institutions and civil society organisations which are to undertake certain processes which aid democratisation.

Political conflicts have therefore immensely affected the democratisation process in many countries of the sub-region, with their impacts felt by not only the people in the affected countries but throughout an entire region as was the case with the Liberia (1989-1996, 1999-2003), Sierra Leone (1991-2002) and Cote d'Ivoire (2002-2007, 2010-2011) conflicts.

Conflict, as is widely believed by some scholars, is an intrinsic and inevitable aspect of human life and social change. It is defined variously by different scholars, yet many of them dwell on the same theme. Johan Galtung defines conflict as "contradictions among incompatible goals, a ubiquitous phenomenon in human and social reality", adding that conflict is seen as "dual between two parties like God and Satan, one good, and one evil, fighting over one issue". He refers to this situation as the DMA Syndrome – Dualism-Manichaeism-Armageddon (Galtung *et al.*, 2002).

To Bonta, conflict is "the incompatible needs, differing demands, contradictory wishes, opposing beliefs, or diverging interests which produce interpersonal antagonism and, at times, hostile encounters" (Bonta, 1996, p.405). Miall *et al.* (1999) also define conflict as an expression of the heterogeneity of interests, values and beliefs that arise as new formations generated by social change come up against inherited constraints. On his part, Lynch defines conflict as "a process through which two or more actors (parties) pursue incompatible goals while trying to undermine the goal-seeking potential of the other(s)" (Lynch, 2002, p.29). Conflicts, he argues, can be positive and constructive by opening avenues for change if managed effectively. We could therefore conclude that conflicts are the results of incompatible desires of persons and groups of persons and the absence of acceptable and workable systems and mechanisms for addressing such incompatibilities.

Within the African continent, many of the countries which are trying to adopt democratic practices, had transitioned from military dictatorships, where the military dictators had metamorphosed into civilian presidents through bogus elections under which they almost always won over 80 per cent of the votes under circumstances which are clearly seen by many as

fraudulent. Jerry John Rawlings of Ghana and Yahya Jammeh of The Gambia are good examples of coup makers who took on 'civilian clothes' to enable them cling on to power. Such fraudulently 'won' elections by the military-dictators-turned-politicians, and some civilian incumbents are one of the main factors which had previously ignited conflicts on the continent.

In Uganda, Museveni, like many of his colleagues, came to power by default after leading rebels of the then Ugandan Army to wage a gorilla-war against an elected government. He has since been in power from January 29, 1986 (39 years), under which period he has 'won' all elections, having clamped down on opposition parties and amended the Ugandan constitution to make himself eligible to run for more terms as president. He has run for six times and is expected to run for the seventh time in January 2026 making him rule for over 40 years if he wins (*BBC News*, 2025; *RFI*, 2025).

In Kenya, the people witnessed the country's worse electoral violence after the December 2007 presidential election which observers believed the opposition leader Raila Odinga won. Then incumbent Mwai Kibaki was reported to have rigged the election to declare himself winner, and this sparked the violence which claimed the lives of over 1,200 people and displaced about 400,000 people.

Joseph Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2011 celebrated another 'victory' in election with no regard to the number of people killed. His main opponent, Dr Kizza Besigye, the leader of the Forum for Democratic Change, who was beaten and pepper-sprayed by Kabila's police officers and was almost blinded, had to abandon his campaign and run to the US for medical treatment while Kabila was campaigning. Kabila had before the election manipulated the parliament dominated by his own party members and amended the constitution to scrap the provision on presidential run-offs with a simple majority, thus making it possible to declare himself the winner with just a simple majority instead of the popular practice where the first two candidates go for a run-off if no candidate obtained more than 50 per cent of the total votes.

Within the West African sub-region there have been several election-related conflicts in many of the countries. On November 25, 2011, Yahya Jammeh, who through a coup in 1994, as a 29-year-old army lieutenant, imposed himself on the people of The

Gambia, 'won' another five-year term as president of his country, 'winning' 72 per cent of the votes under elections described by the Ecowas (Economic Community of West African States) as not free and not fair. Jammeh was accused of intimidating his opponents and over-exploiting his incumbency. He had prior to that 'won' three heavily flawed elections.

