Establishing Journalistic Standards in the Ghanaian Press

By Africanus Diedong

Abstract

This article documents how journalists worked to improve the journalistic standards in Ghana in the years from 1980 to the late 1990s in the face of the attempts of the political leadership in Ghana to manipulate and repress press freedom. The major premise of the research carried out in 2005 is that the improvement of ethical standards of journalists begins with the decisions of committed journalists in the daily routine of the newsroom to make the press a support of democratic governance and defence of human rights. These efforts move from personal values to establishing a professional culture through professional associations, the socialisation of young journalists in newsrooms, involvement in the training of journalists in academic institutions and in-service workshops, and working with government regulatory and complaints commissions. The research began with newsroom observations of two leading newspapers, interviews with leaders in journalistic reform and then finally focused on in-depth interviews with a sample of four journalists widely reputed by colleagues to be noteworthy in establishing standards. The interviews used life-history and professional history methods to permit these journalists to describe how they defined ethical norms in the process of routine news reporting.

Key words: journalistic standards, newsroom ethics, professional journalist associations, media ethics, codes of media ethics.

Introduction

The 1960s to the 1990s were crucial times in many African countries for establishing professional standards of journalism. All of the institutions of the nation-state were being established, and the press, both government and private, was emerging as an important actor in establishing patterns of governance. The "profession" of journalism was coming into existence in the news institutions, but especially with the establishment of journalistic training institutes and, in some cases, academic degree programmes. There were moves to introduce professional associations with their codes of ethics, media councils and other institutions of regulation and self-regulation.

Autobiographical note
Africanus L. Diedong (afrika30@yahoo.com) is a lecturer in the Department of African and General Studies within the Faculty of Integrated Development Studies (FIDS) of the University for Development Studies, Wa Campus in northwest Ghana. He currently teaches Communication Skills, Development Communication, Management of Information Systems and Public Relations at FIDS.

Although virtually all African countries introduced constitutions of democratic governance, in most cases this became some form of neo-patrimonial state: one-party government, dictatorial presidents or, often, very repressive military governments. In this context journalists often became the "voice of the people" protesting against the many forms of denial of human and civil rights. This confrontation between journalists and centres of power became the crucible in which journalistic standards were formulated in many national contexts.

The informal and formal professional associations played an important role in establishing journalistic standards. It is the thesis of the present article, however, that the central actors in creating guiding principles of journalism ethics adapted to African contexts are journalists making decisions in the daily routines of newsrooms. Especially important are journalists of outstanding professional character who provide leadership in the news organisations and influence what events become matters of public discussion. Some of these leading journalists may get to key editing or managing positions and some proprietors play a key role in setting journalistic standards, but often the "ordinary" journalist has considerable freedom, especially in the African newsroom context, for deciding what is to become news and how it is to be presented. Ultimately, it is the individual journalist making personal decisions about journalistic values who provides leadership for the collective decisions of professional associations, codes of ethics and the ideals of journalistic training.

Ghana as a case study of establishing professional journalistic standards

Although all African countries have had their own historical process of establishing a collective professional culture of journalism, Ghana is a particularly interesting case. The Gold Coast of Western Africa has had a long and active history of newspapers beginning in the nineteenth century (Anoka, 1997, pp. 8-11). The press in Ghana played a relatively important role in the independence movement and in establishing a national political culture. The University of Ghana established an academic degree programme in journalism and communication studies very early after independence, and graduates with a professional identity began to be active in the newspapers and broadcasting institutions in the 1970s.

The capacity for developing standards of journalism was certainly present in Ghana by the end of the 1970s. The catalyst was the repressive measures against the press by the Rawlings military government from December 1981 to May 1992 (Anoka & Osei-Mensah, 1986: Anoka & Salwen, 1988; Anoka, 1997: Boafo, 1985). The absence of overt political parties opened a space for the press, especially at the very end of the Rawlings regime. In the view of Clement Asante, the fact that the opposition political parties boycotted the national elections in 1992 and 1993 meant that the press became the unofficial voice of opposition defining the kind of democratic governance Ghanaians wanted (1996, p. 112). That the two leading national newspapers, the *People's Daily Graphic* and the *Ghanaian Times* alone, not to mention the many other smaller newspapers, had a combined circulation in the mid-1990s of 230,000, suggests the relative importance of the press at least in the major urban areas (Asante, 1996, p. 125). The lifting of the ban against private media in 1992 permitted the emergence of dozens of small newspapers which were often little more than an angry, irresponsible use of a sudden new freedom. The excesses of this scurrilous press showed another extreme to be avoided (Koomson, 1996). Many of the practicing journalists in Ghana formed their standards during and especially at the end of the period of the Rawlings military government. This was the period when journalists in Ghana were trying to understand what press freedom with social responsibility might mean in the Ghanaian context.

The Ghana Journalist Association (GJA), organised in the early 1980s, incorporated most of the practicing journalists at the time and developed a code of ethics that all members were expected to follow. In 1985, at the height of the most repressive period of the Rawlings regime, the GJA initiated the annual "Award of Distinction", the "Journalist of the Year" and citations for excellence in different genres of journalism (Koomson, 1996, p. 58). The GJA introduced an Ethics Committee, and the presence of this committee helped to formulate a discourse of what is good journalism. The GJA published in 1992 a strong public condemnation of the worst violations of responsible journalism when freedom of the press was re-introduced. The former president of the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA), Kabral Blay-Amihere, is credited not only with improving the professional training and socialisation of young journalists, but with revitalising the

Association to "provide a bulwark for the defence and promotion of democracy and development" (Hasty, 2005).

Very important in the formation of a professional ethos among journalists in Ghana were the contacts with international agencies such as the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Nieman scholarships at Harvard University in the US, and visiting lecturers in the universities or in short workshops.

