

Propaganda: The Media and Ghana's 2020 Presidential Election Petition

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ABSTRACT: *This article examines the extent to which media bias is featured in the reportage of Ghana's 2020 Presidential Election Petition. The Presidential Election Petition was filed by the main candidate of the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC), John Dramani Mahama who challenged the declaration by the Electoral Commission (EC) that President Nana Addo Dankwah Akufo Addo of the incumbent New Patriotic Party (NPP) won the election. Using a purposive sampling approach focusing on the print media, this paper assesses how three local newspapers-the NDC aligned WhatsApp news online, the NPP aligned Daily Statesman online and State-sponsored Daily Graphic online covered the event and the extent to which media bias played in the coverage of the election petition. The study found that propaganda and media bias featured prominently in the coverage of the election petition and constituted a substantial risk of undermining press freedom and the country's growing democracy. The study recommends, amongst others, training for journalists on how to detect bias and propaganda statements from story actors to obviate the potential of publishing propaganda-driven statements that could threaten the peace and stability of the country.*

KEY WORDS: propaganda, media bias, presidential elections, petition

INTRODUCTION

Ghana experienced two Presidential Election Petitions within eight years spanning from 2012 to 2020. This was owing to disagreement between the two leading political parties, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) over the conduct of the elections and declarations of the results by the Electoral Commission (EC). The first Presidential Election Petition was filed in 2012 by NPP candidate and opposition leader at the time, Nana Addo Dankwah Akufo Addo (henceforth Akufo Addo). He prayed the Supreme Court to annul some results from 26,000 polling stations due to alleged over-voting and

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consequently declare him President. He lost the Presidential Election Petition to the NDC candidate, John Dramani Mahama who was also the sitting President at the time.

Eight years on, the two candidates again met at the Supreme Court to determine the winner of the 2020 Presidential Election. The 2020 Presidential Election Petition was filed by the NDC's candidate, John Dramani Mahama (henceforth John Mahama) who challenged the declaration of the Presidential Election results, citing widespread irregularities, including vote padding (Peace FM online.com, 12/30, 2020). The NDC also accused the EC of falsifying figures to jostle the numbers to favour the NPP. The EC argued that the changes were due to computational and mathematical errors made during the collation of results (Daily Statesman online, 01/12, 2021). The petitioner, John Mahama in challenging the validity of the results, prayed the court to declare that President Akufo Addo of the NPP did not win the Presidential election. He also prayed the court to order a re-run between him and President Akufo Addo (ibid).

According to the Electoral Commission, President Akufo-Addo was validly re-elected with 51.59% of the votes against 47.36% for his opponent, John Mahama of the main opposition NDC, (The Africa Report, 03/4, 2021). In a unanimous decision the Supreme Court held that President Akufo Addo was validly elected and therefore dismissed John Mahama's application (ibid).The Election Petition hearing that lasted for three months, was transmitted live on national television. Spokespersons for the appellant and the defendants addressed the press after every court hearing where they summarised their perspectives on the court proceedings. Media reportage on the hearing of the petition generated interesting public debate, including media ethics and fair reportage by the Ghanaian media.

This study is about media bias and propoganda in the media coverage of the Ghana 2020 Presidential Election Petition with the phenomenon that media bias and propoganda played a preponderant part in the reportage of the Ghana 2020 Presidential Election Petition.

The study assesses media bias and how it influenced the use of media propoganda by the NPP and the NDC and how that affected peace journalism in the reportage of the Ghana 2020 Presidential Election Petition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The mass media have greatly influenced modern elections because of the media's critical role throughout the electoral process. The media's role in general election campaigns allows voters to hear politicians defend their records, criticise their opponents and propose future policies (Kavanagh, 1997).

The media serve as a watchdog by scrutinising the electoral process, acting as platforms for campaigns and providing a forum for election-related public debate and discussion. The media also provide opportunities for ordinary voters to make their voices heard, thereby helping them to influence other voters and political agendas (IDEA, 2015).

Kavanagh (1997) stresses that in the Western world, the critical role of the media in an election process lies within the bosom of one of three groups of actors in the election process, notably the media-the others being the voters and the politicians. The media, he argues, have

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development -UK transformed their relationship with political parties and the voters as the voters rely on the media for knowledge and impression of politics and politicians depend on the media to communicate with voters (1997). Much debate centres on the role of the media in setting the election agenda by shaping the campaign's major themes and issues (ibid).

