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Abstract- Over the years, media autonomy issues in Ghana have emphasized media-state power relations. However, the switch from military to democratic order in 1992 strengthen the autonomy of the media because it received constitutional backing that led to the proliferation of media firms. While these developments are physically evident, the role of owners in the management of their outlets and hence publication seem to occur in a 'black hole' which tends to frustrate the autonomy that the Ghanaian media welcomed. To unearth this phenomenon, the study purposively sampled fifteen experienced editors, senior reporters of the print and representatives of media regulatory and professional bodies to source data and applied the concept of media capture to explore how the actions and reactions of media owners; institutional structures and constitutional provisions determine editorial autonomy. Generally, ownership influences are evident in Ghana's print media but the extent of influence is intense in the private than state media because the two have different ownership structures which informs the diversity of content and hence, their levels of media capture.

Keywords: *diversity, ownership, private media, state media, control, content.*

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Exploring Ownership Patterns: The Ghanaian Experience of Media Control and Editorial Autonomy

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Abstract- Over the years, media autonomy issues in Ghana have emphasized media-state power relations. However, the switch from military to democratic order in 1992 strengthen the autonomy of the media because it received constitutional backing that led to the proliferation of media firms. While these developments are physically evident, the role of owners in the management of their outlets and hence publication seem to occur in a 'black hole' which tends to frustrate the autonomy that the Ghanaian media welcomed. To unearth this phenomenon, the study purposively sampled fifteen experienced editors, senior reporters of the print and representatives of media regulatory and professional bodies to source data and applied the concept of media capture to explore how the actions and reactions of media owners; institutional structures and constitutional provisions determine editorial autonomy. Generally, ownership influences are evident in Ghana's print media but the extent of influence is intense in the private than state media because the two have different ownership structures which informs the diversity of content and hence, their levels of media capture.

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I. Introduction

The fourth republican constitution of Ghana liberalised the media sphere in 1992 and improved freedom of speech and media independence (Nyarko, Mensah & Owusu-Amoh, 2018). This made it possible for Ghanaians and non-Ghanaians who have the means of production to establish and own a media entity amid those already run by the government. The 1992 constitution stipulates in Article 162 (3) that:

> There shall be no impediments to the establishment of private press or media; and in particular, there shall be no law requiring any person to obtain a license as a prerequisite to the establishment or operation of a newspaper, journal or other media for mass communication or information
>
> [ ]
>
> Editors and publishers of newspapers and other institutions of the mass media shall not be subject to control or interference by government, nor shall they be penalised or harassed for their editorial opinions and views, or the content of their publications (Chapter 12).

These provisions revolutionised Ghana's media ecology and informed the unhindered growing number of media establishments. Amid this development, concerns have been raised about the infiltration of politics into the ownership equation and largely the newsroom which appear to impinge ethical practices. Though Chapter 12 states that every person has the right to establish a media firm, Karikari (2009) described as dangerous the pace at which politicians are constantly owning media houses and throwing ethics and professionalism to the wind in Ghana. Other seasoned journalists, the Media Foundations for West Africa (MFWA) and Professional bodies like Ghana Journalists Association GJA) have also expressed concern that political ownership of media outlets in Ghana represent one of the greatest threats to media freedom (Blay-Amihere, 2018; Agyeman, 2023; Acheampong, 2023; Dzakpata, 2021). Ownership in media gained more attention when the owner of *NET2 TV*, who is also a Member of Parliament (MP) for Assin Central, Kennedy Agyapong insulted his TV anchor during a live show for purported bad programming (Youtube, 2020). Again, the owner of *Angel TV* sacked its critical morning show anchor, Captain Smart, on grounds that the political administration is mounting pressure on him (the owner).

Paradoxically, the freedom to own media outlets has rather metamorphosed into concentrating media in fewer hands in Ghana and this action appears to impinge free editorial roles. According to the Media Ownership Monitor (MOM) report, the print has the maximum concentration of audience because the publications of the top four companies: *Daily Graphic*, *Ghanaian Times*, *Daily Guide*, *Business and Financial Times* together reach 95.9 percent of the readership and three out of four readers representing 72.1% prefers a state-owned newspaper for information or entertainment (Reporters Without Borders, 2017; UNESCO, 2023). Coupled with the upsurge in ethical lapses, the MFWA advocated that the National Media Commission (NMC) should publish the identities of media owners in Ghana (Adjei, 2016) which was subsequently released in the Global Media Registry (MOM, 2017). Beyond this initiative, media outlets are generally seen as opaque enterprises with respect to the actual role owners play in their establishments. While Hardy (2014) observed that media ownership is a "contested and congested" discipline, and controversy still hover around whose independence is being protected (p.79) because whereas the law supports owners to establish outlets

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freely, and shields editors from harassment by government for their publications, owners rather seem to suppress this freedom (Dohnanyi, 2003) inherently.

