Regional Radio: A Response by the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation to Democratization and Competition

Carla W. Heath

Randolph-Macon Woman’s College

Abstract: In 1992, constitutional governance was re-established in Ghana, and private broadcasting made legal for the first time. This paper explores one of the responses of the state-owned Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) to this novel situation, the opening of regional FM radio stations. Primary data for the paper was obtained from visits to six of the stations and interviews with station directors and other staff in July 1998. The political economic context in which the stations were established, their structures, and programming are examined. Evidence from this study indicates that with the new stations the GBC is expanding and enhancing its public service mandate. At the same time, institutional structures and scarce financial resources combine to prevent the Corporation from becoming independent of vested interests: government, commerce, or NGOs.

Résumé: En 1992, on rétablit un gouvernement constitutionnel au Ghana et on légalisa la radiodiffusion privée pour la première fois dans ce pays. Cet article explore une des réponses à cette nouvelle situation de la part du radiodiffuseur d’état, le Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) : l’ouverture de stations de radio FM régionales. Les données de cet article furent recueillies lors de visites de six de ces stations en juillet 1998 et d’entrevues avec les directeurs des stations et d’autres membres du personnel. L’article examine le contexte politico-économique de la création, la structure et la programmation de ces stations. Les données recueillies pour cette étude indiquent que, grâce aux nouvelles stations, le GBC est en train de prendre de l’extension et de mieux remplir son mandat de service public. En même temps, cependant, les structures institutionnelles et les ressources financières peu abondantes de la Corporation empêchent celle-ci de gagner son indépendance par rapport à certains organismes intéressés : le gouvernement, les entreprises et les associations à but non lucratif.

Driven by rapid developments in computer, satellite, and other information and communication technologies and wide spread enthusiasm for neo-liberal trade and fiscal policies, telecommunications and broadcasting institutions all over the world have been dramatically re-structured in the past 15 years. Where for

Carla W. Heath is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at Randolph-Macon Woman’s College, Lynchburg, VA 24503 USA. E-mail: cheath@rmwc.edu

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decades radio and television programs had been provided by state or public monopolies, dozens of alternative sources of audiovisual information and entertainment now vie for audiences, commercial billings, and/or shares of contracting public budgets.

In the face of eroding audiences and parliaments reluctant to raise license fees, public service broadcasters in established democracies have been obliged to re-think their missions and to exploit alternative revenue streams (Curran & Seaton, 1997; McQuail & Siune, 1998; Raboy, 1996; Rowland & Tracey, 1990; Shimizu, 1989; Quality Time?, 1993). In East and Central Europe, multi-party parliaments are engaged in negotiating new relationships between broadcasters and the state, and state-turned-public broadcasters endeavour to gain legitimacy with the public (O’Neil, 1998; Price, 1995; Sparks & Reading, 1998). As Latin American, Asian, and African states with long histories of authoritarian rule adopt democratic reforms, accommodations for private media outlets are being worked out as are new relations between media professionals and the state (Barnett, 1998; Brown, 1998; Joseph, 1996; Mpofu, Manhando, & Tomaselli, 1996; Nyamnjoh, 1998; Ogundimu, 1996; O’Neil, 1998; Raboy, 1996; Sinclair, Jacka, & Cunning, 1996; Zaffiro, 2000). Virtually everywhere former monopolies have been broken and public systems re-invented in accordance with the particular histories, political economies, geographies, and cultural expectations of the nation states they serve.

Like a number of African states, Ghana is currently engaged in re-structuring its broadcasting institutions and services. To date this has entailed opening the door to private investors, both foreign and indigenous; allocating frequencies to private commercial and not-for-profit entities (Heath, 1999); encouraging the corporation to adopt commercial principles and become financially independent of government; and expanding the services of the state-owned Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) to include regional FM radio stations. This paper is a case study of the regional GBC stations: the political economic context in which the stations were established, structures, and programming. Particular attention is given to the financial constraints under which the stations operate. I argue that with the opening of these stations, the GBC has come closer to realizing public service broadcasting ideals of universality of access and particular provisions for the least advantaged citizens (Broadcasting Research Unit, 1985) than it has in the past. However, lack of clear direction for the GBC under the new democratic dispensation as well as structural constraints and scarce financial resources prevent the corporation from fully realizing public service broadcasting ideals. The GBC is not yet independent of vested interests—political, economic, or non-governmental—and commercial imperatives threaten to override public service considerations.