In Cote d'Ivoire, then incumbent Laurent Gbagbo lost the November 2010 elections but refused to leave and manipulated the system to get himself sworn-in as president after overturning the earlier results which showed that the opposition leader and former prime minister, Alassane Ouattara, had won. This led to Cote d'Ivoire's worse electoral violence leading to the death of what media reports estimated at about 3,000 people, with over half a million people displaced. After winning a second term in 2015, Ouattara was not qualified to seek re-election, but through changes to the Ivorian Constitution he ran for re-election in a very controversial way and won, sparking violent protest in the country (*dw.com*, 2020).

Similarly, there were election-related conflicts in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, and near conflict eruption in Ghana prior to the 1996 and 2000 elections with reported clashes between supporters of two of the main political parties, the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress.

### The Media's Impact

Due to the lack of an integrated research process not much has been documented on the impact of the media on democratisation and on conflict in Africa. As Gunther and Mughan (2000) argue, the media, throughout the twentieth century were central to the dynamics of the relationship between governors and the governed in all types of political regimes, initially due to the spread of literacy and later the advances in communication technology. In their view, political elites widely, if not universally, acknowledge the paramount importance of the media in shaping the behavioural orientations of the people towards politics, and have therefore developed media policies to suit their economic, social, and political purpose.

This view follows the position of the *Media Studies Journal* in 1995. In an article, 'Media and Democracy', the editors expressed the view that the media help in promoting rule of law and political freedoms including free elections, political equality, independent judiciary, and minority rights. It notes that "since freedom itself



means a lack of restraint, it is assumed that the media can operate unfettered at least until they collide with individual rights or institutional interests". It also posits that: "Ideally, democracy and media coexist and support each other through a process of negotiation hopefully aimed at developing a consensus about the public interest" (*Media Studies Journal*, 1995).

In all modern societies, the media play a significant role in promoting public discourse and shaping public perceptions on many national and international issues. This role is usually played by the media by disseminating information as well as providing interpretations to the information. Additionally, the media also shape national culture by their portrayal of the beliefs, values, and traditions of their people and societies.

Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States of America, said in 1787 that if it were left to him to decide whether America should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, "I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the later" (Jefferson, 1787). History and research show that the media have impact in one form or another on all human endeavours – political, social, or cultural. They are the conduit through which the people and their elected representatives communicate to share ideas – they are the connective link. They serve as a vehicle of self-expression, reflecting public opinion; they inform, educate, and entertain, while still being a watchdog of society.

However, the exact role they play in democratisation and conflicts (and conflict resolution) has often been defined by different researchers, politicians, sociologists and even media practitioners. As the fourth estate, some hold the view that the media can be neutral players behaving as umpires in the political game. On the other hand, others consider them as partners whose direct participatory role is needed for the development of not only political institutions and systems, but the entire socio-economic growth of society.

In many parts of Africa, the development of the media has never been smooth due to intermittent military interventions. As has been the practice with all military dictatorships, the media become one of the first institutions to feel their weight. From history, the media usually become the first target of coup makers and military interventions. The military usurpers usually have the belief that they only needed to first silence the

media before they could win the people to their side. They need the media for the reshaping and re-orientation of the people to accept them (coup makers) as the 'saviours' and 'redeemers' who have come to right the wrongs in society and uplift them from poverty and difficult living conditions into an era of flowing 'sugar and honey'.

Under such conditions critical journalists are silenced, making the media docile and sycophantic. Silenced journalists in no time become part of the institution serving as the mouthpiece of the dictators. The questioning and investigative abilities of journalists quickly vanish overnight as the dictators try to manipulate them to aid their quest for reshaping the minds of the people towards mass mobilisation in support of their dictatorial rule.

### **Democracy and the Media**

Since the last century, the media have been the central link between governors and the governed. Whereas governors recognise the paramount importance of the media in re-orientating the people towards their policies, the governed also acknowledges the potency of the media in carrying their views and grievances across and thereby influencing formulation of policies which affect them.

Politicians therefore like to manipulate and use the media for the advancement of their political agenda and personal aggrandisement. On the other hand, the media, when vibrant and free, like to set their own agenda and shape public opinion. Beaudoin and Thorson (2002) stress the significant role the media play in the process by which people develop a view of the world. According to them, Roach (1993) argued that media coverage of events is influential since the public cannot rely on other sources or information such as 'personal experience and interpersonal communication'. For this reason, politicians in both democratic and authoritarian regimes always desire and attempt to control the media and through any means necessary try to curb press freedom.

Freedom of the press and of speech is an essential ingredient for the promotion of divergent views which strengthen democracy. They are also a platform on which citizens endorse politicians and renew their mandate or reject those who had betrayed them. This, therefore, emphasises the need for media systems in democratic societies to be protected from both governmental and unnecessary legal controls.

