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Making Space in the Public Media Functional for Inter-cultural Dialogue and Social Cohesion

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**Abstract**

*The paper focuses on the mass media as a forum for inter-cultural dialogue and social cohesion with a view to teasing out some critical lessons/episodes which demonstrate the feasibility of the application of some models of cultural programming for journalists engaged and interested in promoting national development efforts. Through a review of relevant literature, the paper sets the scene for exploring how space in the media could be made more functionally relevant to discourses on inter-cultural dialogue and social cohesion. It is within the thinking of this paper that the dynamics of the way of life of Ghanaians, in particular, and Africans, in general, is such that any discourse on culture, rites and rituals, social norms and values would be incomplete without elements of religion being infused into in one way or the other. Melkote & Steves (2001) point out that religion has a crucial role in fostering peace, universal brotherhood and the promotion of a culture of human solidarity. The essence of religion for believers is experienced in the form of discourse. We talk about our beliefs, listen to sermons, interpret symbols, read the discourse of sacred tradition as we interact with one another. In this connection, religion can provide journalists with vital resources to promote understanding, cooperation and respect among cultures.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I argue that the world benefits from a rich variety of cultural identities through responsible 'meaning making' in the public media.*

**Keywords:** *cultural identities, human dignity, religion, interdependence, public media*

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<sup>1</sup> From 'Interpretation of Cultures,' by Geertz C., 1977, which provides an elaborate discussion on forms of discourses in different cultures.

## **I. Introduction**

The right of cultural expression is a relevant factor for the development of every nation. It is therefore not surprising that the major human rights charters, beginning with the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the series of human right conventions of the United Nations over the past 40 years, have made significant and steady progress in clarifying the definition of human rights and getting the support of national governments (Linden, 1998). In Ghana, Article 26 (1) of the 1992 Constitution states: “Every person is entitled to enjoy, practice, profess, maintain and promote any culture, language, tradition or religion subject to the provisions of the constitution.”

Journalists can draw their strength, independence and sense of empowerment and responsibility from the provisions of these important documents. These human right provisions enjoin journalists as well citizens to be active participants in the process of ensuring that different cultural groups have the freedom to contribute to justice, peace and harmony in every country. The paper discusses how powerful cultural institutions, such as the media, have the responsibility to ensure that different groups have the chance to express their cultures. Given the influence of the media, it can be wrongfully exploited to create tension and mayhem. Despite the potential of the media as an important ally in national development efforts, yet its misuse can create communal violence, ethnic conflicts and hatred. It is in view of this that this review was conducted. The paper draws heavily on secondary data as a source for reviewing how media practitioners can meaningfully create space in favour of inter-cultural and peaceful social intercourse. It tries to locate concrete examples of how some community radio stations in Ghana are leading the process of encouraging and sustaining an interactive and dialogical

communication, which engenders people's attitudes towards participating in activities that foster social cohesion, inclusiveness and peaceful co-existence.

## **II. A Responsible Press Needs to Promote Social Harmony**

Many parts of the world, especially the developing countries, are experiencing major civil conflicts. In Africa, there are the sad stories of Sierra Leone and Liberia, where because of politics, tribes were pitted against tribes. The Ivory Coast, once a fortress of stability and hope in West Africa, experienced a chaotic situation because of petty ethnic politics. These social disorders discourage investments and economic development as well as the delivery of education and health care services. In such situations, civil society is rendered powerless and the concentration of political power seems justifiable.

The following questions which I pose are important. Do members of the media and government institutions take initiatives to question and raise healthy public debates about certain ideologies, which are inimical to human dignity, social justice and peaceful co-existence? Are journalists courageous enough to directly question certain power relationships and cultural prejudices that create discontent, discriminations, rancor and division among the population? Or do they simply toe the line of those who wield power in society because of possible economic and political gains? Media reportage that fosters a sense of uniting people of different cultural background to interact and discuss common problems, which impede their development, are more often than not likely to galvanize and rally people to initiate and complete development programmes in their communities.