In Africa, the role of the media in elections is even more critical because of the violence that often characterises some of its elections since the (re-) introduction of multi-party democracy in sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1990s (Kovacs and Bjarnesen, 2018). According to Burchard (2015), more than half of African states endured electoral violence in the post-Cold War period. In Kenya in 2007, Zimbabwe in 2008 and Côte d'Ivoire in 2010, large-scale killings, fear and insecurity were recorded during elections. Again, isolated violent clashes, harassment and intimidation occurred in countries like Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal, Uganda, Liberia, Equatorial Guinea, the Gambia, Guinea, Madagascar and Sierra Leone, (Straus and Taylor, 2012) cited in (Kovacs and Bjarnesen, 2018). In such circumstances, the media's role in drawing the world's attention to intercession cannot be overemphasised. However, evidence suggests that the African media have often been compelled to practise self-censorship because of election-related violence, thus denying the public the needed information during the election process. In the lead-up to the 2013 polls in Kenya, the media engaged in self-censorship to avoid inflaming passions (IDEA, 2015). It was widely believed that the Kenyan media's decision to practise self-censorship was informed by the 2007 post-election inter-ethnic violence that ravaged the country and left more than 1,000 people dead and 700,000 displaced (Ibid).

In Ghana, election violence is no exception. However, in comparative terms, it is less severe than in many other African countries (Agbelengor, 2016), (Jockers, Kohnert and Nugent, 2009) cited in (Amankwah, 2013). Like in other democracies, the media in Ghana have often provided a platform for politicians and voters to interact before, during and after every election. They also provide a channel for the Electoral Commission to educate voters on the election process by providing a platform for debate on election processes, voter education and other political campaign-related matters. The Ghanaian media have since the year 2000 been partnering with the Institute for Economic Affairs in Ghana to organise Presidential debates for Presidential and Vice-Presidential candidates of major political parties in the country. During the 2016 elections, the media collaborated with the West Africa Network for Peace Building to embark on a 'fact-check' programme where claims by political party leaders were investigated to establish the veracity or otherwise of their statements (Mantas, 2020). This was intended to check disinformation on the part of political leaders and ensure voters did not make uninformed choices. In the 2020 elections, a network of 35 news outlets across the country collaborated with Ghanafact, a fact-checking organisation (Mantas, 2020) to verify what the politicians said.

Whereas some African countries have had to resort to violence to settle election disputes, others in Africa have had to resort to the judicial system to settle election disputes. A case in point is Ghana's 2020 Presidential Election dispute between the governing NPP and the opposition NDC.

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The election dispute attracted widespread publicity as it was telecasted live on national television. While covering the election dispute, a section of the Ghanaian media often acted in a manner not only injurious to peace, but also a dent in their professionalism, raising ethical issues about their reportages that call for scrutiny.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Media bias

Media bias is classified into content and decision-making bias (Entman, 2010). Content bias is detected by demonstrating patterns of slant that seek to promote support for some interests or power-seeking actors (Entman, 2006). According to Entman, scholars can only claim bias in research when slant consistently appears and ‘pervades the most influential media outlet’ (Entman, 2010). Decision making bias, the other form of bias, is where journalists allow their ideologies to guide the news they produce.

Entman’s decision-making bias treatise is supported by the propaganda model of Herman and Chomsky (1988) dubbed ‘*Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media*. It scrutinizes mass media as an instrument of power that mobilises power for special interests to dominate state and private action (1988). It argues that the political and economic elite together with the media use propaganda to manufacture consent to control the thoughts of vast majority of members in a democratic society (ibid).

Decision making bias of the state media as espoused by Entman (2010), is supported by Jennifer Hasty’s study of political culture and the media in Ghana from the late 1990s which concluded that state media in Ghana function as ‘state information apparatus’ and ideologically inclined towards the governing party and that state media journalists often publish news that makes the government look good (Hasky, 2005).

Hackett, (1984)’s treatise on media bias examines the balance between competing viewpoints and reality distortion as significant determinants of news bias. He defines bias as the intrusion of subjective opinion by the reporter or news organisation into a factual account.

McQuail (1977) settles on bias through explicit argument and compilation of arguments that favour one side, the use of fact and arguments without any explicit statement of reference, that colours on the otherwise factual report and conveys an implicit but unblemished value judgment. News bias according to McQuail also includes the omission of points favouring one side in an otherwise straight news reportage (Ibid).

Peace Journalism

Biased reportage can aggravate conflicts. Therefore, Galtung (1986, 1998) coined the concept of peace journalism (PJ) and suggested it replaced biased reporting in war and conflict situations. This followed Galtung and Meri Ruge’s analysis on the Norwegian media’s newsworthiness which concluded that threshold, frequency, negativity, unexpectedness and unambiguity dominated the news values (Abdul-Nabi, 2015).

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Galtung (1986, 1998) coined peace journalism (PJ) to replace biased reporting in conflict situations. He argues that journalists' reportage should be people-centred and solution-centred by focusing on peace and truth (Abdul Nabi, 2015).

Lynch and McGoldrick (2015, 5) argue that peace journalism is 'when editors and reporters make choices – of what stories to report, and how to report them – that create opportunities for society to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict'.

Biased reportage leads to reality distortion; distortion of reality facilitates propaganda as demonstrated below.