Despite the occasional mistrust for the media, they could still be credited with the creation of a perfect and reliable link and a platform for individual citizens to access their leaders. In the view of Kaase (2000), the media should not be dismissed since politics at its most artificial state cannot be accessed by the individual citizen except through the mass media. A further demonstration of this was the large number of demonstrators on November 9, 1989, in front of the Berlin Wall before it was opened, which undoubtedly was due to the impact of hyped media reportage.

In early 1990, the media in Mali and Ghana spearheaded their countries' democratic processes by creating avenues for politicians to communicate to the electorate and for the electorate to make their choices based on informed decisions. They also conducted an eagle-eye monitoring of elections ensuring that voting and counting of votes were transparent thereby preventing any attempt of rigging. In Ghana, when the opposition parties boycotted the parliamentary elections in the 1992 elections after accusing Rawlings of rigging the presidential election, the media assumed the work of opposition parties by raising critical issues about the activities of the government and keeping it on its toes.

The democracy-media interface has always posed definitional problems. The relationship which is between the mass media and political interest groups, though takes different forms in different environments, yet the end product seems to point towards the same direction – creating a link between the ruled and the rulers.

### Conflict and the Media

The potency of the media to inflame passions and start conflicts cannot be underrated, much as in the same way that they can equally promote peace between warring parties. The media can easily stir up emotions and exacerbate conflicts judging from the impact of the media during the Balkans conflict and the role played by *Radio Television Libre des Mille Collines* in Rwanda which ignited the genocide in that country and was therefore indicted by the UN War Crimes Tribunal.

The private radio station established in 1993, opposed peace talks between the Hutu-led government of President Juvenal Habyarimana and the Tutsi-led rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front. The station was used by the Habyarimana government to incite ethnic

hatred against the Tutsis. After President Habyarimana's plane was shot down, the radio called for what it described as the 'final war' to 'exterminate the cockroaches', leading to the death of about 800,000 people in the 100-day genocide in 1994. During the genocide that followed, *Radio Mille Collines* broadcast lists of people (Tutsis and moderate Hutus) to be killed and instructed killers on where to find them.

Besides *Radio Mille Collines*, the state radio, *Radio Rwanda*, and the print media also played crucial roles in the genocide. *Radio Rwanda* was used in inciting the killing of Tutsis in Bugesera, south of the national capital, Kigali, by repeatedly broadcasting a communiqué warning that the Hutus in Bugesera would be attacked by the Tutsis. Local officials used this message to convince the Hutus that they needed to attack first, and for that reason led by government soldiers, Hutu civilians, and the militia, the *Interahamwe*, attacked and killed hundreds of Tutsis (eNotes Publishing).

*Radio Mille Collines* in its reports inciting Hutus against Tutsis, described the Tutsis as cockroaches when it interchangeably used *inyenzi* (a term meaning cockroach in Kinyarwanda), Tutsi, and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) combatants. It also made women targets of the anti-Tutsi propaganda prior to the genocide by highlighting four of what became known as the 'Ten Hutu Commandments' that portrayed Tutsi women as tools and sexual weapons of the Tutsi people with which to weaken and ultimately destroy Hutu men. According to Brouwer (2005), gender-based propaganda also included cartoons printed in newspapers depicting Tutsi women as sex objects, with publications such as "You Tutsi women think that you are too good for us", and "Let us see what a Tutsi woman tastes like" (Brouwer, 2005).

The print media in Rwanda, according to some commentators, were believed to have started hate speech against the Tutsis, paving the way for radio stations to fuel it. Anti-Tutsi hate speech "...became so systemic as to seem the norm", with the state-owned newspaper, *Kangura*, playing a leading role, by starting anti-Tutsi and anti-RPF campaign in October 1990 (eNotes Publishing).

With regards to conflict, conflict resolution, and democratisation, the media have always played key roles in either fanning the conflicts with their gatekeeping powers and through disinformation and

biased reporting or facilitating reconciliation of the combatants and promoting peacebuilding by disseminating information and offering platforms for dialogue. Even in western countries where the media have operated for centuries and thought to be 'perfect', unfiltered news or information from them still continue to create fright, insecurity, and chaos as was the case in 1992 following the acquittal of the white policemen who savagely beat black motorist Rodney King in Los Angeles. News from the media on the acquittal of the white policemen ignited riotous response from Black communities.