Also of some importance was the Private Newspaper Publishers Association of Ghana, which has a code of ethics, an ethics committee and from time to time deals with public complaints against a given newspaper or against the industry as a whole (Koomson, 1996, p. 62).

The National Media Commission (NMC) was introduced as a formal measure of the Constitution of 1992 to defend press freedom. The idea of an independent body to protect press freedom, especially for journalists working in the state-owned media, was first adopted in the 1979 Constitution, but the NMC was formally inaugurated only in 1993 by an Act of Parliament in compliance with Chapter 12 of the 1992 Constitution. The NMC has a full-time secretariat and a Complaints Settlement Committee, and in its first two years of operation dealt with one hundred complaints (Koomson, 1996, p. 61). The NMC issued of a series of public reprimands of offending media, and the reports of the formal hearings of the complaints were also publicised.

Giving energy to all these efforts to improve standards were the efforts of individual journalists. Some of these, such as Paul Ansah, were very well known internationally, but many were quite typical journalists of Ghana at the time. The premise of the present study is that establishing a journalistic culture must begin with the decisions and actions based on the values and character of individual journalists. Most outstanding journalists would never be aware that they might be raising standards. They simply do what they think is right and what they enjoy with the zest of life in the routine work of the newsroom. The norms come out of the preferences in selecting news stories, defending personal convictions before editors in the newsroom, calculating the possibilities of reprisals from the powerful and writing in a way that will mobilise public opinion in support of one's news values. The present study has carried out in-depth interviews with journalists who have a reputation of journalistic leadership in order to discover how they established what they considered important standards of good journalistic practice. Never was the question of

journalistic standards mentioned, but as they told the stories of their journalistic lives they touched on what they considered significant journalistic achievements. When these were mentioned, the interviewees were invited to recount in much more detail these experiences in order to analyse the elements of journalistic standards implied in these experiences.

Before giving more detail of the methodology of the study carried out in 2005, it is important to present the concept of the process of establishing journalistic standards which guided the interviewing and then was used in the analysis of the interviews.

The process of raising journalistic standards

This study has focused on a central question: What moves a journalist to begin to want to raise journalistic standards and how does this personal motivation expand into collective action by concerned colleagues?

If one examines the lives of journalistic personalities who have often spent a good period of their professional employment or even an entire life trying to establish a journalistic culture that makes a significant contribution to a society, one finds at the core of their personal motivations a deep sense of compassion for those who are undergoing unnecessary human suffering at the hands of the people around them (Pippert, 1989). It is an entering into the suffering of others caused by greed, injustice, prejudice or any of a host of antisocial behaviours that could be controlled or changed. It is this sense of compassion, the ability to enter into the feelings and perspectives of others which contemporary moral philosophers such as Habermas (1990, pp. 162-168) say is at the centre of moral development. It is an awareness of the dignity of the human person that Clifford Christians (2008, pp. 16-17) and Herman Wasserman (2008, pp. 74-89) argue is the foundation of media ethics. Virtually all great moral philosophers—Kant would be just one example—have located the beginnings of the moral sense in the ability to put oneself in the position of those who are treated in an inhuman fashion and ask what I would feel and think if I were to be treated in that fashion. Those who were close to the Ghanaian journalist Paul Ansah noted that when he said, "I am going to go to town on what those people are doing", this was coming from the sense of compassion that Ansah had for the suffering of people caused by the unjust actions of the powerful. The cry, "You can't do this to human

beings", sums well this the beginning of motivations of those who want to give journalism a strong ethical structure.

A second characteristic of journalists who define standards is having strong, unswerving convictions regarding one's own values (Klaidman and Beauchamp, 1987). They are persons of independence of convictions in the face of pressures in the newsroom. They are also independent regarding the pressures of the powerful in the society, especially those who hold the state power of physical coercion, and they maintain sceptical independence regarding sources of information. They are persons of character, but, as James Q. Wilson observes regarding character, they are people of empathy, understanding others (1995, p. 5). Their convictions are not derived from their own self interests, but rather because they carry with them the constant image of the needs, suffering and injustices of the people. They are deeply aware of the contradictions of African societies which proclaim independence and justice for African people and yet have some of the greatest gaps of wealth and power in the world. In Africa people of conviction are people of proverbs, well-versed in the proverbs of popular culture but also of the great literary personalities and philosophers. People of conviction are aware of their communities of reference which may be ethnic origin, religious background, or professional associations (Appiah, 2005). They are slow to jump on every bandwagon, but give the impression of self-control because they tend to think of the long-term consequences (Wilson, 1995, p. 5; 1993. pp 79-98).

The process of questioning existing standards and beginning to imagine a different order of newsroom ethics is often likely to begin in informal conversations with close colleagues, especially age cohorts formed in the early years of entry into journalistic practice. Journalists know too much, suffer too much and live too much in an emotionally charged environment to open up except to the closest of friends. When one is "down", the support comes from personal friends in the occupation. A third source of motivation to set standards are these moments of very personal sharing of intuitions. In the awareness of the contradictions of the journalistic occupation, a concept of what "should be" begins to be formulated. The pain of seeing editors proclaim honesty, truthfulness and independence and then see them so compromised by political and commercial interests comes out in these personal conversations. The single most important reason why

journalists persist in an occupation that is so badly paid, under such pressure from special interests and often so badly treated in newsrooms is the support of close friends.