This work explores the patterns of ownership in Ghana's print media and evaluates the extent to which institutional structures of the media as defined by the constitution influence editorial freedom and its ethical implications. This study focuses on the print because they serve as the agenda-setting base of news in Ghana through the newspaper review shows on broadcast stations (Nyarko, 2016). The specific objectives are to identify the patterns of print media ownership, explore the impact of the constitutional and institutional structures on ownership control and examine their implications on content diversity and media capture.

II. Literature

a) *Print Media in Ghana: History, Ownership and Democratisation*

From its inception in 1822 in the Gold Coast, the press has been instrumental in the life of Ghana especially its advocacy towards the liberation struggle of the Gold Coast (Karikari, 2007). In 1930, the media system was liberalised for private ownership to thrive because illiteracy levels was high at the time and the press was city-centred. However, ownership at the time was subjected to the condition of submitting total circulation, paper title, office location and publisher's name to the Secretary of the Colony (Twumasi, 1981). To Bond (1997), the foregoing conditions enabled the colonial government to track critical papers leading the local press to question the legitimacy of the colonial regime to suppress press freedoms. To this end, the colonial regime begun to discourage the publication of these papers (Wilcox, 1975). After independence in 1957, Ghana's landscape was vibrant because the press that fought the liberation movement were operational ((Jones-Quartey, 1974). Nkrumah's government implemented a state information machinery that interlinked the Ministry of Information, Ghana News Agency (GNA), and his own *Guinea Press* Newspaper and the *Evening News* that exalted the president and his party. Moreover, the government acquired *Daily Graphic* and other newspapers as a state machinery for propaganda to unite the nation and for development (Hasty, 2005). From 1957, Ghana experienced three republics intertwined with multiplicities of coup-de-tats and military regimes (Nyarko, Mensah & Owusu-Amoh, 2018) where changes in government led to overnight overhaul of the editorial staff of the state-owned newspapers to match the ideological lens of the new administration (Hasty, 2005). Clearly, state monopoly of media resources was the norm at the time. Abdulai (2009) noted that the era before 1992 frown on dissenting views and occasionally led to assaults, detentions and even deaths.

The fourth republic took off in 1992 and marked a significant milestone in Ghana's democracy because the twelfth chapter of the constitution provided for media independence leading to the exponential increase of privately-owned outlets (Nyarko et al., 2018). To regulate the landscape, the 1992 constitution provided NMC [Act 449-(1993)] and the National Communications Authority (NCA) in 1996. The NMC is the highest regulator that registers and licenses print and other publications, promotes journalistic standards and ensure independence of the media including broadcasting in Ghana (AfriMap, 2007). Beyond these constitutionally-defined regulators; professional bodies and foundations also emerged in the media sector to regulate its members. These include Ghana independent Broadcasters Association (GIBA), Private Newspaper Publishers Association of Ghana (PRINPAG) and the MFWA among others. In 2019, the Right to Information (RTI) Act [Act 989] was promulgated to enforce freedom to access information (UNESCO, 2023). These liberalisation efforts saw Ghana improved on the world media freedom ranking for a while and thereafter worsened as follows: 2018 (23rd), 2019 (27th), 2020/2021 (30th), 2022 (60th) and 2023 (62nd) (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Thus, it is imperative to interrogate the issues that account for these changes from the perspective of ownership directives.

b) *Media Ownership in Africa*

The transitions to democracy in parts of Africa and the subsequent liberalisation of the media influenced ownership patterns. In 2007, Konrad Adenaur Foundation reported that growing concentration of the South African media is the biggest challenge to its media freedom (Lovaas, 2008). In Kenya, the Media Owners' Association intensified their call to monitor and regulate the media's tremendous and somewhat unchecked growth (Maina, 2014) due to its concentrations and subsequently control intent. Kanyiwedo (2013) defined media control as:

> The checks and controls of the media which is based on legal demands, the influence of proprietors, restrictions on what to publish or what not to publish, observance of the regulatory bodies' stipulations.

The foregoing controls seem to have prompted a renewed look at media ownership in Africa. Manor and Mkaouar (2023) explored Africa's media ownership in the age of digitisation and media performance and observe that owners can influence journalists, content and norms of the media. They encouraged media moguls to operate beyond informing, educating and entertaining to spearheading developmental agenda; avoiding media capture and concentrations in societies. They conclude that media ownership activities present both challenges and opportunities. Cagé and Mougin (2023) undertook a review of media ownership in Africa from the perspective of "Hidden Media Capture" and