Propaganda

Propaganda dates back about two and a half centuries ago and traced to Sun-tzu's 'The Art of War' but was used in a planned and methodical manner against the media during World War 1 (1914-1918), (Knightley, 2004). It continued to dominate war and conflict discussions and was used prominently in the mid-1950s during the Vietnam War and later in the 1990s during the Gulf Wars.

Propaganda attempts to influence mass public opinion systematically and deliberately in favour of the aims of the sender (Snow, 2010). This means propaganda works on the minds of the receiver of information to suit the objectives of the message's sender. It aims at influencing peoples' behaviours using half-truths, lies, deception and selective truths.

Jowett and O'Donnell, (2012) see propaganda as communication that attempts to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist. One purpose of propaganda is to maintain the legitimacy of the institution that it represents, thus ensuring the legitimacy of its activities (Ibid).

Propaganda functions with persuasion as both are built on the foundation of rhetoric (Soules, 2015). Zollmann (2017) views propaganda as forming of texts and opinions in support of interests and through media and non-media mediated means with the intention of producing public support and pertinent action.

These concepts of propaganda, media bias and peace journalism are critical and constitute a framework for this discussion in detecting media bias and propaganda in Ghana's 2020 Presidential Election Petition reporting.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was adopted for this study, using secondary data from three online newspapers; State-sponsored *Daily Graphic online*, privately-owned *Daily Statesman online* affiliated to the ruling NPP and another privately-owned online newspaper, the *WhatsApp News that* is aligned to the NDC.

Forty-two (42) complex and hard news stories were sampled to tease out exemplars of propaganda and media bias in the reportage of the Ghana 2020 Presidential election petition. Fourteen (14) stories each were selected from the three newspapers and the reason for their

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selection was due to the fact that they generated the techniques of propaganda and media bias deemed appropriate for the study.

Purposive sampling was also employed for the study. Known also as subjective sampling, purposive sampling is the selection of important rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 2015).

Stratified sampling was used to compare the three media houses reportage of the election petition to illustrate and establish variations along with techniques of propaganda and media bias. Critical case sampling approach was utilised to sample information from the publications that generated the concepts, techniques and strategies of propaganda and media bias that are under investigation in this study. These were duly labelled as lack of peace journalism, exaggeration and imbalance and name calling in the Ghana 2020 Presidential Election Petition coverage.

Every story chosen for the study constituted a unit of analyses, and where stories had multiple subjects, the one with the main subject was considered while the rest were ignored. The media outlets were chosen because they generated better examples of media bias and propaganda concepts and techniques.

Even though not the entire archived stories chosen, the 42 stories gathered on the Ghana 2020 Presidential election petition arguably constituted a fairly representative sample for assessing Ghana's selected newspapers' reportage of the 2020 Presidential Election Petition. The selection is grounded in Saiful (2007) who argues that a sample size more than 30 is suitable for a study.

Media texts were coded thematically. They were first examined and coded to detect propaganda and media bias patterns and then categorised into NDC propaganda, NPP propaganda and media bias. Again, it was subcategorised into types of media bias such as imbalance, peace-insensitive journalism and exaggeration and name calling by the NDC and the NPP as a propaganda technique.

DISCUSSIONS ON MAJOR FINDINGS

The findings show that media coverage of the Ghana 2020 Presidential Election Petition recorded imbalances in story presentation in the three newspapers sampled. The table below shows that *WhatsApp News online* demonstrated more biases than the *Daily Graphic* online and *The Daily Statesman online*, registering 50% as against 42% and 7.14% by the *Daily Statesman* and the *Daily Graphic* respectively. The following table is a quantitative analysis of how the lack of balance was recorded.

Table 1

Use of imbalance by the *Daily Graphic online*, *WhatsApp News online* and the *Daily Statesman online*.

Code	Imbalance	Percentage
WhatsApp News	07	50% Out of 14 stories
Daily Statesman	06	42.8% Out of 14 stories
Daily Graphic	01	7.14% Out of 14 stories

Source-author's construction

Analysis on the lack of balance in the coverage of the *Daily Graphic online*, *WhatsApp news online* and the *Daily Statesman online*

McQuail (1977) sees media bias as explicit arguments and compilation of arguments favouring one side (against the other) while Entman (2010) argues that detecting bias requires demonstrating patterns of slant that regularly promote support for some interests or actors who seek power and disapproval of their opponents. *WhatsApp News* coverage of the Presidential petition was tilted towards favouring the NDC who were the petitioners. This is exemplified in its several reportages of allegations of bias against the Electoral Commission of Ghana and the Supreme Court without giving them space to respond to those allegations. For instance, in its March 2, 2021, edition, while reporting on a statement by the NDC calling on its supporters to remain calm as they await the Supreme Court judgment on the petition, the paper noted that a tally of the results of all the 12 Presidential candidates in that election yielded a total of 100.3% of total valid votes. Describing it as a 'monumental faux pas', the paper said the Electoral Commission (EC) 'sought to correct the blunder and in the process exhibited a comedy of errors' resulting in six different tallies for the Presidential election results.

