

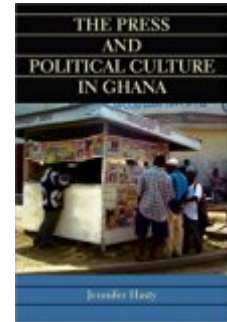
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jennifer Hasty. *The Press and Political Culture in Ghana*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. xvii + 189 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21748-6.

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The Press in Ghana's Bourgeoning Democracy

In her book on the press and the political culture in Ghana, Jennifer Hasty attempts an examination of news discourse in Ghana between 1995 and 2000, a period characterized by the consolidation of the country's young democracy, as well as liberalization and dynamic political contestation.

She locates newspapers at the nexus of Ghanaian news discourse, a discourse characterized by formal genres of mass media and informal modes of social communication. The centrality of newspapers in this sense may be arguable, given the proliferation of FM stations after the liberalization of the airwaves in the mid-1990s, and the popularization of the phone-in format of broadcasting. These factors, together with the ubiquity of radio and the more accessible discourse of broadcast news, might have propelled radio to the position hitherto occupied by newspapers. Indeed, Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo suggests that the various Ghanaian media play similar roles in public information and communication, an assertion that might still be subject to some debate.[1] However, Hasty observes that in Ghana, "newspapers constitute the very terms of local events, and recurring themes—subsuming all in an ongoing narrative frame of national news" (p. 2). Previously, media scholars such as Richard Ericson, Patricia Baranek, and Janet Chan as well as Stuart Hall have underscored the potential of newspapers vis-à-vis other news media, as sources of more discursive and extensive coverage of public affairs, allowing for the monitoring of the activities of the socio-political elite, and framing the discursive parameters of current

affairs.[2] Thus, it might have been even more useful for Hasty's project if she had included some intertextual analysis to evidence how information from newspapers frame and motivate articulations that constitute radio and television news in Ghana.

Hasty charts the historical paradigmatic shifts that have characterized the newspaper industry in Ghana from the colonial to the postcolonial, namely the role of newspapers in the resistance to colonialism and then cooptation in the service of nationalism and political consolidation in the postcolonial era (when the State-owned press became tools of propaganda as against a marketplace of ideas). She accounts for the suppression of the private media in the Rawlings era, and the harnessing of the private media as a tool of dissent in the latter part of the Rawlings regime during the period of liberalization. Hasty argues that Ghanaian news discourse and newswork are overdetermined by global elements such as objectivity, human rights and democracy, as well as local socio-cultural factors such as understandings of the role of the *Okyeame* or linguist in the traditional chief's court, and the role of "youngmen" in the traditional context. In this, she demonstrates not just a keen understanding of Ghanaian culture (no mean feat for a non-Ghanaian who found herself in Ghana quite by chance, as she was initially heading to Nigeria for the study), but also an ability to analyze the complex factors influencing Ghanaian newswork.

The importance of her discussions is that she tries

to account for the processes by which journalists in the state-owned and privately owned media are interpellated into particular subject positions, either to reproduce government rhetoric couched in articulations of national interest and national security (and therefore, as Althusserian Ideological State Apparatuses[3]); or, in the case of the private media, to articulate oppositional discourses linked to liberal-democratic concepts of human rights and democracy. In this sense, the liberal-democratic concept of the media's watchdog role becomes what William Connolly calls "an essentially contested concept," a floating signifier, a nodal point capable of anchoring different articulations.[4] Hasty also points to the curious structural durability of the culture whereby the state media functions as the state's informational apparatus, despite the various changes in Ghana's political culture. Having followed Ghanaian news for several years, and having myself worked in the news media industry, it is worth noting that to date the state-owned media hardly comes out with investigative scoops with the potential to embarrass the state—whether or not an autocratic regime exists. Hasty also argues that even the oppositional discourses of the private press do not really challenge dominant conceptions of the "bigman" role of officialdom. Actually, journalists in the private media appropriate such dominant understandings to seek accountability from the political elite.