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note that though liberalisation of media marked an important milestone across Africa, it has not propelled media freedom as expected. They conclude that private media outnumber state media in wide proportions in Africa, government continually interfere with media operations. Mabweazara, Muneri and Ndlovu (2023) applied patrimonialism to discuss media ownership patterns and control in sub-Saharan Africa and likened the supremacy inherent in patrimonialism to the political power and who, due to unfavourable politico-economy conditions in Africa, captures media outlets whose survival is derived from the political power itself. They note that media capture in sub-Sahara Africa is informed by legal, regulatory, financial and ownership tendencies. Shina (2023) delved into media ownership from the lens of economic precariousness and politics and their implications for strengthening democracy in Nigeria and note that economic constraints and political ownership of the media are two major factors that inhibit the social responsibility role of the media. Shina notes that many outlet focuses on profit making for survival hence deepening democratic culture is secondary to them. Dutta and Roy (2009) found that government's grip on the media emanate from its acquisition of essential infrastructure and distribution facilities of a privately-owned media house. In Egypt, party and other private papers also suffer the subsidy-challenge (Allam, 2023). Endong (2023) concluded that this unorthodox means of controlling media by government adversely impinge the process of democratisation in Cameroon. The government finds as a challenge: "the emergence and survival of a plurality of private broadcasters, which are neither its griots, and mass boys, nor its "megaphones" and town criers" (pp.173-74). Similarly, Ouassini and Ouassini (2023) found that the limited access to media under Gaddafi shaped the structure of contemporary media institutions along two political rival media camps, and note that continuous control of the media in Libya cannot coexist with democratic ideals. This reflects Curran's (2002) observation that such changes in the structure and ownership of media present a problem for the liberal tradition. Allam (2023) explored the connection between ownership and pluralism in Egypt and observes that the ownership structures are three-pronged and mixed between national, opposition and private systems where the government controls stocks in three major dailies: *Al-Ahram, Al Akhbar and Al Gomhuriya*. To Allam, three challenges confront the media market and pluralism: [i] political and economic power, [ii] legal challenges, and [iii] accumulated deficits of the public media organizations. From the foregoing, ownership issues present major hindrances to media autonomy in Africa hence the need to explore it from the institutional and constitutional structures of the print in Ghana.

III. Applicable Theory

Ownership and control occupies a critical aspect of the political economy of the media (PEM) and hence make 'media capture' an ideal concept to understand how the constitutionally-backed media liberalisation in Ghana influences ownership patterns, it impact on media freedoms and content diversity. Schiffrin (2018) defined media capture as a "situation in which governments or vested interests networked with politics control the media" (p.1033). By this, Schriffin observes that media capture is at work in a landscape whenever politico-economic elites conspire to undermine the freedom of the media. In another perspective, Stiglitz (2017) explained that media capture take place whenever one or more of the players who are the targets of media's watchdog role on behalf of society *captures* or *takes hostage* the media to render them incapable to perform their social function. Nyarko and Teer-Tomaselli (2018) identified politicians and corporates as dominant actors in media practice. Under this circumstance, ownership tendencies have been studied through media capture lens (Cagé & Mougin, 2023; Tsarwe & Mare, 2023; Mabweazara, et al., 2023). Having experimented different political systems with democratic and socialist undertones at different points in its history which influenced media ownership styles practiced; Ghana's print media lends itself to interrogation to ascertain ownership impacts in the fourth republic.

IV. Methodology

a) *Informants*

This study is based on a qualitative research approach because it permits a thick description of experiences of participants (Ulin, Robinson, Tolley & McNeil, 2002) with respect to a specific subject matter. By this, persons / entities who demonstrate in-depth mastering of the operations of the media generally and more specifically how the activities of print media owners in Ghana impact the running of their outlets. Fifteen (15) informants were purposively selected for interaction and they include persons who have trained as professional journalists (reporters, editors) and in active service and other participants; who at the time of this study, work in various capacities of professional and regulatory bodies (Berg 2001, 32) within the media fraternity in Ghana. The participants were drawn from two state-owned newspapers (editors $n=2$, senior reporters $n=4$) and two private-owned newspapers (editors $n=2$, senior reporters $n=4$) and representatives of media associations/bodies (professional [GJA] $n=2$; NMC $n=1$). These informants were engaged because the actions of media owners on their outlets generally appears to transcend editors, reporters and also seem to pose some challenges to regulatory and professional bodies. All the informants from mainstream media

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practice were males. Only one female from a regulatory body was engaged. This is because generally, the Ghanaian media landscape is male dominated (Media Ownership Monitor, 2017; Yeboah-Banin, Fofie, & Gadzekpo, 2020) and more essentially, the targeted ranks (editors and senior reporters) were males at the time of data gathering. In the end, media owners were excluded because they may not present the true reflection of their actions on their outlets.

b) Procedure

The participants were all adults so the decision to grant interviews was single-handedly determined by them after permissions were sought and granted by the four print outlets that the informants were affiliated. Official ethical clearance no. *HSS/1353/013M* was issued by the Center for Communication and Media Studies of the University of KwaZulu-Natal that ensured: (i) confidentiality and anonymity leading to the adoption of generic names 'Media Practitioner' (MP) 1 through to 15 [MP1-MP15], (ii) free entry and exit from the study, (iii) freedom to decline response to questions deemed uncomfortable, (iv) determination of the location of interaction if need be (v) frank sharing of views without any coercion, (vi) gatekeeper approval to conduct study among others. This study used semi-structured interviews because it permitted an unrestricted space for informants to share views reflecting the subject under investigation (Banyard & Grayson, 2000). Considering the fact that interview process can sometimes be time-consuming (Berg, 2001) and to ensure that boredom that comes with prolonged face-to-face interaction does not affect the richness of responses, the questions were briefly tailored to the main research objective and completed between 30-40 minutes per informant. The trustworthiness of data (Lincoln, 2002) for this study was ensured through: (i) audio-taping responses for precision, (ii) cross-checking transcribed text with the original audio-taped material and (iii) finally confirmed responses with respondents reachable.