The same allegation is contained in its January 11, 2021, edition where it claimed that 'the EC changed its own declared results seven times to jostle the numbers to fit its declaration'. The EC, the paper added 'dubiously rationalised this number-cooking, saying it will not materially change the election result'. These allegations were published without reference to the EC's explanation that the errors were occasioned by computational and mathematical errors made during the collation of results.

The paper also published several allegations of bias against the Supreme Court, including one by a spokesperson of the petitioner in its February 17, 2021 edition, without publishing a response from the apex court. It again suggested in its February 23, 2021 edition that the apex court was losing credibility in its ruling against the petitioner's motions for interrogatories without getting the court's side of the story to explain why the NDC was severally denied the interrogatories. This compilation of arguments against the EC and the Supreme Court and favouring the NDC demonstrate slant and thus bias as argued by McQuail (1977).

Out of the 14 stories sampled for the study the paper did not reference the five issues set out by the Supreme Court to determine the petition. That this omission is biased is grounded not only in McQuail (1977) thesis on omission and bias, but also in the *Washington Post's* guide to reporters that a story is biased when 'it omits facts of major importance or significance' because 'fairness includes relevance'. The five issues were amongst others; whether or not the

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development -UK petition discloses any cause of action, whether or not the second respondent (Akufo Addo) met the Article 63 (3) threshold of the 1992 Constitution, which states that a presidential candidate must obtain more than 50 per cent of the total valid votes cast to be declared as President-elect; and whether or not the second respondent (Akufo Addo) still met the Article 63(3) of the 1992 threshold by the exclusion or inclusion of the Techiman South constituency Presidential election results. These issues cannot arguably be said to be irrelevant. The paper again recorded imbalance by concentrating on the arguments by the petitioner in all its sampled publications to the neglect of the respondents' responses that were treated tangentially throughout the sampled publications.

This imbalance denied its readers the opportunity not only to know the issues set out by the Supreme Court for the determination of the petition but also the respondents' responses to the petitioner's case. Arguably, under such a circumstance, readers of *WhatsApp News* having been privy only to the contents of the petitioner's case, could read biases in the ruling of the Supreme Court when it did not favour the petitioner.

The *Daily Statesman* which recorded nearly 43 per cent of the imbalance also devoted much space recycling responses of the E.C. and President Akufo Addo to former President Mahama's petition. Eight out of the 14 stories sampled contained President Akufo Addo's responses to former President Mahama's petition, while portions of the petition itself was published on only four occasions. The paper's decision to de-concentrate on the petitioner's case in its reportages is a clear demonstration of bias grounded in McQuail (1977) who argues that media bias includes explicit argument and compilation of argument favouring one side (against the other). The paper also interviewed President Akufo Addo's legal team members including, Fatimatu Abubakar and Kojo Oppong Nkrumah in its January 12, 2021 edition and Frank Davis in its February 2, 2021 edition who criticised the petition without giving the NDC lawyers the same opportunity. This constituted a substantial risk of convincing its readers that the petitioner had a weak case ahead of the determination of the petition by the Supreme Court.

The *Daily Graphic online* recorded the least imbalance, gave the petitioner and the respondents equal publicity in their cases, and did not recycle either the petitioner's case or the respondents' case as the *Daily Statesman online*. Where the paper referred to their cases in its February 17, 2021 issue, *the Daily Graphic online* gave the petitioner and the respondents' three paragraphs each arguably concentrated on relevant issues. This gesture conforms to the *Washington Post's* guide that a fair story should not omit facts of major importance. The paper, however recorded an imbalance in its publication of March 1, 2021, where the judiciary warned the media to be circumspect in their reportage of the court proceedings. While reporting the warning from the judiciary, the paper failed to get a response from the media or the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) yet it was quick to detail the warnings of the judiciary to the media in its story on the media response to the judiciary. The paper also published the full statement of the GJA but failed to publish the full statement of the judiciary. This lack of a balance is, arguably, a demonstration of slant and can situate in Hackett, (1984) that lack of balance between competing viewpoints constitutes bias.

Table 2

Use of Exaggeration by the *Daily Graphic online*, *WhatsApp News online* and the *Daily Statesman online*.

The findings show that the *WhatsApp News online* was more biased in exaggeration followed by the *Daily Statesman online* and the *Daily Graphic online*. The table below shows a quantitative analyses on how exaggeration was recorded by these news organisations.

Code	Exaggeration	Percentage
WhatsApp News Online	11	79%
Daily Statesman Online	07	50 %
Daily Graphic Online	03	21%

Source-author's construction

Analysis on the use of exaggeration by the *Daily Graphic online*, *WhatsApp news online* and the *Daily Statesman online*

The *WhatsApp News* was particularly biased against two institutions of the state, conspicuously;-the Electoral Commission (EC) and the Supreme Court (SC).