The press serves an essential function in the society by accepting and fulfilling certain obligations. These obligations to society are more likely to be met when journalists are

committed to setting high professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, fairness and balance in their work. The media as a whole need to be pluralistic and reflect the diversity of their society by giving access to various viewpoints and to rights of reply. According to Denning (1981):

The Freedom of the Press is extolled as one of the greatest bulwarks of liberty. It is entrenched in the constitutions of the world. But it is often misunderstood. I will first say what it does not mean. It does not mean the press is free to ruin a reputation or to break a confidence or to pollute the course of justice or to do anything that is unlawful. It means that there should be no censorship. No restraint should be placed on the press as to what they should publish. Not by a licensing system. Nor by executive direction. Nor by court injunction. It means the press should be free from ... previous restraint or... 'prior restraint.' The press is not restrained in advance from publishing whatever it thinks right to publish. It can publish whatever it chooses to publish. But it does so at its own risk. It can publish and be damned. Afterwards, after publication, if the press has done anything unlawful, they can be dealt with by the courts. If they should offend by interfering in the course of justice, they can be punished in the proceedings for contempt of court. If they damage the reputation of innocent people, by telling untruths or making unfair comments, they can be made liable in damages. But always afterwards. Never beforehand. Never by previous restraint.

Hence, it is a gross dereliction of duty when journalists provoke situations that may lead to crime, to civil disorder or that offend any people in society because of their faith, ethnic or racial background.

The 1994 Rwandan genocide is an example in which the reckless use of the media wreaked heavy damage on an entire nation and cast a pall on the image of the media. However, on the international scene, questions about the effects of hateful propaganda and whether journalists should exercise self-restraint or even self-censorship in dangerous moments are topical. Every civilized person would find the hate speeches and acts of terrorism of Osama bin Laden and members of Al-Qaeda against civilians objectionable. However, after the terrible events of September 11, the manner in which the press covered events related to terrorism has become questionable.

Considering the fact that there are larger value issues involved, did the American media or *Al-Jazeera* Television use self-restraint or self-censorship in reports on terrorism? From these examples, it would not be an exaggeration to point out that disinterested journalism now seems to be on the decline. Journalists need to maintain their independence from subtle manipulations from any quarters. Journalists should resist the temptation of helping unscrupulous institutions that incite tension and misunderstanding among cultural groups for short-term gains. In the long run, such practices are self-defeating. They deny the possibility of initiating dialogues to amicably resolve serious cultural problems. However, journalists with highly developed sense of intercultural communication competence could effectively use dialogue as a strategic means of positively influencing “communication in intercultural space.”

According to Arasaratnam (2014), wider literature beyond communication studies uses the label “intercultural competence” which Spitzberg and Chagnon (2011) define as, “the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent cognitive, affective, and behavioural orientations to the

world” (p. 7). Arasaratnam (2011) describes a competent intercultural communicator as someone who is “conversant in navigating communication in intercultural spaces” (p. viii), defining an intercultural space in turn as “a symbolic representation of an instance when communication between individuals is affected by cultural differences in a way that would not have been noteworthy in the absence of these differences” (p. viii). These definitions indicate that the relevance of intercultural communication competence is situated in the presence of noteworthy differences between people, and the extent to which one is able to communicatively engage with these differences effectively and appropriately.

According to Agustín (2012), dialogue is not considered to be an immediate solution but rather a measure that “will benefit peace and international stability in the long term, including with respect to the threat of terrorism” (CoE, 2005). The Council of Europe (CoE) has developed a discourse opposed to the dominant one (clash between cultures). The goal is to promote a diplomatic way of resolving conflicts (i.e., the CoE is against military solutions) and not to stigmatize entire civilizations (i.e., the CoE is against the opposition between Islam and the West).