The global context
The context for re-regulating and re-structuring of broadcasting systems on a global scale is the convergence of three interrelated sets of developments: the production and aggressive marketing of home video, cable, satellite, and Internet
delivery systems that hold out the promise of seemingly endless choice in news, information, and entertainment; vigorous lobbying of national governments by transnational corporations to eliminate barriers to cross-border movement of goods and services; and democratizing movements in many so-called second and third world countries (Price, 1995; Raboy, 1996; Rowland & Tracey, 1990). Free trade proponents argue that democracy is best served by a free marketplace of ideas provided by competitive private, commercial media and that state control of any medium of communication thwarts democracy and impedes commerce. Others (e.g., Ansah, 1991; McChesney, 1997; Price, 1995) maintain that true pluralism and genuine human development can only be fostered and sustained in a media environment that includes vital, well financed public service institutions. They point out that the imperatives that drive commercial media militate against catering for disadvantaged populations and minority cultural interests, providing public forums for in-depth discussion of public affairs, and devoting airtime to programs that engage audiences as active learners and intelligent citizens.

The African context
Marc Raboy (1996) has pointed out that public service broadcasting in Africa is a “distant ideal, not a working reality” (p. 78). Nevertheless, public or state broadcasters in Africa have typically associated themselves with the public service traditions of their former colonial masters. Systems in British colonies were established with assistance from professionals seconded from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC); those in French colonies were set up by the Société de Rediffusion de la France d’Outremer (SORAFOM, now Organisation de la Radio et al Télévision Française [ORFT]). Over the years, numerous engineers and producers have gone for training at the BBC, CBC, Studio Ecole, Radio Nederland, and Deutsche Welle. Nevertheless, it is evident from studies of African broadcasting (e.g., Bourgault, 1995; Heath, 1986; Mytton, 1983; Ulasi, 1989; Zaffiro, 1984) that no African system has achieved public service standards of independence, impartiality, universal access, or special consideration for minorities (Broadcasting Research Unit, 1985). However, they have typically been closely associated with national or, rather, state interests.

Constraints to independence, impartiality, and universal access: Centralization
Taking their cue from the colonial governments they replaced and Western communication consultants like Wilbur Schramm (1964), leaders of newly independent African states typically regarded radio as a powerful administrative tool that was important for spurring economic and social development, creating national integration, and legitimizing their regimes (Bourgault, 1995; Heath, 1986; Mytton, 1983). It was thought that these purposes were best served by centralized systems that employed powerful medium- and short-wave transmitters that reached most, but seldom all, of the country. Important exceptions were Nigeria, a federation, where regional or state stations have existed alongside national ones since before independence (Ladele, Adefela, & Lasekar, 1979), and South Africa, where apartheid policies dictated the establishment of FM African language sta-
tions in the early 1960s (Hayman & Tomaselli, 1989). Not surprisingly, national broadcasting houses and transmitting stations became prime targets of coup makers and hence heavily guarded facilities, off limits to foreigners and most citizens. African governments that feared ethnic and sectarian factionalism and challenges to their regimes preferred to beef-up centralized transmission rather than “risk” decentralization. Over the years, African broadcasting systems came to be regarded as the voice of the party or regime in power. One of the major challenges facing public media today is to gain public confidence and a reputation for unbiased, fair reporting.

Economic factors also contributed to centralization. Shortly after independence, states made considerable capital investments in medium- and short-wave equipment. For prestige reasons, the little money available for capital improvements in the next decade was usually spent to introduce television. The economic logic here was that in order to cover a country, dozens of VHF/FM facilities would have to be built, maintained, and staffed. Neither national power grids nor paved roads reached every community. Furthermore, trained personnel were reluctant to accept rural postings. Additionally, it was argued that radio receivers marketed in Africa were not designed to receive FM signals.