For instance, in its February 2, 2021 publication, the paper wrote about the Supreme Court's decision to uphold the EC's argument not to give some documents on the elections to the NDC. It highlighted that 'the Supreme court in a rather bizarre decision has urged the EC (on) to keep the contentious source documents a secret from the petitioner'. The paper again emphasised 'this order is coming despite suspicions that the Supreme Court will throw out the petition which questions the most dubious election declaration in the history of Ghana's democracy' (March 2, 2010). Other expressions like 'launched into a flurry of insinuations against the witness of John Mahama (the petitioner) ...' (February 4, 2021), 'Following in a now well-established pattern of dismissing every application by John Mahama...' (February 23, 2021) amongst others were opinions expressed by the paper and portrayed a value judgment on the part of the paper against the Supreme Court as it sought to suggest that the apex court was biased against the petitioner. These slanted mediated texts portrayed value judgment on the part of the paper and thus biased. These align with observations in McQuail (1977) who argues that the use of argument which camouflages otherwise factual report and conveys an implicit but explicit value judgment and the use of fact and arguments without any explicit statement of reference, constitute bias.

Reporting about the Electoral Commission, the paper referred to the EC's changing figures that '...shortly after the monumental faux pas, the EC sought to correct the blunder and, in the process, exhibited a comedy of errors resulting in six different tallies...' (March 2, 2021). It again reported that 'The EC dubiously rationalised this number-cooking, saying it was not intended to 'materially change' the election result (January 11, 2020). With particular reference to Jean Adukwei Mensah, Ghana's Electoral Commissioner's refusal to mount the witness box, the paper noted that she '...has shrewdly succeeded in outsmarting every move...' by lawyers for the petitioner to get her to mount the witness box. (February 12, 2021). Imageries like 'monumental faux pas', 'dubiously rationalised number cooking' and 'shrewdly succeeded' were opinions expressed by the paper. These are suggestive pieces of evidence of

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development -UK bias grounded in McQuail (1977). It can also fit into Hackett's, (1984) definition of news bias as the intrusion of subjective opinion by the reporter or news organization into what is purportedly a factual account, including the distortion of reality as the main determinant of news bias

The *Daily Statesman online* also recorded some slanted mediated texts, especially against the petitioner. It wrote for instance, that the petitioner, former President Mahama 'refused to file his statement as ordered by the court...' (January 25, 2020) and that 'the NDC attacked the court's decision' regarding the dismissal of interrogatories (January 21, 2021). The paper again described the petitioner's key witness Johnson Asiedu Nketia as a '... momentarily disoriented witness...' (February 2, 2021). Again, it said the former president knew he had lost the election and was only trying to 'massage the disappointment of NDC supporters' (December 14, 2021). In its February 4, 2021 edition, the paper alleged that 'the NDC is baying after the blood of the EC chair, who is an accomplished citizen... even before she entered the position...' Expressions like 'refused' 'momentarily disoriented' 'baying after the blood' and 'massage the disappointment of NDC supporters', are value judgment on the part of the paper as they were opinions expressed by the paper and thus constitute bias as argued by McQuail (1977) and Hackett (1984).

The Daily Graphic online recorded three noticeable biases in terms of exaggeration out of the 14 stories sampled for the study. While reporting the celebration of the victory of President Akufo Addo by his lawyers, the paper noted the 'spontaneous bursts into the singing of Methodist Hymn 74' (March 5, 2021). The paper also reports how the defendants were 'attacking the substance' of the petition' (January 9, 2021) and how John Mahama 'attacked the ruling' on dismissing of one of his applications (February 17, 2021). 'Spontaneous bursts', 'attacked the ruling' and 'attacking the substance' were expressions used by the paper and thus biased as argued by Hackett (1984) and McQuail (1977). These expressions had implications for peace journalism as they did not encourage nonviolent responses to the political conflict (Lynch and McGoldrick (2015).

Table 3

Use of Peace Insensitive Journalism by the *Daily Graphic online*, *WhatsApp News online* and the *Daily Statesman online*.

The slanted mediated texts as recorded below by the *WhatsApp News Online* and *The Daily Statesman online* posed a threat to peace journalism. The *WhatsApp News Online* recorded 64 percent of peace insensitive journalism as against the *Daily Statesman Online* that recorded 29 percent. Below is a quantitative analyses of Peace insensitive Journalism recorded by the news organisations.