### **III. Media as Space for the ‘Meaning-Making’ of Cultural Groups**

The immediate causes of major civil conflicts are often attributed to political and economic factors. However, the reality is that the root causes of these conflicts are often deep-seated cultural problems that have been smoldering, unchecked over the years. Political and economic systems originate from different cultural contexts and are logically cultural products. Therefore, these underlying factors could be described in cultural terms. That being the case, it becomes

understandable why culture is often characterized as an arena of struggle for empowerment (Servaes, 1999, pp. 59-76).

Every cultural group tries not only to maintain its cultural identity but also to preserve and project its cultural patrimony into the future. Journalists can facilitate this process when they regard their primary day-to-day contribution to the wider society as that of cultural actors; that is, as producers and messengers of the meaning that is crucial for the promotion of dialogue and the exchange of values among different cultural groups (Schudson, 2003, p. 24). In this process, different cultural groups struggle to find space in the media to use as a forum for empowering themselves and promoting their values. The manifestations of culture found in the local and international media underline peoples' intimate relationship to their respective cultural identities and traditions.

Some cultural trends are regarded as superficial; materialism for example. However, this begs the question: Within the context of cultural diversity, who decides which cultural values are the best? It should be noted that the human person constitutes the centerpiece of culture. Nevertheless, do the images the media produce give primacy to the dignity of the person? Or rather do they defer to the dehumanized world of human products that now define post-modern culture? The tendencies towards increasing press concentration and globalization is true for all countries. Cultural power is gradually being concentrated in the hands of a few individuals or groups of persons who own major communication corporations. In this development, minority cultural groups find space in the press to express their cultural values only with difficulty. It is

this trend towards ‘the loss of the values of local cultures in favour of a misunderstood homogenization,’<sup>2</sup> promoted by the cultural industries, that need to be questioned.

The ideal situation is a nation in which different cultural-linguistic groups are allowed the freedom to maintain their cultural identity in a context of growing national unity. South Africa seems to have set foot on this path, a beginning that is worthy of emulation. The media policy of a nation is particularly important because it can help people see that the richness of cultural diversity is to the advantage of all cultural groups (White, 1999). Despite the importance of media policy for a democratic society, yet no country in Africa has a holistic and integrated communication policy. The general trend is to have pieces of regulations, laws and guidelines on electronic media, print media, film, news agencies, and telecommunication, communication training and government information (Boafo, 1986).

The need for healthy interaction and beneficial relationships among cultures demands that all those cultural prejudices and stereotypes that hinder this process be discarded. Communal ties in African society are strong and sometimes are carried into the political spheres. The professional journalist in this context is found at the edge of the boundary between commitments to promoting values for the common good and showing loyalty to a political group that possibly shares his or her socio-cultural orientations. Despite some historical and cultural factors that have, to some extent, influenced the difficult position of African journalists, it is possible for the press to contribute to the cohesion of society through appropriate representation and expression

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<sup>2</sup>Cardinal Renato Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, highlighted this point as one of the negative effects of globalization in a speech published on March 30, 2004 ([www.zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).



of diversity if it has a clear sense of the normative ethical values of community, which are vital to the fostering of strong civil society in Africa.

#### **IV. Some Challenges of Cultural and Religious Sharing**

It is important to keep in mind that the influence of news is cultural. This is because the press operates within culture and is obliged to use cultural symbols. However, this does not give license to use the power of the press to denigrate different cultural groups. Instead these symbols – be they words, pictures, cartoons or images, in a nutshell ‘cultural texts’ – must be used with discretion and circumspection in order to promote the good of the public. For example, ethnocentric labels, such as *extra-comunitario* (a non-community member), are still being used in some sections of international press to demeaningly refer to foreigners from the so-called third world countries. Can such practices really foster understanding, cultural sharing, respect and tolerance among people from different cultural backgrounds? In a world where economic borders are disappearing, people from different cultural backgrounds must necessarily interact in their legitimate desire to realize their human potential and in the search for meaning in their lives.