c) Mode of Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse data. To Boyatzis (1998), TA is a framework to analyse classifications and present patterns that relate to the data under consideration. TA is ideal for this because it helped to examine different perspectives of informants, uncovering differences and sameness, and generating unexpected understandings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). The six-stage Braun and Clarke process are as follows: First, data familiarity was ensured where all transcribed text were organised into easy-to-read style and format, read and reread. Here, the researcher became conversant with the meaning of the data generally. Second, from the understanding garnered at stage one, the data was again organised into a systematic fashion in ways that enabled initial codes to be assigned to the text in line with the general and specific objectives of the study thereby making this process more theoretical than pure inductive. Third, with a broad array of meaning inherent in the text, a thorough exploration of it enabled the researcher to identify themes that comprised many codes and speaks directly and indirectly to the research questions the study aims to address. Fourth, to ensure that each theme has enough data to advance a strong argument, existing themes at stage three were reexamined, reviewed and modified in ways that pulled and merged related subthemes to align with the major themes. Fifth, themes were finally refine and labeled with a clear definition of what each stands for. In the end, the analysis of result centred around three main themes: state ownership and control, private ownership and control and content diversity.

V. Results

Generally, media control by owners is evident within the newspaper landscape in Ghana and tends to impact editorial freedom of practitioners negatively. However, structurally, the influence of ownership on the operations of state-owned newspapers is less compared to the privately-owned outlets and these directly tend to influence their respective contents.

a) State Ownership and Control

State-owned newspapers in Ghana operate through legally-created institutional structures as laid down in the 1992 constitution with the aim of checking external controls mainly from government as an owner. In line with this, an informant notes: *Daily Graphic is a limited liability company owned by the state and has been paying dividends annually to the state through the government. The owners are the people of Ghana and they have vested authority in the NMC who appoints the Board of Directors on behalf of Ghanaians. Ordinarily, in private companies, shareholders elect the Board but in the case of the media, the NMC represents the shareholders so they elect the members in consultation with the president [of Ghana], but the primary responsibility lies with the NMC. That is how the system operates (MP1).* Here, MP1 clarified the centrality of the state in the ownership of the state media and defined its ownership as 'all-inclusive' in structure, and hence labels the *Daily Graphic* newspaper as an outlet fully owned by the over 30 million citizens of Ghana. By this, the constitution created the NMC with the responsibility to appoint members of the board of the state media. The Commission sources its legitimacy to appoint the board from its constitutional composition drawn from major sections of the Ghanaian public. While by law the appointment of board members to the state media is the NMC's mandate, the ruling authority is not left out completely. Largely, the operations and autonomy of the state media is informed and governed by the constitution. Generally, funding has been a major

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economic hindrance on the autonomy of the media but in the Ghanaian experience, the state media, *Daily Graphic* generates revenue and even pays proceeds to the people of Ghana yearly. Similarly, another participant reiterated: *In fact, I will say that no influences happen because today, the government has absolutely no influence on the [state] media especially if the media decides to be adversarial. [In] the public media, editors are not appointed by the government but rather by the board in consultation with the NMC that is independent of government. The Managing Directors are directly appointed by the NMC in consultation with the government so the government has no influence at all (MP7).* MP7 maintained that the structure of the state media is entrenched in the constitution so the government has no room to control the management of the state outlets and they can be confrontational in their publications sometimes. This is because, first, government who is the custodian of the state media has no hand in the appointment of the editors who man the various state publishing houses. Second, the operations of the NMC are autonomous of government. Third, board members of the state media recruit their own editors through talks with the NMC and finally, the Commission appoints Managing Directors to head the state media through mere talks with the president. Overall, the role of the government in the operational structures of the state media is negligible and hence influence is non-existent according to MP7.