Language
Even where radio signals could be received, they were often not linguistically accessible. Typically, African broadcasters have employed the language of the former colonial power, which had been adopted as an official language, plus a number of African languages. For example, in Zambia time was allocated to seven African languages in proportion to the size of language community in the nation (Mytton, 1983). The Voice of Kenya (now the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation) transmitted two services to the entire nation: the General Service used English; the National Service used Swahili. In addition, there were three regional services on which time for a total of 16 languages was shared (Heath, 1986).

Arrangements in Ghana were similar to those in Kenya. Radio Ghana operated two national services. Radio I was a non-commercial service on which time for broadcasts in 6 African languages (Akan, Dagbani, Ewe, Ga, Nzema, and Hausa) as well as English was shared. Reception was augmented by 51 wire re-diffusion stations that relayed the national service and a few local programs to some 60,000 subscribers with pre-set boxes (Ansah, 1979). In the public service tradition, Radio I aired regular programs for children, youth, and women as well as programs for farmers and fishermen. However, the service did not serve all populations well and could not be regarded as a medium for genuine social and economic development. Less than two hours a day was available for any one language, and a number of language communities, especially in the Northern and Upper regions, were not served at all. Furthermore, news bulletins in local languages were, according to Paul Ansah (1979), “summarized translations of national and world news broadcast in English,” not reports of local or regional events and issues (p. 9). Even locally produced programs carried via the re-diffu-
sion systems gave more attention to “studio discussions on national civic issues” than to matters of particular concern to rural citizens (p. 12).

Radio II, a commercial English-language service, carried news, talks, morally up-lifting programs, and music as well as social and funeral announcements. Although English is not well understood by the majority of Ghanaians, Radio II had a bigger audience than Radio I in some areas, possibly because of its musical programs and the “lack of continuity in GBCI programmes” (p. 8). Its frequencies were also used for Schools Broadcasts (Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, 1985) and, since 1992, “Literacy Line,” a functional literacy program produced by the Non-formal Education Division (NFED) of Ghana Educational Services (Kwami Ansre, Deputy Director, Radio, Non-formal Educational Division of Ghana Educational Services, Accra, personal communication, November 7, 2000). Both national services are still in operation.

Opening the airwaves
The restructuring and re-regulation of sub-Saharan African broadcasting systems is associated with a new era of political pluralism and neo-liberal economic policies that swept across the continent in the decade following the fall of the Berlin Wall. After decades of state control and limited choice of media, liberal rhetoric that associated democracy with private media and a free market was particularly attractive to the general public and business communities alike. However, it was also assumed by persons concerned with human rights that independent national public service systems were needed to assure genuine pluralism and attention to social development as well as national unity (Ansah, 1991; Karikari, 1994; Koomson, 1995).

In South Africa and Namibia, serious efforts were made in the early 1990s to transform state systems that had been tools of apartheid and colonial oppression into public service broadcata whose missions are “advancing unity in diversity” (Gorelick, 1996, p. 231) and “serving as a single public sphere at a national scale, providing a space for democratic communication and national unification” (Barnett, 1998, p. 552). According to James Zaffiro (2000), reforms at the South African Broadcasting Corporation spurred the government of Botswana to “grant parastatal status to Radio Botswana (RB), to allow commercial broadcasting, and proceed with long-standing plans to initiate a national television service (BNTS)” (p. 1). Elsewhere, reforms of public or state broadcasting institutions have been less systematic and have taken a back seat to getting private stations on the air. Reports from the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) (Minnie & Mwape, 1997), Article 19 (1995), PANOS (Lake, 1993), and the Africa/Information/Afrique news service (1997-99) indicate the process has been halting and uneven, slowed or obstructed by military coups, civil wars, resistance to change on the part of entrenched political leaders, and sluggish bureaucracies (Carver, 1995; Holmes, 1999; Lake, 1993; Minnie & Mwape, 1997; Zaffiro, 2000). Dozens of private radio stations—commercial and not-for-profit—are on the air in Mali, Burkina Faso, South Africa, Nigeria, and Ghana. However, in Kenya, Zanzibar, Malawi, and Zambia, where allocation of frequencies is tightly controlled by a
cabinet minister, few private stations have been licensed. No private radio operator has been licensed in Zimbabwe although the Supreme Court ruled that the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation's monopoly is unconstitutional (Machipisa, 2000). In a number of countries, licenses to operate radio or television stations were issued before an independent broadcasting authority or procedures by which frequencies would be allocated were established, leaving the process open to allegations of political bias, nepotism, and cronyism (Holmes, 1999; Kilimwiko, 1997; Lush, 1995; Nyamnjoh, 1998; Scott, 1996). Where authorities to manage frequencies have been established, they are typically appointed by the government-of-the-day and are thus vulnerable to political pressures and shifting economic priorities (Barnett, 1998; Minnie & Mwape, 1997).