A relevant condition for understanding a culture that is different from one’s own is the need to enter into an interactive communication process in which all preconceived ideas and stereotypes are abandoned, making it possible to register that which a mental scheme cannot understand. Understanding another culture is an experience filled with surprises in which one finds a worldview and an ethos very different from one’s own (Cissna & Anderson, 1994). That is why it is important to note that cultural dialogue is not just “curiosity” towards another culture. Rather, it is about having a real esteem for another culture; that is, recognizing aspects of a different culture as valid for your own culture and for other cultures of the world.

Discourses about the promotion of inter-cultural dialogue should not gloss over religion because the identities of religions are shaped by culture. Even though it is necessary to uphold our own cultural identities, this needs to be done with some balance and flexibility. Religion is one area of life in which people sometimes lose their sense of good judgment and adopt extreme measures to defend their beliefs for selfish interests. Globalization seems to have brought the great religions into direct confrontation. Can people of the Hindu tradition in India come to recognize that Christians, Muslims, and those who practice other faiths are making a significant contribution to the cultural and political development of India? Can those of African traditional religions come to realize that other religious presences are making an important contribution to the cultural, political and economic development of Africa? Is it possible for those of a Christian or secular tradition in the West to come to realize that the Muslim presence makes a significant contribution to the cultural development of Western countries? There are no easy answers to these questions.<sup>3</sup> To borrow an image from St. Gregory the Great, journalists need to have large noses to distinguish good and bad odours in the cultures that surround us. In this way, we can affirm life-giving values and reject life-denying vales in our respective cultures (Gallagher, 2003). The Catholic Church exhorts Christians to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions (Vatican II, *Guadium et spes*, 1965 & Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, 1965). In such initiatives, Christians can discover the workings of God in other religions as well as elements that are true and good for humanity.

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<sup>3</sup> These questions are adaptations from Robert A. White (2004), Major Issues in the Study of Media, Religion and Culture. In Horsfield P., Hess M. and Medrano A. (Eds.), *Belief in Media, Cultural Perspectives on Media and Christianity*, (pp. 197-217). UK: Ashgate Pub. Ltd.

The world would become a better place if there is a greater understanding of how different major cultural groups come to appreciate the benefit of different groups for one another and for the benefit of society as a whole. Journalists' role is not to narrow their responsibilities to the public by focusing our attention on particular religions to which they owe allegiance or which serve their economic interests.

### **V. Some Guidelines for the Dialogue Process among Cultures**

Given the challenges of cultural and religious pluralism of today, I believe the fundamental function of journalists should be that of building bridges across which people may reach out and understand one another. According to the Council of Europe (2008), intercultural dialogue allows us to prevent ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural divides. It enables us to move forward together and to deal with our different identities constructively and democratically on the basis of shared universal values. However, journalists are far too busy doing this on an ad hoc day-to-day basis than planning and executing any grand design of influencing the course of history (Priestland, 1979). Communication means the co-creation and the sharing of meaning. In order to actualize this description to enable journalists to promote inter-cultural dialogue, it is necessary to enter into the narrative organization of culture. To deal with the complex cultural diversity of today's pluralism, journalists need a deeper understanding of the cultural worlds of others. The following guidelines<sup>4</sup> may be useful in this effort:

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Hess, M. (2004). *The Bible and popular cultures: Engaging sacred text in a world of others*, pp. 4-13.

- Recognizing the other as having greater insight into some aspects of human experience that could be used to reveal our own hidden dimensions.
- ‘Getting the other straight;’ that is, entering into the internal logic of the intentional world constructed by the other in order to understand their strategies of ‘meaning-making.’
- Deconstructing and going beyond the other; that is, attempting to see the rationality of the world of the other, given their circumstances. In the mirror of ‘difference’ we may be able to recognize some dehumanizing features embedded in the structures of our own culture and bring them out for public discussion. (Such attitudes can promote ‘empathy’ – attempting to feel like the natives of others cultures. We can invest the characters in stories published in the media with appropriate values, capable of inviting people to identify with these characters).