In a mixed view, MP15 observed that 'human factors' sometimes weaken the institutional structures of the state media in a comment: *In terms of influence, every one of us, if you get to know that an unfavourable story is going to be published about you and you have got the means of influencing [the publication], you will influence it. The difference is the authority and the power. Fortunately for the state media, the constitution provides for their insulation from governmental control therefore it is not the president who appoints the editor where the implications about 'who pays the piper calls the tune' [surfaces]. If anything at all, it cannot be a direct interference because the 'decision to publish' or 'not to publish' firmly rests with the editors and if they fail, they cannot blame anybody because people who can influence may try to influence somehow (MP15).* MP15 explained that naturally people resent negative news about them and given the chance, they will thwart it. Constitutionally, the state media are safeguarded from controls of the ruling authority by stripping of them power to appoint the management team of its own media firms. This curtailed the situation where the government, clearly influences news content because the editors cannot be coerced to publish or shelve a story. To this informant, the extreme scenario may be an *indirect* meddling from officialdom. Thus, the management structures governing the state media are so clearly stipulated and defined in law that any external control should be blamed on editors who wield power to determine what comes out as news. In the end, the power of the government to control the state media is suppressed considerable. Furthermore, MP14 showed the interplay between party politics and state media operations in a comment: *In the print, there is no direct interference whether from the ruling National Patriotic Party [NPP] or opposition National Democratic Congress [NDC]. If other parties come [to power], it will remain unchanged. Daily Graphic has nothing to do with government even though it is state-owned. The Graphic boss is accountable to the NMC. Let's face it, if I am the MD of Daily Graphic, there should be no fear that the government can sack me. So, we must be fair to the system but [the challenge] is the human beings who operate the system so there could be some personal issues. For instance, I don't see anything wrong with Tony Blair calling Murdock if, in 'News of the World', something unfavourable was said about my party so talk to your editor. The important thing is that you have given that man [editor] the freedom to choose (MP14).* From the foregoing, MP14 shows that governments are inseparable from the political parties they represent and note that none of them has successfully influenced the state print *directly* due to the constitutionality of its operations. To this informant, this trend will continue even in the event of transitions in government. The structural separation between print outlets and their owner occurs in a fashion where no editor should feel threatened of dismissal from the job. The Managing Director (MD) is answerable to the NMC instead of the government. This epitomises the democratic outlook of the fourth republic where actual ownership power of the state media resides with 'the people'. Thus, a breakdown of these structures is attributed to the human and personal compromises by the personnel who man the media. However, MP14 also sees a follow-up call from government to express displeasure about a story published about his administration as a 'normal practice' because the baseline is that media is given the room to decide 'what is news'. Additionally, MP8 puts the preceding view into perspective in a statement that: *On ownership, government may influence but not always. Government points out to editors some of the headlines that displease them. This happens through phone calls occasionally and this makes the paper cautious especially with issues of presidency and policy. The paper in such circumstances employs the inverted style (MP 8).* This seems to suggest that irrespective of the safeguards implemented, government wields some controlling powers deployed through telephoning editors behind the scene about issues published. Ironically, for the government and/or political figures to engage editors and 'pick and choose' articles in the newspaper that they are unhappy or otherwise about tends to undermine the constitutional provisions to protect editorial autonomy. The effect of this 'behind-the scene'

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government-editor interaction makes the newspaper wary when commenting on sensitive areas of governance and this is not healthy for building a resilient media system. These subtle instances of influence by the political class to undermine the autonomy of media culminates into capturing the media to propagate their own agenda. Juxtaposing the relations between media and finance, MP5 commented: *I cannot wholeheartedly say that the state media operate fully independent[ly] once they derive their source of income from government, although they take adverts among others. They are still controlled in some way by government. Sometimes you read some state-owned media news and realise that this is indeed a government's hand. This affects their operations because sometimes the paper cannot even do a critique of things that happen in government that are not right (MP5).* MP5 illustrates that the state media are not completely autonomous of its owner because they are financed and/or earn their income from there irrespective of the fact that those media outlets also accrue advertising and other revenue streams. To this informant, two factors point to the owner-influenced line of argument. First, occasionally some state media carry stories that reflect government agendas and second, state media sometimes lack the impetus to scrutinise wrongdoing in government. Thus, whereas direct control of state-owned newspapers is difficult due to the legal structures provided by the constitution, human and personal factors make indirect control possible. The implication is that the media practitioners whose freedom is being safeguarded to ensure ethical practice rather tend to pave way for owner influences to thrive despite the legal backing.