A fourth source of concepts of journalistic standards is a strong sense of democratic procedures (Hyden, Leslie & Ogundimu, 2002). Gans in his classic study of newsrooms, *Deciding what's news*, affirms that "altruistic democracy" is a central set of values in news making (1980, pp. 43-45), and he has continually evaluated news making in terms of its contribution to the development of democracy (2003). Young people interested in journalism are much attracted to an occupation that is active in the public sphere and is close to major societal problems, political decisions and debates in civil society. Good journalists generally have a stronger sense of due process of law and legal violations, a stronger sense of human rights, and a stronger awareness that, finally, the citizens are the ones to make the decisions of the nation. This fuels a desire to make elected officials accountable, transparent and honest. There is a strong awareness of the public's right to know and the need to bring the civil society into the news. The good journalist also is aware that the media have a role in redistribution of wealth as fundamental for a democracy.

If the major site of reform of journalistic standards is the newsroom and the ethos of the newsroom, then it is obvious that the good journalist has a life commitment to the welfare and ideals of the newsroom (Josephi, 1999). This entails a strong sense of disciplined loyalty to colleagues, editors, management and proprietary interests. One of the finest descriptions of how a newsroom functions as a team is Woodward and Bernstein's description in *All the president's men* of how the *Washington Post* built its case in the Watergate affair (1974).

A sixth source of motivations to raise professional standards is a strong commitment to the profession as such and to professional associations. Abbott, in his study of the sociology of professional codes of ethics (1981), shows that the leaders in professional associations and in the formulation of codes of ethics are almost always those who are exemplary in their exercise of professional ideals and those who are concerned about the general status of the profession. The leaders in raising standards are, not surprisingly, the recipients of awards for outstanding professional practice. They are concerned that the journalistic profession is so often looked down on by other professions and distrusted—even despised—by the general public

(Retief, 2002, pp. viii-x). There is a strong desire to raise the status of the profession because this will enable the profession to have higher regard in the local and national communities and to gain the public trust in the credibility of journalists. This concern for the profession often leads journalistic reformers to begin journalism training institutes, introduce practical workshops, encourage the development of academic degree programmes in journalism and support the organisation of media monitoring bodies such as press councils and complaints commissions (Boafo, 1988).

Finally, the very best of journalistic activity is often brought out in moments of major social, political and cultural conflict in a society when there is flagrant oppression and denial of human rights. The wrongs of the powerful become evident and the need to take a strong and clear public stand is much greater. In these moments pointing out injustices objectively, accurately and with vivid description becomes especially important. Using the rhetorical skills of good journalism to move public opinion to demand social and political change is particularly important. These historic moments are times when the norms of journalism are formulated and institutionalised (Evenson, 2005). This development of journalistic norms at times of political conflict is documented by Omu (1978) in his history of the development of the press in colonial Nigeria and by Ogbondah(1993) in his history of the confrontation of the media and the military in Nigeria from the 1960s to the 1990s.

The methodology of the study

The focus of this study is a series of in-depth interviews with selected journalists, but leading up to the interviews was a series of stages from the most general level of observation of the decision-making process of journalists in newsrooms in Ghana down to the detailed account of specific episodes which revealed the journalistic standards.

The first stage was a participant observation of news-making practices in two newspapers considered typical of the quality "independent newspaper" which is the site of work of the journalists selected for personal interviews. The observations of the practices in the newsrooms along with the theoretical framework of the process of raising journalistic standards were a guide in the personal interviews and in the analysis of the data from the interviews.

The second stage was a narrowing of the focus to the life histories and practices of four journalists considered "leaders in setting standards" by many journalists in Ghana. The selection was based on observations in the newsrooms and on interviews with editors, but especially on a few confidential interviews with lecturers at the Ghana Institute of Journalism and with the director of the Ghana Chapter of Transparency International. To avoid personalistic influences in the selection, an important criterion was public recognition indicated in an award for excellence by the Ghana Association of Journalists. As with all outstanding journalists, however, not a few of the actions of those interviewed are debated by friends and foes alike. The interviews, carried out in a private context where the interviewees could speak more freely, began with general questions about their life as journalists. Questionnaires and interview schedules were not used so that the interviewees could structure the life histories in terms of what *they* considered important in their personal world views.

The third stage was a still more focused set of questions on (1) how they selected news stories and some examples of this, (2) how they find and relate to sources, (3) how they deal with issues of objectivity and truth telling, (4) how they maintain good relations with the media organisation, and (5) how they relate to their professional associations. These questions usually led into personal narratives of episodes which revealed their journalistic standards.

The fourth stage was to elicit, with the above-described aspects of the process of raising standards in mind, a detailed account of what the interviewees considered memorable achievements in their journalistic careers. It is important to repeat that they never considered themselves to be "raising standards" but, in fact, given the esteem of their colleagues, the awards they have received and their activities in drawing up codes of ethics or serving on evaluating boards, their personal standards do have a wider influence.

The interviews brought out a wealth of detail of journalistic achievements, but six accounts are presented here as a basis for more detailed analysis of the journalistic values implied in each episode. These are presented as an integral narrative within the life history of each interviewee to show how norms emerge out of the values, character and working context of a journalist. All interviewees agreed to the publication of these descriptions. From these episodes it was

possible to draw out the fifteen major dimensions of journalistic standards presented in the conclusions.

The six case studies

(1) Affirming personal autonomy and convictions in the newsroom in the face of editorial opposition

The first case was recounted by Yaw Boadu Ayeboafo working in the government-related newspaper, the *Daily Graphic.* The context was the preparation for the coming elections after the constitutional reforms of 1992. In the process of re-establishing democratic procedures after years of authoritarian, repressive governance it was often difficult for the people of Ghana to imagine how responsible participation should be ensured. This was particularly true among personnel at the *Daily Graphic* which for years thought more of how to blindly support state power rather than how to encourage democratic participation, especially the participation of opposition parties. Ayeboafoh tells in a vivid way how he wanted to cover the story of the opposition parties and how he confronted this problem with the editor of the *Daily Graphic* regarding this issue.