The Council of Europe’s White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue (2008) emphasizes that intercultural dialogue can only thrive if certain preconditions are met. To advance intercultural dialogue, the White Paper argues, the democratic governance of cultural diversity should be adapted in many aspects; democratic citizenship and participation should be strengthened; intercultural competences should be taught and learned; spaces for intercultural dialogue should be created and widened; and intercultural dialogue should be taken to the international level. Journalists who recognize the relevance of developing intercultural competences are more likely to appreciate and share the rich experiences of the cultures they encounter. Operating with this kind of cultural mindset can help the media to explain problematic issues, and present them in a balanced, truthful, informative and compassionate manner.

## **VI. Relevance of Culture for Mediated Communication**

Ghana has more than fifty different ethnic groups with diverse cultural practices and values. In fact, similar situations exist in some African countries. These diversities are expressions of the beauty of the Ghanaian cultural heritage. Cultural diversity has been defined as the quality of having diverse or different cultures as opposed to a monoculture. It also means having different cultures that give respect to one another's difference and living in harmony (Akatey, 2014). In its rich diversity, culture has intrinsic value for development as well as social cohesion and peaceful co-existence. Awedoba (2005) notes that in outlining its views on culture and the relevance of the concept for development, the UNESCO comments as follows, "Cultural values are continually being re-interpreted and reshaped in response to coping and adjusting to new needs and conditions resulting from social and economic changes" (p. 8).

According to the UNESCO publication on the Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity (2001), the acceptance and recognition of cultural diversity by individuals and societies particularly through the interactive use of the media are conducive to building dialogue among civilizations and cultures, as well as fostering respect and mutual understanding. This statement by the UNESCO indirectly highlights mass media as an emerging development partner, particularly in developing countries and on the global scene. Functional media that are capable of exercising vigilance, resulting in accountable governance, and the promotion of cultural diversity and responsible citizenship can translate positive attitudes into greater productivity and better living standards (Kuu-ire, 2009).

In the midst of cultural diversity, the need for mass media to design specific programmes/genres as strategic frameworks to regularly bring people from diverse cultural and socio-cultural backgrounds together to hold discussions on sensitive and topical issues of

communal interest cannot be over-emphasised. In Ghana, some community radio stations are leading the process of encouraging and sustaining an interactive and dialogical communication, which engenders people's attitudes towards participating in activities that foster social cohesion and peaceful co-existence. Writing on "introducing dialogue for peace-building and conflict resolution," Naaikuur and Diedong (2014), note that international media have always been accused of creating a haunting image for Africa as a place replete with wars and conflicts, among other malaises. However, the reality is that many African communities are experiencing an increasing amount of violence and insecurity which grows out of the struggle for land and other resources. The phenomenon of land disputes and attempts being made to tackle the problem is highlighted in a study by Paaga and Dandeebo (2014). Overall, the socio-economic advancement of the conflict is the sufferer.

Africans always relied on traditional conflict resolution mechanisms such as dialogue circles to resolve conflicts and to maintain peace. CR has proven to be a strong new platform for dialogue and conflict resolution in some African communities (Alumuku, 2006; Jallof, 2012). Recognising community radio as a vital means of social communications the organization, Search for Common Ground (SFCG) has identified important effects a programme run in Liberia since 2007 and in Sierra Leon since 2000, which SFCG had supported with public information, dialogue, community outreach and capacity building through radio projects like news shows, soap operas, and community outreach projects. As a result, SFCG's evaluation concluded that overall CR continued to play a strong role in local peace-building. Specifically, programming that directly addressed issues related to community inclusiveness and non-violent conflict resolution had meaningful impact across locations. CR stations were also noted as active agents

in defusing local conflict and preventing backsliding into violence (SFCG 2009, cited in Jallo, 2012).