b) Private Ownership and Control

The print media section in Ghana is run and owned by a huge private sector and many factors explain the motives for their creation and more significantly, how their operational structures inform the autonomy of practitioners. First, an informant states: *In the private media usually the level of transparency is less compared to the state-owned media, although they strive to be transparent. For instance, though some private media have Boards [of Directors], they are often side-lined. Some private media owners in Ghana even pay less than the minimum wage which is a problem. Private owners also do influence and determine the content. If an owner feels a story does not advance his/her cause, it is dropped (MP12)*. This illustrates that structurally, the management of private print firms is an individual-owner function and not based on the constitutional provisions. As a result, some of them does not even compose Board of Directors to run their outlets. Even where they exist, some owners do not incorporate their decisions which tends to negate democratising managerial practices. By this, the private sector of Ghana's print media generally lack openness but to MP12, efforts are being made to overcome it. While media workers receive a daily wage which is below the approved national level; content published in the landscape tends to meet the personal desires of the owner and any material contrary to that objective is shelved. These descriptions appear to label the private owner as somewhat dictatorial in executing its functions. Second, an informant reiterate that: *Within the confines of private newspaper operations, the contents and agenda set tend to be an extension of the owner. The owners have a great influence on what the content of the newspaper is. I remember an instance where partisan and personal interests fuel the operations of newspapers here. So to that extent, the individual interests of the proprietor or publisher is usually paramount and I have observed that this is what is put out as public interest material (MP3)*. Here, MP3 seems to illustrate that the autonomy of journalists is heavily determined by their role as the producers of content in the outlets they are affiliated. Under the current circumstance, the news production function of journalists is inseparable from ownership decisions in the running of the firm, hence the free hands of journalists to work is brought under subjection. This suggests that the agenda and subsequently news churned out in the landscape is not based on their possible significance to society but it tends to be owner-determined. This epitomises that those who own the means of production have control over what eventually becomes news. Recounting the aims for establishing private print houses, a comment reveals that: *Owners have various reasons for establishing a newspaper. Some may establish it for profit-making - purely private enterprise, some for politics. They want to use it to champion their political aspirations but clearly you cannot discard the interests of your owner. It is like a car owner has engaged you as a driver to drive the car to safety. If the owner constantly influences you as a professional driver, you would be in danger, if I think I cannot be compelled to do what is against my professional ethics; the extreme is that I cannot be compelled to drive (MP4)*. This informant (MP4) explains that two major motives propel persons to enter into private print media production. First, commercial and business investment to recoup high returns. Second, owners deploy their outlets to advance their political ambitions. Beyond these motives, the desires of the owner is paramount and cannot be ignored under any circumstance. Here, there seem to be 'master says' or 'master-servant' relations at play likened to commands from car owner to his driver. To MP4, the only way to resist ownership pressure is to quit the job to uphold ethics of the journalism profession. However, the difficulty that seems to come with editors quitting job to preserve integrity of the media profession is the unfavourable Ghanaian economic conditions that compel practitioners to work under owners who pay salaries below the national wage

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(as expressed by MP12) and disregard professional ethics. Drawing the line between personal desires of owners and ideologies of media outlets, this is evident: *Every media owner has his/her own agenda. At least every institution is supposed to have a strategic plan so in Ghana and certainly elsewhere, all media houses have their own editorial policies and agenda. As much as possible, they are all executing their agenda to the best of their abilities (MP13)*. On the basis that all firms have direction of purpose, so are media outlets. By this, MP13 clarifies that private media owners have their philosophies that gave birth to their investments and subsequently those determine their institutional and management structures, editorial strategies and guidelines. On this tangent, it is believed that all private media establishments have lived to expectation with respect to sticking to their set ideologies. Furthermore, the issue of ownership ideology is put into perspective by an informant as follows: *Basically, influences depend on the philosophy of the owners to promote their ideas, principles and values. So, that determine what you [the editor] carry and it does not mean direct influence but, if the owners do not give free hand to media men to operate, definitely influence of content will abound. For example, Public Agenda is owned by Integrated Social Development Centre [ISODEC], an NGO and stands for sustainable development, giving voice to the marginalised and good governance. These things guide them [the newspaper] about how they package their news. Usually the paper talks about rule of law, rights promotion, fair trade, and social justice. It's all about some paradigm within which they operate. You yourself [the journalist] cannot go outside because it will be inconsistent with the philosophy and values of the owners (MP10)*. Here, beyond recognising that owners attempt to stifle the free will of journalists in determining the news undermines media autonomy, MP10 notes that the ideological and philosophical framework that define a media outlet draw clear-cut confines within which practitioners should report. To the informant, this determination of the purpose for establishing a media house by its owners should not be misconstrued as a direct control of content. Fundamentally, the economic power of owning media resources enable owners to advance two outcomes: [i] ideology that serves public interest and [ii] ideology that projects owner's personal interests. Beyond political and business owners, NGOs also own and run media outlets in the private sector to advance the cause of social and democratic developments.

c) Content Diversity

In media practice, diversity of content is an essential democratic element because it encapsulates assortment of views, opinions and ideas to meet the information needs of audiences and more significantly, makes media a consensus building platform. However, the publication of diverse content is informed by the constitutional and institutional structures that shape the role of owners in content creation. In line with this, the study records that: *Looking at the state media, it has one owner, and represented by the government in power. The ownership of state newspapers allows broad issues ranging from politics, environment, women, gender, children and all segments including rural reporting. They have metro and regional pages that cover aspects of human life. But in the private press, most of them are owned by active politicians or their allies so they concentrate mostly on biased politics. If it favours my party or an official of my party, then they write well. If it is against my opponent, then they paint them negative thereby sacrificing some vital aspects of society or human life like the environment. Some of these papers have few pages for gender or women's issues, children and other developmental matters. So for the private papers, politics carry the day (MP9)*. This informant explains that the all-inclusive ownership nature of the state media where the government is just the custodian of that resource, the state media is seen to have a *single* owner that permits coverage of essential subjects to cover all sectors of the national economy. With this, the state media publishes local and regional contents in ways that ensure that the multi-ethnic Ghanaian owners are well served. However, the individualistic-ownership nature of the private media sector creates the grounds for different people to own media and hence get dominated by 'political proprietors'. This informs the politically-skewed reportage by the private sector at the expense of equally essential issues of society. The political papers are usually partial and take sides in public debates to favour the partisan leanings of their proprietors and attacks their rivals in ways that reflect the 'ideological square concept'. Thus, many private papers focus on politics at the expense of development journalism and hence they lack news diversity. Showing specifically the extent of 'political diversity' of content, another informant notes that: *Political owners influence media in terms of diversity of political opinion. Beyond that, I don't see dramatic differences in terms of variety of social, cultural and ideological expressions. There is lack of plurality of content. The only diversity which is very healthy comes from two sources: the different languages that media use because of their location so if you are in Axim, Bolga or Kukurantumi [cities in Ghana], you get your radio news in your language. Second, you may also find some level of diversity in opinions in terms of political party affiliates (MP11).* MP11 observes that while the private print environment generally lack pluralism, political owners tend to influence and publish 'diversity of political views'. According to this informant, two major content diversity is identified in the Ghanaian private print environment. First, political orientation and partisan affiliation-based diversity where diverse views and