> The chairman of the interim electoral commission had said that political parties were not supposed to campaign until they had registered. I had a different opinion because I thought, "How can they get together if they do not talk".
>
> The editor thought I was stubborn because I had already taken a decision on the issue. For one week I consistently brought stories on the issue to the editorial conference. The editor got very angry with me. He finally told me to go back to the electoral commissioner and find out whether my viewpoint was right.
>
> I contacted the electoral commissioner and he said that, in fact, other newspapers had already discussed the same issue. I became convinced that not only was our newspaper afraid to support more democratic procedures, but that our newspaper was losing out to other newspapers because of our cowardice and subservience. I could not imagine myself being associated with such a newspaper. When I came back to the newsroom, I wrote a letter of resignation.
>
> When the editor got my letter and read it, he wrote a response that is one of the best testimonials that I can take anywhere. The editor wrote, "Of all the senior journalists at this newspaper, you are the one that I feel so much confidence in. Even if I am not in the office, I know that you would do the right thing. So, if sometimes things get out of hand, you

should not take it personally. You should take it as a hazard of the tension of the work".

Ayeboafoh then went on to explain the "philosophy of journalism" that has guided his life regarding good relations with his employers and editors, using in characteristic African style reference to his favourite cultural heroes and appropriate proverbs.

> I do not believe that because I work for the government [the *Daily Graphic* is a government-owned newspaper], I should necessarily sing their praise. My fundamental belief is underlined by what Chinua Achebe said about the individual who owns the cock in the community. When it crows in the morning, it becomes the property of all. In Achebe's words, "The cock that crows in the morning belongs to one household, but its voice is the property of the whole neighbourhood". So my belief is that, regardless of who owns the cock, it serves the good of the community in which it is found. This is the core belief that I have canvassed and shared with the people. Their interests [of the people] are the things that should inform [us journalists] on the things we write about. The primary interest of every journalist must be the public interest.
>
> It is good to be free. But as a journalist, how are you using the freedom to the benefit of the larger society? Are you using the freedom simply because it is freedom and therefore you [as an individual are free] or because you are free to do a lot of things for the people?

The first important aspect of character brought out in this case is the unswerving commitment to what one considers important personal values and the commitment to personal freedom to act on convictions, personal integrity and autonomy. But, secondly, there is a commitment to work with the media organisation with honesty, transparency and cooperation. The response of the editor revealed an important aspect of work in the newsroom, the absolute trust in the loyalty that the editor must have in all the journalists of the media organisation. This relationship must be one of collegial mutual respect. A third noteworthy aspect is the sense of the important procedural aspects of a democracy and the importance of educating the public, the government officials and even the political leaders as to what a democracy is about. A fourth aspect of the character of this journalist is that he has rooted his habitual newsroom behaviour in a philosophy of freedom for service, and he appeals to the authority of Chinua Achebe as an exponent of African values of communication. A fifth notable

aspect of the episode is the wonderful gentlemanly attitude of the editor who was demanding that nothing be published that is not fully verified but had the humble honesty to recognise the value of what Ayeboafoh was insisting on.

(2) Discovering relevant human rights issues

Yaw Boadu Ayeboafo recounted another episode which brings out another important dimension of the character of an outstanding journalist: a deep human compassion for victims of human rights violations. This case came in response to the question of how he discovers what he thinks are good news stories.

> There was an issue about the "witches' home", which I saw as a violation of the rights of elderly women. We went to Bimbilla in the northern region of Ghana. In the night, I heard a gong-gong [drumbeats]. I wanted to find out the significance of it because I was excited.
>
> The District Chief Executive of Bimbilla told me that there was a strange disease in Bimbilla, and they suspected that the witches were responsible. The gong-gong was beaten to call out all women of a certain age. They were to gather under a certain old tree to be sent to the witches' home.
>
> I was disturbed. He realised that I was developing some [sympathetic] interest on the issue so he decided not to talk to me. I tried to talk to a number of people and everybody was very evasive about it.
>
> When I returned to the office in Tamale [the northern regional capital], I learned that there about three "witches" homes' in the region. I asked, "What do they do there?" Everybody was reluctant to explain to me what goes on in these homes.
>
> I did not have enough information to write a straight news report. I decided to write a feature article and compared what happened in the southern part of Ghana, where witches have to declare themselves as witches, against what I was seeing [in the North]—where people were pronounced "witches" just because they are old.
>
> Two weeks after the story was published I received a call from the Department of Social Welfare in Tamale. They wanted to know where the "witches' home" was located. I told them, "I do not know. I should rather come to you to find out about the location of the 'witches' home". From this development they also started their own investigations.
>
> Subsequently, the Catholic Relief Services decided to offer some material assistance for these so-called witches. Currently these poor

elderly women are receiving a lot of support as a result of the issue that has been raised in the public domain.

This case brings out, in addition to the sense of human compassion and an habitual awareness of human rights issues, the persistence in the face of resistance and insensitivity of officialdom that is necessary for investigative reporting in Africa. The agile switch from news reporting to the feature was effective because it eventually moved public opinion and moved the relevant agencies to act.

(3) How to critically evaluate presidents—and live to tell the story

In Ghana many journalists and editors have the reputation of being in the employ of political parties and make little pretence of being objective, fair, and balanced. This has damaged the reputation of the news media and the journalistic occupation in general. How politically independent journalists should be is a matter of some discussion in Africa. Some argue that model of the involvement of the press in politics in Africa is closer to the model of Mediterranean or polarised pluralist model that Hallin and Mancini propose as one of the legitimate modes of relationship of media and politics (2004). The polarised-pluralist model is said to be particularly relevant for Africa because it assumes the characteristics of low literacy, the strong role of the state, instrumentalisation of the press, clientelism and lower professionalisation of journalists. The majority of media theorists and journalists in Africa argue for a greater degree of independence of journalists with the press demanding greater accountability and responsibility from political leaders.