Decentralization of the GBC
Plans for GBC FM radio stations in each regional capital have been on the books since the 1970s (Amakyi, 1988; Ansah, 1979); however, there was neither the political will nor the financial resources to realize that plan before the mid-1990s.1 When Flight Lieutenant J. J. Rawlings took power for the second time on December 31, 1981,2 the Ghanaian economy was near collapse (Owusu, 1996; Rothchild, 1991). The economic crisis had affected every aspect of the nation's infrastructure; the situation at the GBC had deteriorated to the point that only two 10 kilowatt short-wave transmitters were functioning (Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, 1985). In 1982, the governing Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) adopted an economic recovery program that met with World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) approval and attracted foreign aid. These measures set the country on the road to economic stabilization and restored donor confidence. For example, as a sign of its approval of the economic reform measures instituted by the PNDC, the Japanese government made 700 million yen in aid available to the GBC. Subsequently, three 50 kilowatt short-wave transmitters were commissioned in 1985 for the Corporation’s Golden Jubilee, making reliable 24 hour-a-day domestic service and revival of the external service possible. Colour television equipment was installed and TV technical facilities and studios modernized (Quao, 1985). In 1986, with a gift of a 500 watt transmitter from West Germany, the GBC launched its first regional FM station, Greater Accra Radio (GAR).

The PNDC, apparently fearing that regional broadcasting stations might lead to factionalism and threats to national security, continued to resist advice from media experts like Paul Ansah (1979, 1985) who argued persuasively that a decentralized public service broadcasting system would, in fact, further national integration as well as encourage economic and social development. However, three re-diffusion stations were converted into low-power FM community stations during the decade (Amakyi, 1988). This was not really a step toward decentralization as the stations were designed to complement development projects of other agencies: the University of Ghana School of Communication Studies’ Wonsuom self-help project in Swedru (Obeng-Quaidoo, 1988), the NFED’s Literacy for Life projects in Apam and Bolgatanga (Laflin, Quarmyne, & Ansre, 1998), and work
of the Institute for Field Communication and Agricultural Training (IFCAT) in Bolgatanga (Todd, 1980). The stations, which were funded by World Bank loans and assistance from UNESCO, the Netherlands, and Sweden, employed local languages and focused on agriculture, fishing, and education. When external support for the projects dried up, the stations were effectively abandoned. The Swedru and Apam facilities were turned over to local District Assemblies, which apparently had little interest in reviving them as they are now closed. As discussed below, the Bolgatanga station was transformed into a full-service regional station.

In 1991, the PNDC reluctantly acceded to pressures from Ghanaian civil society and international “donors” to restore constitutional governance and further liberalize the economy (Boafo-Arthur, 1999; Gyimah-Boadi, 1999; Oquaye, 1995). The Constitution of the Fourth Republic was adopted in April 1992; the ban on political parties was lifted and dozens of opposition newspapers appeared on the newsstands. The PNDC transformed itself into a political party, the National Democratic Congress (NDC), and Rawlings contested the November 1992 presidential election, which he won with 58.3% of the vote. However, the opposition maintained the election had been rigged (Jeffries & Thomas, 1993; Oquaye, 1995) and boycotted the December parliamentary elections, giving the NDC 189 of 200 seats in parliament.