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opinions come from different supporters of specific partisan group. Second, the media location-based diversity is where content reaches inhabitants in their language/dialect but this holds only for radio. Furthermore, MP3 explains that content diversity is also driven by the degree of information needs of consumers in a comment: *[The] majority of news consumers are out there for the news and for public interests material, and for them, depending on what ideological or partisan leaning they have, they tend to align themselves with publications of media outlets that serve them [with] information that suits such leaning. But then, the human nature is such that our quest for information is almost insatiable and so consumers consume the information that is presented to them (MP3)*. According to the informant, the media landscape is composed of people with different political affiliations and this determines the sort of material they consume. Thus, media consumers tilt towards media outlets that hold the same philosophy as them and will feed them with news that satisfy their most pressing need. This implies that the private media capitalises on the consumer's addiction for their political content to superimpose one-sided material. These patterns show that the Ghanaian media is polarised along political party lines. Finally, the study sums it up that: *Owners can always influence the content because "he, who pays the piper, calls the tune". [S]he has used his [or her] money to establish the paper so you cannot do anything against his / [her] interests* (MP4).

VI. Discussion / Conclusion

The political economy landscape of Ghana's print media is governed by the 1992 constitution which provides the legal framework that defines the operational functions of the state media so that irrespective of the political party in power, the structures of ownership remain and continue. By this, media capture is experienced at different levels along different ownership patterns identified in Ghana. These are state/citizen ownership and private ownership with extensions into political/partisan, commercial/business, family and philanthropic (NGOs). In comparison to the private media, media capture is negligible in the state media in Ghana because the two main avenues of capturing and undermining the autonomy of the state media is not available to the custodian political owner. First, government lacks the 'controlling power' because the constitution of Ghana confers appointments and oversight responsibility of the state media on the 18-member civil-composed regulator (NMC). This strengthens the effectiveness of the citizen-centred ownership to safeguard media freedom. As a result, regulatory bodies become significant to media ownership democratisation because they set the rules (Manor & Mkaouar, 2023). Second, the growing financial strength of the state media especially *Daily Graphic* which has diversified into media and non-media ventures (Nyarko. 2023) makes the state print not fully dependent financially on the central government because it generates its own revenue and even pay proceeds to the citizens of Ghana thereby aiding its growing autonomous status. This escapes the state media from falling into the suppressive trap of the government. Though appointment to the state media is the key responsibility of the regulator, consultation of Ghana's president on this matter, may give the government some leeway to indirectly control the state media. As a result, occasionally, pro-government agenda is set and media fails to critique vital issues of government (Nyarko & Teer-Tomaselli, 2018). However, by Ghana's constitutional provision, the job of the editor of the state media is secured to determine 'what is news' and can be critical and contentious on governance issues. With this, succumbing to self-censorship due to human and personal sentiments, some of which are expressed through calls by officialdom about unfavourable headlines is the editor's blame. This trend contrasts with the assertion that generally government fully controls the state media (Djankov et al., 2001).

Beyond the 1992 constitution liberalising Ghana's media landscape to enable 'everyone' to freely own media outlet, safeguarding the editors of the private media from their owners is bleak. Unlike the state media, the owners of private media, who may be businessmen and/or an active politicians still hold on to their ownership powers to single-handedly determine the operational structure of their outlets. This encapsulates the decision to whether compose a Board, incorporate their suggestions into the running of the outlet or ignore them, recruit and fire editors at any time among others. Structurally, transparency is not encouraged in the private sector and owner's personal desires and ideology govern the running of the outlet in ways synonymous with dictatorial administration. This description shows that the private sector of Ghana's media has been captured by political and other interest-seeking parties like businesses. For instance, in Nigeria, Shina (2023) observed that strengthening democratic culture is not primary to many media outlets and the focus of journalists is given to proft making. In light of this, Dohnanyi (2003) questioned whose freedom is being protected and conclude that the growth of media privatisation particularly newspapers represented an escape from state suppression only to worsen their plight under private operations. Martin (1992) concurred. This is because private editors are not free to determine 'what is news' and execute owner's directives. Nevertheless, trained journalists who intend to challenge this unethical practice are constrained by the unfavourable economic conditions in the Ghanaian media where owners pay lower wages. In this vein,