Ayeboafoh has the reputation of being politically independent and is for this reason highly regarded in Ghana not only by fellow journalists but by many public leaders. During the military government of Rawlings the regime forbade all political reporting. Ayeboafoh thinks that if many journalists fear to speak out about corruption and abuse, how does the journalist maintain a position of forthright criticism?

Generally, Ayeboafoh noted, journalists cannot be apolitical. However, we should not be partisan in the things we do. We should be very open and broad-minded. For example, at the peak of the repressive revolution [of Jerry Rawlings] in the early 1980s I wrote some articles

> that were very critical of the government. I was never arrested by anybody.
>
> When the then military leader of Ghana, Flt. Lt. Jerry John Rawlings went to the Ghana Trade Fair Centre he spoke loosely and disparagingly about the Apino Soap products [displayed at the trade fair] because he assumed that the proprietor of the industry would use the profit to support an opposition political party. I felt it was unfair, and I decided to take on Rawlings. I wrote in an article that a head of state must be the first person to promote local industries. I criticised him for saying that people should not be buying Apino Soap because it belongs to a person of the opposition party. If that is the case, 'Why are we talking about the "Ghanaianisation" of industries? Rawlings' comments caused fear in people associated with the owner of Apino Soap and within a month after this remark by Rawlings the Apino Soap industry collapsed.

Ayeboafoh emphasises that, in dealing with news sources, it is important for journalists to exhibit professional integrity. Again he bases his philosophy in Achebe as a major African thinker:

> A journalist worth his salt should never allow news sources to corrupt him. Neither should they accept bribes in the course of their duties. I have read Achebe's *A Man of the People* and learned something from it. The so-called "man of the people" that Achebe writes about, paying off his followers all the time, is a very bad politician who does not do anything right. With journalists, the first thing after a news event, he makes sure that he gives some money to them and when they are going away he will tell the people, "You see these people? If I do not give them some money, they would write some nonsense about me". And the journalists accept it. That attitude of journalists was very wrong.

Boadu-Ayeboafoh also considers the mutual support of journalists very important in sustaining their personal integrity. Prior to taking up the post of executive secretary of the Ghana Media Commission from 1999 to 2003, he was vice president of the Ghana Journalist Association. For years he has been an active member of the GJA, affirming that "membership in the GJA enables journalists to learn from each other. It also enables me to reach out to my colleagues because, as you interact with them, you are not regarded as an alien. The seminars and workshops organised by the GJA on pertinent topics are useful in enhancing the standards of media performance. Exposure to all these seminars has had a very positive influence on me".

Important for Ayeboafoh also is doing what he can to teach young journalists. He is a part-time lecturer of journalism at the School of Communication Studies at the University of Ghana and at the Ghana Institute of Journalism.

The characteristics of the good journalist in Africa that this episode brings out are, firstly, the *courage* to state publicly that people with public service responsibilities are not living up to these responsibilities. This requires that a journalist have a very clear idea of what is public morality and a supporting moral philosophy, as Ayeboafoh seems to have. Also required is the capacity to see when and how a statement should be made so that it will educate the public and raise the state of public morality in the nation. Secondly, Ayeboafoh takes a firm stand against any form of bribery, as do all the four journalists of character in this study. He has a strong sense of solidarity with his fellow journalists and wants to act with integrity in order to raise the public respect for the journalist profession as a whole. Thirdly, the good journalist is active in the professional associations and, interestingly, participates to improve his own professional and moral capacities. Finally, Ayeboafoh probably does not have to worry so much about his personal support because he is widely recognised as competent and *honest* and has many side jobs such as part-time teaching or is remunerated for a term in an organisation such as the Ghana Media Commission as executive secretary. It is likely that those who have a reputation for accepting bribes or the subventions of political influence—and they are known—will, in fact, be the poorest of the journalists because they are not recognised as competent.

(4) Providing needed information but also reinforcing public opinion

News media are constantly trying to decide what the public wants to know or should know, but they also constantly seek to reinforce opinions in favour of justice. Progressives follow progressive media or conservatives seek out conservative media in order to find foundations for their own values and opinions. The journalist who brought out this aspect of the journalist interested in improving standards is Kofi Coomson, the founder and publisher of The *Ghanaian Chronicle,* one of the leading private newspapers in Ghana. Earlier in life, from 1978-1979, he edited *The Nationalist.* In stating the philosophy of his newspaper, Coomson also indicated what line of opinion he intended to reinforce.

> What I have brought to the *Ghanaian Chronicle* is the culture of investigative journalism and bold reporting. My four years of journalism experience in Nigeria from the late 1970s to the early 1980s influenced my penchant for investigative journalism. I came back to bring something of the Nigerian spirit of bravado, the spirit of investigative journalism to Ghana.

Coomson recalled the opening editorial of the *Ghanaian Chronicle* when it started in 1991.

> I stated that the *Ghanaian Chronicle* was going to promote human rights, be a platform for investigative journalism and pursue corruption wherever it would exist whether in churches, boardrooms or in government . And we will be fearless and give voice to the voiceless.