### **Positive Media Effects**

The media have always been in the centre where they interact with politicians and state officials as well as the public. In their desire to push their own agenda and project their images and policies, and shape public opinion, politicians try to manipulate the media. The public also has its own agenda; at the same time the media have their own with which they want to represent and shape public opinion. Therefore, the stage is always set for that competition between politicians, the public, and the media where each group tries to set the agenda and shape public opinion.

Despite the competition, the media still play a lead role in the affairs of the society, especially with regards to conflict resolution and management, as well as the promotion of democracy. Eytan Giboa subscribes to this position when he notes that "the modern media have transformed the management, resolution, and transformation of domestic and international conflicts", hence they have a significant effect on domestic and international conflicts (Gilboa, 2002b). However, it is important to note that the media can make the desired impact depending mainly on two things: the independence of the media, and the influence of the media (Wolfsfeld 1997a in Bloch and Lehman-Wilzig 2002). The two nevertheless, do not necessarily go together and that "showing journalistic independence still demands proof of significant influence on the behaviour of the actors" (Wolfsfeld 1993 in Bloch and Lehman-Wilzig 2002). In addition to the two points, Mowlana adds a third, being the media's ability to determine the public agenda (Mowlana 1996 in Bloch & Lehman-Wilzig 2002).

The media have played dual roles of helping state officials to manage or prevent conflicts as well as hinder conflict prevention or management. This usually situates the media in the hands of both combatants and

intermediaries. Despite this, the media are noted to be playing very important roles in promoting national interest and national agenda in times of difficulties where national interests are at stake. The American media, for instance, rallied the American people behind their government during the 1991 and 2003 Iraq wars. The media's influence goes beyond just rallying people. In the US, it is noted that there is possible influence on foreign policymakers. According to Bloch and Lehman-Wilzig (2002), "those in charge of foreign policy within any American Administration are known to assiduously read the elite press – whether in organised synopsis form (the President's daily packet) or in normal fashion" (p.164). Media reportage therefore plays a key role in shaping policy directions of state governments.

The media play a key role in politics and democratisation. For instance, free and fair elections are not only about voters casting their vote, but more importantly voters having the requisite information about contestants and their policies to enable them make informed choices. In most cases the media become the only independent source of information for the voter. Political parties and their candidates use the media to get their campaign messages and policies to the electorate. The media themselves take on the responsibility of scrutinising campaign messages and policies of candidates to aid the electorate to make informed choices. Scrutinising the election process is one of the most important aspects of an election to provide an added safeguarding mechanism against interference and rigging. Wolfsfeld (1997b) postulates that the "best way to understand the role of the news media in politics is to view the competition over the news media as part of larger contest among political antagonists for political control" (p.3 cited in Malinkina & McLeod 2002).

In 1991, the media in Benin was credited with helping to restore democratic rule in the country. The Benin National Conference, the interim parliament which produced the new democratic constitution, was firm in its conclusion that the media played a significant role by educating the people on the elections and the policies of the opposing candidates. This led to the defeat of military dictator General Mathieu Kerekou, the first African dictator to be toppled in the democratic revolution which had begun on the continent. Winding up its activities, the Conference gave a public acknowledgement of the role played by the media in the restoration of democracy in Benin. This led to the enactment of laws by the parliament guaranteeing press freedom. Kerekou himself unequivocally

accepted that his defeat was caused by the media. The role of the media in Benin became a shining example which was emulated by the media in other African countries (The Benin Conference, 1990).

In Niger, in the midst of government harassment of journalists and media organisations in the 1990s, *Radio Anfani*, one of Niger's first private-owned broadcasters, introduced what became the equivalent of phone-in radio, where people walked into the studios and openly poured out their grievances making the people to exert their influence on the country's governance (Ocitti, 1999). *Anfani FM* was shut down several times under Gen. Ibrahim Bare Mainassara while its journalists severally faced arrests and government sanctions related to their reporting (RSF, 2004).

In Burundi, unlike neighbouring Rwanda, where *Radio Mille Collines* became the tool for the genocide leading to the death of almost a million people, a radio station, *Studio Ijambo* (Ijambo means 'wise words' in the local Kirundi language), based in the capital, Bujumbura, was used to promote peace in that country from March 1995, after 50,000 people had been killed in 1993 as a result of a Tutsis and Hutus conflict. Here, both Tutsis and Hutus worked together. For instance, Adrian Sindayigaya, a Hutu, worked with Agnes Nindorera, a Tutsi, jointly interviewing people from the two ethnic groups to produce radio programmes meant to promote peaceful co-existence of the two groups (European Centre for Conflict Prevention, 1999). In 2014, the media in Burkina Faso hyped the popular protests which led to President Blaise Compaore running away from the country on October 31, after being in power for 27 years.