Although opposition parties were not represented in parliament, opposing voices were heard in the press and civic associations. The 1992 Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and forbids the licensing of any medium of mass communication, including radio and television (Republic of Ghana, 1992, Article 162 [3]). By 1995, the state had begun to authorize private radio and television stations3 (Heath, 1999), which played an important role in generating interest in the 1996 election and keeping it “somewhat competitive” (Gyimah-Boadi, 1999, p. 414). Rawlings was re-elected in 1996 with 57.4% of the votes. Opposition candidates captured 66 of the seats in parliament.

The new environment of political and media pluralism demanded that the role, status, and structure of the GBC be rethought. In a message to the corporation in 1995, then Minister for Information Kofi Totobi Quakyi wrote: it is “time to redefine the objectives of public service broadcasting in Ghana and to formulate GBC’s strategic plans for the next decade.” The government, he promised, would continue to fund infrastructure to enable the corporation to “share development information equitably and provide wide access throughout the country.” For its part, the “GBC should endeavour to forge a more participatory and collaborative relationship which would truly serve the public by expressing their political and cultural diversity while pursing the national development agenda.” In reference to the anticipated opening of commercial stations, the minister urged the GBC to maintain “its traditional broad spectrum role and not allow commercial considerations and the temptation to go in for imported programmes to turn the corporation into a cultural ghetto” (cited in Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, 1995, p. 10). Nevertheless, the same anniversary publication that carried
Totobi-Quakyi’s remarks indicated the GBC was under pressure from government to become financially independent.

**Regional GBC affiliates**

**Structure**

There are stations in 9 of the 10 regional capitals: Greater Accra Radio (GAR), Accra; Garden City Radio (GCR), Kumasi; BAR FM, Sunyani; Volta Star, Ho; Radio Central, Cape Coast; Twin City Radio, Sekondi; Radio Savana, Tamale; Upper Regional Agricultural Radio (URAR), Bolgatanga; and Wa in the Upper West. There is no GBC station in Koforidua, Eastern Region, although GAR can be received there. A number of factors contributed to the decision to begin the process of converting re-diffusion stations in regional capitals into full-service FM stations in 1994:

1. The stations would enable the NDC to extend and amplify its messages, a particularly important consideration in the run up to the 1996 national elections. Radio Central, Volta Star, and Savana were all commissioned in 1996 (Wa FM was opened in 2000, in time for that year’s election campaigns).

2. A semi-decentralized public service broadcasting system was consonant with the 1996-2000 development plan (Republic of Ghana, 1995) that affirms the government’s commitment to administrative decentralization.

3. GAR had demonstrated the popularity of FM radio with Accra audiences, and the GBC hoped to get a jumpstart on private stations expected to open in major cities in the near future. Both GCR in Kumasi, Ghana’s second largest city, and Twin City FM, serving Sekondi-Takoradi, an important commercial and industrial centre, were opened in 1994.

4. The Bolgatanga station was already in operation, and the NFED had negotiated a loan from the World Bank for transmitters, production equipment, and building renovations for the Ho and Tamale stations.

5. Regional stations that were expected to be vehicles for social and economic development as well as financially self-sufficient operations offered the GBC a way to resolve the contradictions embedded in the mandate to be a commercially viable public service broadcasting system.

In July 1998, I interviewed regional directors and other professional staff at six of the stations. These informants described their stations’ missions as mobilizing the public to solve their own problems; serving as a forum for discussion of local public affairs; offering entertainment in the language or languages of the area; and transmitting government information. These objectives closely follow the guidelines for improving the country’s capacity to undertake developmental activities set out in the government’s development plan, *Vision 2020*, which includes:

- establishing free-flowing information systems in support of community initiative, innovation and private entrepreneurship
• integrating public participation into the development and development planning process
• raising the awareness of the population to the economic potentials of cultural practices and traditional festivities for community and national development
• promoting the development and use of Ghanaian languages and the Ghanaian cultural heritage in educational institutions. (Republic of Ghana, 1995, p. 81)

Six of the facilities are wholly owed and operated by the GBC; Volta Star and Radio Savana are partnerships between the GBC and NFED. Savana also has an arrangement with Simli Radio, a Ghana Denmark Communities Project (GDCP) whereby Savana’s signal is boosted by a transmitter in Dalun (donated by the Danish government) in exchange for 2 hours of airtime a week (Sadiq Harruna, Director, Simli Radio, personal communication, November 2, 2000). The GBC in Accra handles administration and sets general policy while regional directors and their staffs are given free reign to develop programs and formats in the style and languages best suited to regional conditions, needs, and tastes. Each station has an advisory committee composed of representatives from the Ministry of Information, the Regional Chief Executive Office, the House of Chiefs, religious associations, and opinion leaders in the region. To date, these bodies do not appear to have taken an active role in either setting policy or monitoring programs (Kwami Ansre, Deputy Director, Radio, Non-formal Educational Division of Ghana Educational Services, Accra, personal communication, November 7, 2000).