To fulfil his journalistic mission, Coomson recognised the importance of getting in contact with other reputable journalists in Ghana such as Kabral Blay-Amihere and Paul Ansah. Paul Ansah was teaching and was head of he Department of Mass Communication at the University of Ghana and agreed very reluctantly to write for the newspaper when Coomson contacted him. After a thorough interrogation about the background of Coomson and the type of newspaper he wanted to publish, Ansah gave Coomson his word but with the most ironic proviso: "I will never write politics. In fact, if it is politics count me out. I have been worried about the standard of journalism now and I will be writing on the issue of standards". The irony of Ansah's proviso is that he became one of the strongest political writers in the history of Ghana. Indeed, Ansah became a master of rallying public opinion for a change of the dictatorial government of Rawlings, which came within a year of the founding of the *Ghanaian Chronicle.* Whenever Paul heard of a violation of human rights or some anti-democratic action of Rawlings or other public figure, Ansah's favourite response was, "I am going to go to town on that guy". This later became the title of the collection of some of Ansah's most noteworthy articles and editorials, *Going to Town* (1996). In the view of Coomson, Ansah and other journalists, writing for the *Ghanaian Chronicle* gave a new identity to journalism in Ghana which has continued to the present day.

Coomson said that his vision as a journalist and editor at the *Ghanaian Chronicle* "was that we should be properly independent in every sense of the word and publish the truth at all times regardless of

whatever political party is in power". This immediately brought him into confrontation with the repressive actions of the Rawlings government.

One of the serious violations of the Rawlings government was the prohibition of any public assembly, procession or demonstration - a right which later became important in the 1992 constitution of Ghana. In 1991, when students were protesting the merciless and illegal actions of the government, the disappearance of notable people and other increasingly violent measures, the police gunned down a female student of the Institute of Professional Studies (IPS) during a student demonstration. This was big news at the time, and public opinion in Accra was raised in opposition. Coomson thought that this was an occasion when the newspaper needed to support public opinion.

> Nobody knew what the student's status was at the time. There was a news blackout. The government even said that people should stop looking for her. The student had been admitted to the Korle Bu Teaching Hospital in Accra. Coomson said that he wanted the public to know the condition of the student. So he went to the hospital and "misrepresented" himself as somebody who was coming from the "castle" and the nurses gave me access to the student. Coomson said he took pictures of her and published them in order to enable the public to know the condition of her health. People thought that she had been killed. The government came out categorically to say that the press should not have gone to the hospital to harass her.

Coomson's article was the only information about the condition of the young student, and the article was widely discussed in the city at the time as "good journalism".

In this case and in other important stories, Coomson said that he had to take risks in getting information that might be considered questionable, but he thought that was justifiable given the general government refusal to give sufficient evidence and justification of its actions. One of these cases was his means of getting the information about the young female student who was wounded in the demonstration.

> When the story [about the student's condition in the hospital] was published, the government was angry and the Minister of Health at the time publicly lambasted me. The minister sent me a letter of protest. I responded, "Listen! I told the doctors and nurses that I was from the

> 'Castle' [The Christianborg castle at Osu in Accra, a colonial building which is the official residence of the president of Ghana]. They did not ask me which castle I was coming from. They just opened the doors for me. If they would have asked me, I would have told them that I was coming from the Elmina castle" [a former slave post in Cape Coast east of Accra]. It was a big joke at the time when the story was published.

Coomson recalled that on another occasion he paid for some documents in a major story. Regarding the question of ethical principles in obtaining public documents in this way, he thought seriously about the matter but his personal conscience led him to think that the government was hiding important information that the public should have. He felt that under the circumstances the action was justified.

> I felt that it was important to expose a scandal at the Ghana Petroleum Corporation (GNPC) in 1999. Tsatsu Tsikata, the then-director of the GNPC, wanted to sell the national oil rig—a multi-million dollar asset of Ghana. Tsikata would never give any information to the press about the matter publicly. But I got people at the GNPC to give the information. I paid the people for it and published it.
>
> And to take the matter up a step further, I was so determined to get the information that I actually went to court and sued Tsikata and the entire board of directors of the GNPC. For me the matter was so significant that I wanted to know how much they were going to sell the oil rig for and the reasons for the sale. I used my personal resources in fighting for a national cause. I wanted to get the information into the public domain and stop the sale of an important public asset.

Bribing public officials to get information, even when it is information the government should have given, is ethically a very controversial step. Coomson felt he was justified, and it is likely that virtually all journalists in Ghana supported him in this. Coomson has been a leader in the Ghana Journalist Association and was honoured with the GJA "Journalist of the Year" award in 1993. He received a Neiman Fellowship to study at Harvard University in the US on how to deal with issues such as the typical refusal of African governments to adopt a public information policy of open accountability. Getting information from African governments remains a very controversial ethical matter.

(5) Defending human rights and peace

Ben Ephson, currently the managing editor of the *Daily Graphic*, a private daily newspaper, believes that "the media can make and unmake a country". Like many of the more distinguished journalists in Ghana, he has close ties with the world of Anglo-American journalism. He was a correspondent for *West Africa* from 1982-1986, the BBC correspondent for Ghana from 1986-1996, and is currently an Associated Press stringer in Ghana. He is also a member of the Environmental Journalists' Association in the US and the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) in the US. In 1989 he was honoured with an award from the NAJB for his outstanding work in journalism. He stresses the importance for journalists to read widely in world current affairs and takes advantage of fellowships for study abroad at the BBC or in America when he has the opportunity.

He has been writing for newspapers since he was a boy and as a lawyer he has a sharp awareness of how powerful people in Ghana are violating the law. He covered the Goka trial in the 1980s and reported on the series of tortures that came out in the trial.

> One of the victims' back was cut and given to another person to chew, and another person had his genitals cut and given to someone to chew. This was a clear case of abuse of human rights. No matter how guilty the person is, the case has to go through the due process of the law. I believe the tortures were abusing human rights.
>
> In writing about the violation of human rights, I felt that it was my duty [as a foreign correspondent for the BBC] to let the world know that this was happening, but it is also important to make my country a better place to live in. I kept out the nasty details of the torture.