Code	Lack of Peace Journalism	Percentage
WhatsApp News Online	09	64%
Daily Statesman Online	04	29%
Daily Graphic Online	1	7%

Source-author's construction

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**Analysis on lack of Peace Journalism in the news coverage of the *Daily Graphic online*,
WhatsApp news online and the *Daily Statesman online***

Peace journalism is ‘when editors and reporters make choices – of what stories to report, and how to report them – that create opportunities for society at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict’ (Lynch and McGoldrick, 2015). Value-laden expressions like ‘...despite suspicions that the Supreme Court will throw out the petition...’, ‘Following in a now well-established pattern of dismissing every application by John Mahama...’ and ‘...the Supreme Court in a rather bizarre decision has urged the EC on to keep the contentious source documents a secret from the petitioner’, by the *WhatsApp News* suggested bias on the part of the Supreme Court that was trusted by the petitioner and supporters of the NDC to deliver justice. This did not encourage peace journalism as it arguably constituted a substantial risk of influencing a rejection of the court verdict by the petitioner and his supporters on the grounds of unfair judgement.

The *Daily Statesman online* was also guilty of peace-insensitive journalism. Expressions like John Mahama ‘refused to file his statement as ordered by the court...’ and ‘the NDC attacked the court’s decision’ regarding the dismissal of interrogatories portrayed the petitioner and the NDC as non-conformists to the rules of engagement at the Supreme Court. Again ‘baying after the blood of the EC chair’ and ‘massage the disappointment of NDC supporters’ were peace-insensitive journalism as they suggested that the NDC had no case and was bent on implicating the EC just to satisfy their supporters.

The *Daily Graphic online* was manifestly less biased in peace-insensitive journalism in all 14 publications sampled for this study. The only manifest value-laden expression that was peace-insensitive was John Mahama ‘attacked the ruling’ which suggested the petitioner was aggressive towards the Supreme Court. Insignificant as it may appear in numbers, it exposed the paper’s implicit bias towards the petitioner as it portrayed him as a violent litigant. The use of propaganda by the NDC and the NPP.

Table 4

Propaganda like media bias featured in the Ghana 2020 Presidential Election Petition even though to a lesser extent. The NDC and the NPP both engaged in propaganda through name-calling technique to secure favourable media coverage.

Code	Propaganda	Percentage
NDC	7	50%
NPP	9	64%

Source-author’s construction

Analysis on the use of propaganda by the NDC and the NPP

Name-calling is when a speaker labels a person negatively hoping the person will be rejected by the audience based on the negative labelling, instead of considering available evidence (Harb, 2011).

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The NDC whose presidential candidate, John Mahama was the petitioner engaged in name-calling against the Electoral Commission led by its chairperson, Jean Mensah. In a communique it said:

The NDC will on its part, stop at nothing to rid the Jean Mensah-led Electoral Commission of its partisan biases and prejudices, and ensure transparency and fairness in national elections' (WhatsApp News online, March 2, 2021).

Amongst other allegations, the party again accused Jean Mensah of declaring Akufo Addo president because he appointed her as EC chair and also because she had familiar relationship with the President's wife (WhatsApp News, February 2, 2021). 'Partisan biases' 'prejudices' and the fact that Jean Mensah declared President Akufo Addo winner because he appointed her are examples of 'name calling' implying that the Jean Mensah-led Electoral Commission was not a neutral arbiter in their conduct of Presidential elections.

The NDC's allegations of bias against the EC and its chairperson were arguably intended to ridicule the EC and its chairperson as familiarity with the President's wife and appointment from the President were not evidence enough to question the EC question the EC and its chairperson's fairness in the collation and declaration of the 2020 Presidential election results. Beyond the NDC rhetoric, the above allegations also reflect the political ideology of the *WhatsApp News* as pro-NDC and anti-NPP and reveal their propagandistic posture against the EC and Jean Mensah in their conduct of national elections.

The NPP also engaged in name calling against the petitioner and the NDC. Expressions amongst others like the petition is a 'ruse and face-saving gimmick' (Daily Statesman online, January 19, 2021), 'Merely conjectural and borne out of petitioner's unfounded imagination' (WhatsApp news, June 11, 2021), '...industry in futility, designed, built, and furnished with lazy labour...' (Daily Statesman online, February 25, 2021), 'incompetent' (Daily Statesman online, January 12, 2021) and the NDC 'just delaying by playing theatrics...they want to give the petitioner the urge over other candidates so that he can still run for the presidency in 2024 on the ticket of the NDC' (Daily Statesman online, January 24, 2021) exemplify name calling. Again, beyond the NPP rhetoric, the *Daily Statesman's* publications about the petition and the petitioner also reflect their ideology as pro-NPP newspaper and their propagandistic posture against the petitioner and the NDC. Expressions like 'incompetent', 'conjectural,' 'ruse and face-saving gimmick', '... industry in futility...lazy labour' were arguably intended to ridicule and belittle the petitioner and his legal team while '...giving the petitioner urge over other candidates so that he can run for the presidency in 2024...' was arguably a calculated attempt to cause disaffection for the petitioner in the NDC party.