Specifically in Ghana, CR is proving to be one of the major instruments for peace because of the method of inviting people of different points of view to find consensus on how to solve common problems. *Radio Peace* began in a region of tribal conflict, violent gangs, and struggle over land and a host of other disputes. The station began by bringing together the chiefs of the area to make a pledge of peace, and then return to make progress reports. The station promotes work with unemployed youth who are prone to violence. A community festival every year with all the different clans and ethnic groups celebrates their unity in diversity. The station finds ways of helping the poor and the often desperate marginalized, and it has become a focal point for the socio-economic development of the region (Alumuku, 2004).

*Radio Peace* has an early warning system to report any illegal activity or violence so that this can be settled. Management of the station recounted that one day a young man came from a village known as Apam claiming that the chief of the village had sold a piece of land belonging to the community for eight thousand Ghana Cedis, about twelve thousand one hundred and sixty US dollars. He did not want to tell the story through the radio but indicated that out of anger he wanted to bomb the village. The station quickly informed the security agencies who conducted an intensive investigation to the allegation. The move forestalled the likely creation of a communal conflict (Diedong & Naaikur, 2012).

CR in Ghana has also been involved in promoting dialogue among religions. *Radio Progress* is well known for the promotion of religious understanding among various Christian denominations and between Christians and Muslims in the Upper West Region. Even though the

origins of the station can be traced to the Catholic Church, the station has maintained an open door policy on religious broadcasting. Equal opportunity is given to all religious groups to broadcast religious programmes reflecting their faiths. Muslims in particular are overtly appreciative for being allowed to freely use the radio every Friday for their worship programme. “Muslims have always wondered aloud about the generosity of the Catholic Church and question whether their Muslim norms would allow the same generosity if they had been granted the license themselves” (Alumuku, 2006, p. 205). This “evangelization mission” of Radio Progress has contributed to the reputation of the Upper West Region as the most peaceful in Ghana. Radio Progress has gone a step further to give a tangible meaning to social inclusiveness by programming for persons with disability. Such persons who suffer stigmatisation hardly have voices in media landscape (Diedong & Donkor, 2014). Behind such success stories of cultural programmes, which promote unity in diversity, is the ability, willingness of journalists to go beyond mere reportage of cultural events such as festivals and durbars to focus on issues that draw people together to interact, critically question, and find solutions to the root cause of problems that divide them.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Our approach to communication should primarily enhance and not diminish our innate human dignity. Governments need to enact and/or implement national media policies that empower every culture or religion to freely express their values and traditions for the mutual benefit of all cultures. If such policies are well implemented, questionable cultural practices, which are still being practiced in some parts of Ghana and other places would no longer enslave people (Modey, 2014). In countries where such injurious cultural practices still hold sway, it is



recommended that nation-wide scientific studies are conducted to find out the causes and solicit proposals from people on how the problem could best be addressed.

The media need to support the right to cultural enrichment by giving access to all cultural groups to express themselves. Journalists should confront the challenge of ensuring that the human person is always at the centre of the different values that these cultures claim to manifest. The media should continually be open to the world and discern the current interests and thoughts of the diverse cultures that enable people to co-exist with one another peacefully in their publications.

In this process, the good public communicator is the one committed to take initiatives to participate in public discussions, the one who encourages and impartially defends human rights and the right of all cultural groups to freely express themselves (Diedong, 2008; White, 2000). People are thus helped to learn from others while at the same time affirming their own cultural and religious convictions. It should be stressed that what is required of journalists of today is to be persons of conscience. Journalists ought to be sensitive to the ethical dimensions of the diverse cultures. They should be promoters of values among the diversity of cultures that edify and give hope and meaning for our existence, and above all cherish the values that transcend the limitedness of culture. In so doing, what Mahatma Ghandi once said should be borne in mind: “I open my windows, so that other cultures can enter freely in, but not so wide that my things and myself are blown out.”

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