The GBC is financed by parliamentary subventions, sponsorships, spot ads, and license fees for television sets. Regional stations receive monthly allowances for operating expenses: transportation, electricity, diesel for generators, and general maintenance. In return, the stations are expected to meet revenue targets set by the Director General. These targets are based on estimates of the potential of the station to raise revenue from the collection of television license fees, the sale of airtime for social and commercial announcements, and the sale of listener request coupons. For example, the target for GCR in Kumasi was 500 million cedis for 1998, Radio Central’s was half that, and Savana’s a tenth.

In an interview, W. C. K. Obuobi, Director of Radio Savana, explained that they were expected to raise 35 million cedis from announcements and ads and 25 million cedis from television license fees (personal communication, July 13, 1998). This meant collecting the 3,000 cedi fee from more than 8,000 set owners. Obuobi felt these targets were “too optimistic.” The region is poor and suffers from years of neglect by central governments, there is little or no industrial development in the region, and many villages in the area are still not hooked up to the national power grid. In addition, the population is largely Muslim and thus does not use the radio for funeral announcements, as is the case in the southern part of the country where such announcements account for a significant portion of many stations’ incomes. The station must rely heavily on non-governmental organization (NGO) sponsorships and spot ads for revenue.
In contrast, Evans Acheampong, Director of URAR in Bolgatanga an hour to the north, was optimistic that he would be able to transform the former agricultural service into a full-fledged and self-sufficient commercial operation (personal communication, July 14, 1998). In the two months he had been at the post, he had introduced new programs such as Radio Lawyer, Women's Digest, Gospel Trail, and Heart to Heart, which, he said, were of interest to potential advertisers, perhaps because they address interests of middle-income audiences whom advertisers want to reach. He had also begun negotiations with NGOs for sponsorships and the production of public service announcements. Additionally, he had enlisted the support of the Chiefs, Tribunal, and Police in an aggressive campaign to sell television licenses. The owners of unlicensed sets were fined 100,000 cedis, of which the police kept 50% (Evans Acheampong, personal communication, July 14, 1998).

The GBC has been partially supported by commercials since 1967, primarily from local subsidiaries of large transnational corporations like Unilever, Daiwood, Fan Milk, and Samsung (Kugblenu, 1978), and the new multi-channel radio environment has made the public more aware of ads. However, the practice of using the mass media to advertise goods or services is just beginning to catch on with indigenous businesses in Ghana. Informants in Ho and Tamale in particular spoke of the difficulty of persuading local entrepreneurs to use radio to enhance sales. Everywhere, the economic slow down, the 1998 power shortage, and competition from private stations limited commercial billings.

Regional stations remit 40% of their revenues to GBC Accra; however, a station’s allowance remains fixed regardless of the amount raised from the sale of airtime or television licenses. In effect, the commercially viable stations like GAR, GCR, and Twin City FM are subsidizing the stations in poorer, less industrialized areas. While this arrangement is in accord with government efforts to redress the tendency for wealth, resources, and power to be concentrated in urban areas, it conflicts with the same government’s directive to the GBC to become commercially viable and financially independent.