Media bias and propaganda played a significant role in coverage of the Ghana 2020 Presidential Election petition. The use of imbalance, exaggeration and peace-insensitive journalism featured prominently in the reportage of the Presidential Election Petition by the *WhatsApp*

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News online, Daily Statesman online and Daily Graphic online. Propaganda by the NDC and NPP was also featured and even though not so prominent quantitatively, its qualitative effect cannot be underestimated as seen below.

In comparative terms, the *WhatsApp news online* was more biased in all the above categories assessed, followed by the *Daily Statesman online* and the *Daily Graphic online*. The *Daily Graphic online* that is state owned recorded one noticeable imbalance story, three exaggeration stories and one peace-insensitive journalism story. The *Daily Statesman online* aligned to the NPP recorded six imbalances, seven exaggerations and four peace-insensitive journalism stories. Comparatively, the *WhatsApp News online* aligned to the NDC recorded more biases thus seven imbalances, 11 exaggerations and nine peace insensitive journalism stories.

As found above, examples of imbalance, peace insensitive journalism and exaggeration constitute slant. They can find expression in the definition of bias by Entman (2010) that detecting bias requires demonstrating patterns of slant that promote support for some interests or actors. It can also find expression in the definition of media bias by McQuail (1977) that media bias is the use of explicit argument and compilation of arguments favouring one side (against the other). The biases by the *Daily Statesman* were all in favour of the NPP and against the NDC and the petitioner, John Mahama while biases recorded by the *WhatsApp news* were against the Electoral Commission and the Supreme Court. The only imbalance story by the *Daily Graphic online* was against the media while two of the three exaggeration stories were against the NDC and the third one, a colourful expression, recorded in favour of the NPP when they reported on the NPP's legal team's jubilation after the court verdict.

The *Daily Graphic's* slant against the NDC and in support of the NPP reveals an interesting observation regarding its ideological orientation. Even though state-owned, some studies have argued that the paper favours the governing party in its reportage of political issues. Smith and Temin (2002) posit that in the coverage of the 2000 presidential and parliamentary election campaigns in Ghana, state-owned newspapers, including the *Daily Graphic* showed 'considerable bias in favour of the (ruling) NDC (p. 588). In an ethnographic study of the Press and Political Culture in Ghana between 1995 and 2000, Jennifer Hasty observed that the state media in Ghana function as a 'state information apparatus' and hardly publishes stories that would embarrass the government. She argues that due to fear of flak and concerns about undermining national security interests, state media journalists often churn out information that will not make government look bad (Hasky, 2005). Even though the above observations were made before the repeal of the criminal libel law in Ghana in 2001, the ideological orientation of state media in Ghana, including the *Daily Graphic* has arguably not changed much. In a study of how the state media covered the Dagbon conflict of 2002, in which the NPP government was accused of complicity, Seth Mahama found that state media journalists, including those from *Daily Graphic* overwhelmingly constricted their publications to the views of elite/official sources and churned out official frames to the disadvantage of news from other actors. He concluded that the 'over-reliance on official sources for news rendered the *Daily*

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Graphic and other state media propagandists of the ruling NPP government' and rendered them 'faithful servants of the state' (Mahama, 2020, 192).

Given the observations by the authors above, it can be argued that the *Daily Graphic online* in its coverage of the Ghana 2020 Presidential Election Petition was not only guilty of content bias but also decision-making bias where their reports were guided by the ideological orientation of the paper which was to support the ruling government. The *Daily Graphic online*'s support for the ruling government is a clear case that corroborates Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model that postulates that the political elite control the thoughts of vast majority of members in a democratic society by manufacturing their consent through media propaganda (1988).

As evidenced above, all the sampled news portals namely the state-owned *Daily Graphic online*, the *Daily Statesman online* and the *WhatsApp news online* slanted their stories to promote the cause and favour their side of the conflict. These slanted mediated texts violated the *Ghana Journalists Association's* Code of Ethics numbers 6, 8 and 20 which state that:

1. Journalists must not produce any material that has the potential to lead to hatred, ridicule or discrimination.
2. Journalists must differentiate between fact, opinion and commentary such that news is presented objectively without embellishment.
3. Recognises the public's right to unbiased, fair, balanced, accurate, and comprehensive information.

Arguably, the *Daily Graphic online*, the *Daily Statesman online* and the *WhatsApp News online* violated the above ethics as they published statements that sought to support one side against the other, including ridiculing the petitioner and the chairperson of the Electoral Commission. They were also opinionated in some of their reports and engaged in the use of exaggeration and imbalance (see tables 1 and 2).

As indicated above, the slant is biased and biased reportage could constitute a substantial risk of aggravating a conflict. Consequently, Galtung (1986, 1998) coined the concept of peace journalism (PJ) to replace biased reporting in conflict situations. He argues that journalists should report conflicts by focusing on peace, truth and be people-centred and solution-centred (Abdul Nabi, 2015). Lynch and McGoldrick support his treatise. They argue that peace journalism is when 'editors and reporters make choices – of what stories to report, and how to report them—that create opportunities for society to consider and value non-violent responses to conflicts' (2005, 5). However, slanted mediated texts by the sampled *News online* portals (as evidenced above) did not suggest that reporters and editors of those news portals made choices to create opportunities for readers to consider and value non-violent responses to conflicts.