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Skovsgaard (2015) maintains that the fundamental reason for media's disputed professional autonomy is that, compared to medical and legal professions among others, journalists are more dependent on the firm they work for. Hallin and Mancini (2004) reiterated that in the media profession, practitioners can only interact with clients (news consumers) and serve them only through the machinery provided by the news firm (owner). Ironically, within the private sector are NGO-owned print outlets which Sjøvaag (2019) terms as 'civil society ownership'. Clearly, while their philosophies should be adhered to and in principle cannot necessarily be seen as an imposition by owners, editors should be given the freedom to publish stories under those agenda. Nyarko et al. (2020) noted that the NGO or philanthro-journalism model was to safeguard the private media, it is somewhat becoming a threat to freedom in the event of balancing fundraising vis-à-vis agenda-setting. In the end, the ownership structure of the state media is more democratised than the private which is somewhat authoritarian in scope and captures media.

The diversity of content in Ghana depends on the ownership patterns and their respective operational structures. The constitutionally-defined hierarchy of the state media enable them to publish diverse content to meet the diverse needs of its owners who are the citizens of Ghana in different languages and locations. McQuail (2005) concluded that news content should encapsulate diverse sections of society: culture, politics, ethnicity, regions, and religion among others. By this, Ross (1999) observed that it is not utterly an unhealthy situation for the state to own media because its publication reaches locations where no one else [private media] will go. On the other hand, the sole proprietor ownership structure of private print suppresses content diversity. Politically, while Djankov et al. (2001) concluded that private media furnish voters with diverse content, the Ghanaian experience shows that the political-orientation of many private media leads them to confine their context of 'political diversity' to the different views expressed by their loyal party sympathisers and some of them do not even read beyond their affiliated outlets. Many of such outlets report partially, engage in 'information war' which epitomises the ideological square syndrome at the expense of all-round developmental agenda. Stiglitz (2017) found that in most developing nations, "print and broadcast media are often captured through the ownership of powerful plutocrats affliated with political elites who limit the scope of political debate" (p.59). Thus, the media's failure to publish alternate news misdirect the national focus of the media to defined groups (Gecau, 1996). Fundamentally, the drive to discourage concentration of media ownership to enhance content diversity (Picard & Zotto 2015; Lovaas 2008) is somewhat defeated by the same private media which was introduced to propel that initiative.

The stabilisation of democracy in Ghana in 1992 after a prolonged military regimes generally de-monopolised the media environment allowing both state and private media to coexist. The practice of replacing the editorial ranks of the state media after regime changes since 1957 did not continue to the fourth republic. This is because whether NPP or NDC is in power, the constitutional provisions for the media remains unchanged and the job of editors of the state media is secured without direct influences. This contrasts with the direct influences of the state media by governments after democratic transitions in Zimbabwe (Mabweazara et al., 2003) and Libya (Ouassini & Ouassini, 2023). This illustrates that the 'elite continuity concept' is evident in Zimbabwe, Libya and many African countries because their media sectors are engulfed with the same political and corporate elites of the pre-democracy era. Cagé and Mougin (2023) for instance observed that the 1990 monopolisation shifts from public to liberal media ownership environment have not enhanced media freedom and the objective to achieve independent media is far fetch. This epitomises the *change without change* (Sparks, 2008) in media landscapes. In Ghana's experience of ownership, the effects of media capture and elite continuity concepts cannot be generalised across the state and private media sectors because they are impacted differently due to their ownership structures.

VII. Recommendations

With the gradual loss of control of the central government over the state media, the private media has become an avenue of influence by political and corporate owners. The study proposes that future media ownership appraisals should be initiated along distinct private and state ownership lines instead of a generalised view due to the differences in their ownership patterns and structures. Second, the NMC should initiate steps to lobby legislators to review the 1992 constitution to tackle: [i] media concentration by setting a limit above which an 'individual' cannot own additional outlet, [ii] categories of person who can own media to check increasing political ownership, [iii] spell out some liberal modalities to insulate editors from their private owners on the basis that media is the fourth realm. Third, the NMC should regularly engage the Private Newspaper Publishers' Association of Ghana (PRINPAG) on media freedom matters and observance of ethical journalism. Fourth, the NMC should use its Complaint Settlement Committee to encourage the private media to pay the legal national minimum wage for practitioners. Fifth, the NMC, as a constitutional body and regulator should collaborate with key stakeholders like GJA to define some operational mechanisms at the registration stage to encourage private media to constitute Boards in ways that introduce some internal checks and balances over agenda-setting and to ensure

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that they operate within their mandate. Sixth, the attention of editors of the state media should be drawn to their independence of the government and hence their job security to enable them work without fear or favour. Seventh, like the *Daily Graphic* that has diversified into media and non-media ventures, other public media should also work towards achieving financial sustainability without commercialising its mandate to mitigate their full reliance on government funding.

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