During the worst days of the Rawlings military government in the early 1980s, the government was setting up Citizen Vetting Committees (CVC) to try people who were alleged to have been involved in criminal activities, but in fact to control those in opposition to the abuses of the government.

> As a reporter I had written that people were not tortured in the course of the trials. However, a month later somebody showed a reporter some evidence that people were beaten. I had to write that people who appeared before the CVC were beaten during the heady days of the

military government of Rawlings. As a result of the reporting, the committee stopped beating people who appeared before it.

Like many other journalists attempting to establish standards in Ghana, Ephson has continually reported on the bribery, corruption and inefficiency in the government. But he stressed that journalists must "investigate the issue thoroughly, and when you are ready with the facts, you publish". But he stressed that often reporters' hands are tied because journalists in Ghana do not have the legal right to subpoena documents or testimonies. If private documents of the government are somehow obtained, the agency will ask for the name of the people who leaked the documents and punish them. Journalists have to find indirect ways to reveal the illegal measures of high government officials. He cited the case of the revelation in the Ghana newspapers that high government officials were supposedly taking bribes for contracts related to the stadia rehabilitations. One journalist mentioned the names and was sued. Ephson had to be content with a front page headline, "President Kufuor, Open your Eyes on the African Cup of Nations Match 2008 Stadia Rehabilitation".

Ephson believes that journalists must not only be independent politically, but it is necessary to avoid close ties with social organisations such as the Rotary Club or with particular interest groups of the civil society because "some day you have to do a story on a member of that organisation". He is active in the Ghana Journalist Association and the Private Newspapers Publishers' Association of Ghana but beyond this he maintains his independence. His commitments are to the law, the declaration of human rights and the right of free, open debate in society.

(6) Drafting and enforcing codes of ethics

Fritz Andoh is regarded as having played an important role in the development of professional journalism norms in Ghana, but in a less dramatic way than those who are actively confronting issues of government accountability and human rights. He was one of the key persons in the drafting of the code of ethics of the Ghana Journalism Association (GJA) in August 1994, was the former Vice Chairman of the Ethics Committee of the GJA, and is a member of the National Media Commission. He has been a resource person for many workshops organised by the Ghana News Agency, the GJA and the

Friedrich Ebert Foundation. He teaches at the Ghana Institute of Journalism and is involved in producing the *Media Monitor*, the quarterly magazine of the National Media Commission. For many years he worked with the Ghana News Agency in Nairobi. He has a chapter, "Ethics in Newsgathering" in Kasoma's book on *Journalism Ethics in* Africa (1994), still a widely quoted classic in its field.

Andoh helped the Lesotho Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to establish the Lesotho News Agency and served on the task force that developed the All Africa Press Service. Like so many of the other pillars of the Ghana media professionals, he has had many fellowships in international courses and workshops in Europe and America.

Andoh worked for many years in the Ghana News Agency and was a correspondent for the GNA in East Africa for some years. The routine input of a news agency does not provide much scope for major democratic reform, but Andoh does recall that his news story in the *Ghanaian Times* highlighting what he thought was the poor performance of the Ghanaian delegation at the Commonwealth heads of state in Lusaka, Zambia raised the ire of many in the delegation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, wrote back a note congratulating him on the honest report.

Andoh is representative of those journalism professionals in Ghana who think that the way to raise the standards of the profession is to quietly but steadily enforce the codes of ethics and norms of media regulatory agencies in Ghana. He is a devout Catholic (currently editor of the *Catholic Standard* weekly of the Catholic Bishops) and emphasizes the importance of fairness implied in the golden rule. He also emphasises an impartial distance from sources, but always maintaining a gentlemanly respect in all news stories.

Over the last forty years Ghana has emerged from a period of great political instability and repressive military government to become what many (especially the donor agencies) consider to be one of the models of democratic governance, more efficient administration and economic development in sub-Sahara Africa (Alhassen, 2004). One may be hesitant to hold up any African country as a model after the demise of other "models" such as Cote d'Ivoire and Kenya, but Ghana, also sitting on a powder keg of injustice, offers a somewhat better quality of life at present. The media, especially the press, led by the type of professional journalists described above, are reputed to have made a significant contribution to this development, although it would be

difficult to pin down direct lines of causality. The media policies and legislation in areas of ICT, community radio, and educational media are also highly regarded.

Ghana allows a relatively high degree of media freedom which opens a space for what many consider a disreputable, irresponsible multiplication of cheap tabloid newspapers and magazines (Hasty, 2005). Few notable people in Ghana escape the wild accusations and insinuations in this sector of the media, although many are probably more cautious about their behaviour because of this kind of journalism. One of the young journalistic protagonists of this area of media (name withheld!) made cynical remarks about the need to promote journalistic professionalism. "The license to write and publish does not belong to journalists alone because journalism is about the right to free expression. If you try to insist too much on professionalism you exclude a large part of the population from freedom of expression". He argued that the field should be left open to those who are ready to violate codes of ethics in the name of freedom of expression. And he might have added his support in the name of entrepreneurial endeavour.