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These slanted mediated texts rendered the *Daily Graphic online* and the *Daily Statesman online* 'faithful servants' of the ruling NPP and *WhatsApp News online* 'faithful servants' of the opposition NDC respectively. More so, these slanted mediated texts partly lay claim to Wolfsfeld (1997)'s treatise that the media in national crisis time act as 'faithful servants' of the state. Herman and Chomsky (2002) and Bennett (1990), also suggest that the media produce 'propaganda rather than independent journalism' in times of conflict (cited in Hammond, 2017, 80). The forming of texts and opinions by the *Daily Graphic online*, *Daily Statesman online* and *WhatsApp news* portals in support of the NPP and the NDC is exemplified in Zollmann (2017, 7)'s definition of propaganda as 'the forming of texts and opinions in support of particular interests in the media with intent to produce public support and/or relevant action'. Arguably, the *Daily Graphic online* and the *Daily Statesman online* portals acted as propagandists for the ruling NPP while the *WhatsApp News online* acted as propagandists for the opposition NDC.

Propaganda in the Ghana 2020 Presidential Election Petition reportage was not confined to the above news portals. The NDC and NPP also used propaganda to secure favourable media coverage (see table four above). Allegations of bias against the EC and its chairperson by the NDC legal team and NPP legal team's expressions against the petition like 'merely conjectural and borne out of petitioner's unfounded imagination', 'industry in futility, designed, built, and furnished with lazy labour' and amongst others 'incompetent' (see above) were value-laden words-an example of name-calling-and thus biased. This was arguably intended to undermine and ridicule the opponent. This disputably had the potential to activate opponents' sensibilities, thus rendering it dangerous for peace-sensitive journalism.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that media bias and propaganda featured well in the media coverage of the Ghana 2020 Presidential Election Petition. It has also demonstrated that *WhatsApp News online* was more biased followed by the *Daily Statesman online* and the *Daily Graphic online* in reporting the election petition.

In their quests to gain good coverage, the NDC and the NPP resorted to propaganda. Even though it was not widespread quantitatively, its qualitative effect on peace journalism is manifest as found in this study.

The above findings support the phenomenon that media bias and propaganda played a large role in the reportage of the Ghana 2020 Presidential Election Petition. This role constituted a threat to peace journalism in Ghana.

Recommendations

There is a need for the media to be trained in detecting propaganda in news reports to obviate the reporting of propaganda driven-statements from news actors as propaganda constitutes a substantial risk of aggravating conflicts as argued in this study. It is recommended that the Ghana Journalists Association should collaborate with media houses to execute this task through regular training workshops for journalists.

Media houses should also comply with journalism ethics, especially the Ghana Journalists Association's Code of Ethics on balanced, fair, unbiased, neutral and accurate reportage to ensure objective and responsible journalism practice in Ghana.

There was a declaration by the Supreme Court in 1996 that all state-owned media should grant equal access to all political parties in their political campaign activities. That declaration notwithstanding, the state media, as found in this study, continue to favour ruling political parties against opposition political parties in reporting political campaign activities. Given that the Supreme Court's intervention was a mere declaration, the state media continued to flout it with impunity. *It is recommended that political power seekers consider returning to the Supreme Court for a biting order to compel the state media houses to truly grant equal access to all political parties in their coverage of political party campaigns. Arguably, once this is done, any state media that flouts the order could risk a contempt charge by the Supreme Court. Once the state media grant equal access to all political parties, it could arguably facilitate fair representation of ideas in the media that could enhance the growth of the country's emerging democracy.*

Allegations of bias against the Supreme Court by *WhatsApp News online* ahead of the final delivery of judgement were dangerous as they constituted a substantial risk of feeding into the perception of bias held by some NDC politicians and their following. Extremists amongst these NDC supporters could have rejected the court verdict and caused disturbances. Given that these kinds of reportages have been perpetuated in Ghana since the repeal of the criminal libel law in 2001, there is a need for a national debate amongst various media stakeholders in the country on how to curb the excesses of the media to ensure responsible media reportage.

Part of the allegations against the EC by the NDC and a section of the media were that the EC changed its figures six times to jostle the numbers to ensure that President Akufo Addo won the election. It is therefore important that going forward the EC should sacrifice time for accuracy to get their figures right to obviate allegations of cheating and incompetence.

Since this is the first study on media bias in reporting Presidential Election Petitions in Ghana, this study could serve as a reference point for further research into the role of the media in reporting election petitions, including parliamentary elections and the implications media bias could have for the country's emerging democracy.

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