Hasty locates the Ghanaian press in the civil society that has emerged in Ghana since the 1990s, and its role in the public sphere as a mediator between society at large and the State. Like Agnes Ku her conceptualization of civil society, the state, and the public sphere represents a shift from the pure Habermasian paradigm, and envisages the state and civil society as being politically intertwined in the public sphere.[5] In this sense, the media is positioned as an apparatus with the potential to mediate dialogue between the state and society, and also to engender consensus between the government and the governed. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci, Hasty notes that securing consensus in the public sphere is key to the legitimacy and stability of new political dispensations. However, this exposes the risk of cooptation faced by the media, a subject that is thoroughly explored in the book. Hasty also points to the hegemonic dynamics that structure the relationships between the media, society and the state in Ghana, relationships characterized by constant negotiation. This underscores observations made about newswork by various media scholars including Ericson et al. and Hall.

It is clear from Hasty's work that she does not attempt

to pass judgement on Ghanaian newswork practices but rather to understand them. Like Gaye Tuchman's seminal *Making News* (1978), Hasty's book is an ethnographic study that aims at providing insight through an understanding of the subject positions of journalists, and the processes through which interpellation and habitus formation in Ghanaian press houses occur. While overall Hasty achieves great success in her project, and though she is certainly not an apologist for past dictators and human rights abusers in Ghana, it would have been even more useful to particularize the atrocities that characterised most of Ghana's dictatorships (especially the Rawlings regimes), as such details (for example, the "disappearing" of "enemies of the revolution," killing of opposition elements, etc.) would enable readers (especially those foreign to Ghana), to properly comprehend the factors that led to the culture of silence during such regimes and the difficulties faced by journalists in the state-owned media. Further, a particularization of some of the atrocities would promote an understanding of the process described by Louis Althusser that results in the media's transformation from an Ideological State Apparatus into a Repressive State Apparatus—to the extent that the state-owned media, under repressive Ghanaian regimes, facilitated state repression (a subject extensively discussed in the recent report of Ghana's National Reconciliation Commission). Further, critical as it is, the book does not touch on questions of "mercenary journalism"—the practice whereby some journalists attempt to strong-arm the elite for material (and not political) gain. This is an issue that has reared its head following a number of exposures over the past few years and therefore has entered public discussions of newswork in Ghana.

Hasty's work could also benefit from a final round of editing by someone familiar with Ghana. For example, she mistakenly dates the 1992 constitution as the "1991 constitution" (p. xi). Then again, "Minister of Parliament" should have read "Member of Parliament" (p. xvii). She appears to conflate the Western and Central regions of Ghana when discussing regional ties that bind the private press and the Nkrumahist political tradition (pp. 117-118). For example, she suggests that Freddie Blay is the MP of a Central Region constituency, when in fact his constituency, Ellembelle, is in the Western Region. This conflation is itself a result of a conflation of Fantes and Nzemas as being one and the same ethnic group. However, these anomalies do not seriously undermine Hasty's work, and her development of a new concept—"chain-quoting" to describe the practice in the state-owned *Daily Graphic* whereby news narrative is constructed from a

chain of quotes in an inverted pyramid—is most useful. For any researcher intending to gain valuable insight into newswork and news discourse in Ghana, or for anyone intent on understanding the media in Ghana, Hasty’s book is an accessible, jargon-free must-read.

Notes

[1]. Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo, “Events that Matter: Specific Incidents, Media Coverage, and Agenda-Setting in a Ghanaian Context,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 28, no. 1 (2003): pp. 43-66.

[2]. Richard V Ericson., Patricia M. Baranek, and Janet B. L. Chan, *Representing Order: Crime, Law, and Justice in the News Media* (Toronto: University of Toronto

Press, 1991); and Stuart Hall, “Culture, the Media, and the ‘Ideological Effect,’” in *Mass Communication and Society*, ed. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woollacott (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979), pp. 314-348.

[3]. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971).

[4]. William E. Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

[5]. Agnes Ku, *Narratives, Politics and the Public Sphere* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999).

[6]. Gaye Tuchman, *Making News* (New York: Free Press, 1978).

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