Fifteen dimensions of good standards in journalism

If the premise of this study is correct—that the moves toward the reform of ethical standards of the media in a given country or region are established largely by people in the media occupations with clear values and ideals—then how would one summarise the major dimensions of "professional ethics" in Ghana? Standards are brought out by responding with unpremeditated idealism to immediate work demands in the newsroom context. For virtually all those interviewed the major context was the repressive use of power in politics, superstition rites, economic greed and other areas of Ghanaian life. The common self concept of these journalists was some form of moral leadership. The following fifteen notable characteristics could very likely be found among outstanding journalists in other countries of Africa:

(1) Unswerving commitment to personal convictions of right and wrong;

(2) Honesty, transparency and cooperation within the media organisation;
(3) Commitment to the procedural aspects of democracy such as participation;
(4) The grounding of personal convictions in traditions of African moral philosophy;
(5) Mutual respect and esteem among colleagues, especially by editors;
(6) Clear ideas of human rights and commitment to uphold them;
(7) Basing every public statement on ample evidence and fairness;
(8) The mastery of the genres and rhetoric of journalism, especially the narrative style which fixes responsibility;
(9) Maintaining independence from all partisan interests in order to critically evaluate all;
(10) Activity in professional organisations and teaching of young journalists
(11) Courage in the face of threats of the powerful
(12) Independence of all influences of sources, especially financial influence;
(13) Strong awareness of currents of public opinion and ability to move public opinion;
(14) Continually seeking further education in the profession
(15) Belief in codes of ethics.

These fifteen characteristics are not a systematic textbook list of ethical norms, but they do describe what have become important dimensions of the normative culture of journalists in Ghana. These are the issues which have been important in the lives of many young journalists and these form the criteria for esteem of outstanding journalists in this particular country. In Ghana, at least, journalists tend to think of themselves as providing an important moral leadership in the country—and their self-concept seems to have considerable justification.

References

Abbott, A. (1981). Status and status strain in the professions. *American Journal of Sociology,* 86, 819-835.

Alhassen, A. (2004). *Development communication policy and economic fundamentalism in Ghana.* Tampere: University of Tampere Press.

Andoh, F. (1993). Ethics in newsgathering. In F. Kasoma (Ed.) *Journalism ethics in Africa* (pp. 210-235). Nairobi: African Council of Communication Education.

Anoka, K. & Osei-Mensah, A. (1986). The mass media, political attitudes and behaviour in Ghana, *Gazette,* 37, 139-154.

Anoka, K. & Salwen, M. (1988). Newspaper agenda setting among elites and non-elites in Ghana. *Gazette*, 41, 201-214.

Anoka, K. (1997). Press performance under civilian and military regimes in Ghana. In F. Eribo and W. Jong-Ebot (Eds.), *Press Freedom and Communication in Africa* (pp. 3-28). Asmara: Africa World Press.

Ansah, P. A.V. (1996). *Going to town: The writings of P.A.V. Ansah.* Accra: Ghana University Press.

Appiah, K.A. (2005). *The ethics of identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Asante, C.E. (1996). *The press in Ghana: Problems and prospects.* New York: University Press of America.

Ansu-Kyeremeh, K. & Karikari, K. (1998). Media Ghana: Ghanaian media overview: Practitioners and institutons. Legon: University of Ghana.

Boadu-Ayeboafo, Y. (2004). The media system in Ghana. In *Daily Graphic,* 7th August, 2004.

Boafo, S.T.K. (1985). Ghana's Press under the PNDC: Performance under confinement. *Gazette*, 35, 73-82.

Boafo, S.T.K. (1988). Journalism professionalism and training in Sub-Saharan Africa: A case study of Ghana, *Africa Media Review*, 2, 56-74.

Christians, C.G. (2008). The ethics of universal being. In S.J.A. Ward and H. Wasserman (Eds.), *Media ethics beyond borders: A global perspective*. Johannesburg: Heinemann.

Evenson, B. J.(2005). Progressivism, muckraking and objectivity. In S. R. Knowlton and K.L. Freeman (Eds.), *Fair and balanced: A history of journalistic objectivity* (pp. 136-148). Northport, AL: Vision Press.

Gans, H.J. (1980). *Deciding what's news.* Chicago: Northwestern University Press.

Gans, H.J. (2003). *Democracy and the news.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Habermas, J. (1990). *Moral consciousness and communicative action*. Trans. by C. Lenhardt and S. Weber Nicholson. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Hallin, D & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Hasty, J. (2005). *The press and political culture in Ghana.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
Hyden, G., Leslie, M. Ogundimu, F. (2002). *Media and democracy in Africa.* Uppsala: Nordic African Institute.
Josephi, B. (1999). From journalism school to newsroom: What rite of passage? *AsiaPacific MediaEducator,* 9,89-105.
Kasoma, F.P (1994). The need for journalism ethics in Africa. In F.P.Kasoma (Ed.) *Journalism ethics in Africa* (pp. 210-235). Nairobi: African Council for Communication Education.
Klaidman, S. and Beauchamp, T.L. (1987). *The virtuous journalist*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Koomson, B. (1996). A survey of ethical violations by Ghanaian Journalists. In Kwami Karikari (Ed.), *Ethics in jounalism: Case studies of practice in West Africa* (pp. 36-68) Accra: Ghana Universities Press)
Ogbondah, C.W. (1993). *Military regimes and the press in Nigeria, 1966-1993.* Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
Omu, F.I.A. (1978). *Press and politics in Nigeria, 1880-1937.* Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.
Pippert, W.G. (1989). *An ethics of news: A reporter's search for truth.* Washington: Georgetown University Press.
Retief, J. (2002). *Media Ethics: An introduction to responsible journalism*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
Wasserman, H. (2008). Media ethics and human dignity in the postcolony. In S.J.A.Ward & H. Wasserman (Eds.), *Media ethics beyond borders: A global* p*erspective* (pp. 74-89). Johannesburg: Heinemann.
Wilson, J.Q. (1993). *The moral sense*. New York: The Free Press.
Wilson, J.Q. (1995). *On character.* Washington: The American Enterprise Institute.
Woodward, B. & Bernstein, C. (1974). *All the president's men.* New York: Simon and Schuster.