In both Mali and Ghana, the media are credited with playing significant roles in restoring democracy. In Mali, before the restoration of democratic rule, two newspapers, *Les Echos* and *l'Aurore* defied the military government and encouraged the citizenry to revolt against military dictatorship. This helped with the protests engaged in by students and other identifiable groups. With the restoration of democracy, the media continued to hold the government to account. For instance, they persisted in asking the government to account for the proceeds from the sale of Mali's telecommunication company, SOTELMA. The media also contributed to the growth of democracy in that country through their sustain education of the people to exercise their rights and participate in the governance process.

In Ghana, apart from the media becoming the unofficial opposition outside parliament, when the New Patriotic Party (NPP) boycotted the 1992 parliamentary elections, hence the 1993 parliament became a one-party house, the media held the government to account in many instances. The media, especially the private media, have since 1993 exposed several corrupt practices by state officials. They also provide educational lessons on civic and political issues for the people through published stories and programmes. During the elections from 1996 to 2024, the media became one of the best watchdogs right from campaigning to elections, promoting transparency and fairness in both the electioneering and the actual voting and counting.

The positive effect of the media can be summed up in what US President Lyndon Johnson once said. Not long after leaving office in 1969, he was asked by a TV news producer what had changed in American politics since the 1930s when he came to Washington as a young Texas congressman, and this was his answer:

You guys. All you guys in the media. All the politics has changed because of you. You've broken all the [party] machines and the ties between us in the Congress and the city machines. You've given us a new kind of people. Teddy, Tunney. They are your creations, your puppets. No machine could ever create a Teddy Kennedy. Only you guys. They are all yours. Your product. (Halberstam, 1979, pp.15-16, in Zaller, 1999)

## CONCLUSION

It is believed that the media are the mirror of society, and that every society gets the media it deserves. A vibrant media cannot therefore exist in isolation where other institutions for democratic governance are not in place. More so, the situation even becomes worse when the three main arms of government – the executive, legislature, and the judiciary – are all in the hands of the same group of people as had always been the case under military regimes.

It is also an acknowledged fact that in all democracies, people can only act and make informed decisions and engage in informed discourse when they have available and reliable information. Former World Bank President, James D. Wolfensohn, elaborates this powerfully:

...Development is a complex issue involving actions on several fronts. A key ingredient of an effective development strategy is knowledge transmission and enhanced transparency. To reduce poverty, we must liberate access to information and improve the quality of information. People with more information are empowered to make better choices. (Wolfensohn in World Bank 2002, p.v)

Wolfensohn adds that a free press is not a luxury, but rather at the core of equitable development. The media, he argues, can expose corruption, keep a check on public policy by throwing a spotlight on government action, and by letting people voice opinions on governance and reform, and help build consensus to bring about change (Wolfensohn in World Bank 2002, p.v).

Thomas Jefferson (1786) says "our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost". Therefore, the growth and enhancement of democratic culture in Africa could in most part, be dependent on the vibrancy and diligence of the media in providing the needed information in a timely manner.

Irrespective of the standpoint from which one sees the role of the media in Africa, their performance in the on-going democratic processes amply demonstrates that they promote knowledge-sharing and understanding among the people to enable them participate in governance. Jefferson again acknowledges this in a 1789 speech: "Whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their own government".

As shown by research, human communication as it takes place in homes and other places does not become a collective conversation until the communication finds space in the media. This means that modern societies depend on the media as an arena of public discourse, thus how democratisation-related conflicts are communicated is mainly decided by the media through their ability to shape the public agenda (Votmer, 2019).

There is no doubt that the African media are relatively not as strong as those in the advanced democracies, particularly in the West, yet it is instructive to conclude that they have in the last three decades played a very significant role in promoting democracy in many African countries. Despite very difficult and sometimes unbearable conditions in which

they operate, and their roles in previous conflicts where they were active participants with own interests and preferences, the African media have played leading roles in ensuring democracy in Africa. They managed to create new public spheres and platforms for people who hitherto were bullied and intimidated by dictatorial regimes to now participate in national discourse by voicing their concerns as part of the participatory democratic process growing on the continent.

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