Other structural factors further constrained economic solvency. For example, the Bolgatanga, Tamale, and Ho stations were saddled with multi-million cedi debts to the power and telephone companies that the stations were expected to pay off with their monthly allowance even though those amounts barely covered monthly power bills. Volta Star’s transmitter was powered by diesel costing 300,000 cedis per day because the transmission site had not yet been connected to the national grid. According to the 1992 Ghana Educational Services contract with the GBC, the NFED was to use a World Bank loan to renovate old re-diffusion stations in Tamale and Ho; provide transmitters and production equipment; and pay, train, and equip its staff. In return, 60% of the airtime on Radio Savana and Volta Star was to be devoted to NFED functional literacy programs without charge to the Division (Laflin, Quarmyne, & Ansre, 1998). Directors complained to me that the NFED had not met its financial obligations. However, a 1998 study for the World Bank and NFED (Laflin, Quarmyne, & Ansre, 1998) indicates that
only 10% of the airtime at Volta Star and Radio Savana, ten 30-minute programs a week, was devoted to NFED programs and NFED personnel were being used to produce “regular” programs for the stations. Under pressure to become self-sufficient, station managers are reluctant to allocate time or resources to programs that are un-sponsored or do not attract advertisers who want to reach listeners with some disposable income.

Programming
In keeping with official directives and the new competitive broadcasting environment, GBC broadcasters are beginning to develop programs that could be labeled “edutainment” (Kofi Frimpong, Director General, GBC, Accra, personal communication, July 7, 1998) and to pay attention to the way educative programs are “packaged” (R. C. Yamoah, Director, Garden City Radio, Kumasi, personal communication, July 21, 1998). As is the case almost everywhere in the world, music is the mainstay of radio broadcasting in Ghana, and radio continues to be the primary source of news. Because equipment as well as time and space for program production are limited, few programs are pre-recorded. In their study of Volta Star and Radio Savana for the NFED and World Bank, Laflin, Quarmyne, & Ansre (1998) found that out of a 16-hour broadcast day only 30 minutes was devoted to pre-recorded programs. Typically, scripts are simple, perhaps incorporating unedited field interviews or vox pop responses to producers’ questions, and live programs are “largely unplanned and unscripted” (p. 3).

At the time of my study, all stations began the day with devotional music and messages, all had slots for listeners’ requests, and all had romantic or easy listening music late in the evening. Throughout the day, the variety and type of music played varied considerably and often depended upon a DJ’s personal collection or what she or he could borrow from friends. For example, R. C. Yamoah, Director of GCR, is an avid audiophile and has an extensive personal collection of African music picked up on his travels abroad. This makes possible a rich musical mix on the Kumasi station. On the other hand, there was only a handful of worn, mostly Western pop cassettes at the studio in Ho. There is no regulation specifying a certain percentage of Ghanaian or African music; however, the GBC’s target is 60% African, an objective shared by many of the private commercial stations. In 1998, most of the African music played on radio in Ghana had been recorded abroad and purchased in London, Berlin, Johannesburg, or New York. Ideally, GBC regional stations would devote airtime to live performances by local musicians. While the stations have the studio space, the facilities are not fitted acoustically or technically for such events. Additionally, there is no money to pay artists or even to bring them to the studio for a session, and regional stations outside of Accra have no outside broadcast equipment or vehicles that could be used to record musicians in the field, at festivals, ceremonies, and the like.

Several times a day, the regional stations hook up via pre-set tuners to Radio I or II for national and world news in English and the appropriate vernacular. The amount and nature of local and regional news vary and seem to be a function of resources and staff initiative. For example, there were 6 news people at Central but
only 2 at URAR and 1 at Savana. These reporters were also responsible for writing stories that were sent to Accra to be used in national radio and television reports. A chronic problem for journalists who cover a wide area is transportation. At the time of my visits, there was no working vehicle at URAR, Volta Star, or Radio Central, and only one at Savana. Reporters rely on taxis, or organizations and individuals who want coverage send vehicles to carry journalists and cameramen to the event venue. As Jennifer Hasty (1999) has demonstrated, invited assignments such as these result in news that legitimizes and shores-up the authority and development agendas of the government and well-placed NGOs. Journalists are also hampered by the lack of professional sound recording equipment and even typewriters. Computers were an unheard of luxury in GBC stations outside of Accra although they were commonplace in the private stations visited at the same time. Directors are encouraged to find their own solutions to these problems. For example, Evans Acheampong, Director of URAR, was negotiating with PACIPE, an environmental NGO in the area, for tape recorders and motorbikes to facilitate collection of reports from the field (personal communication, July 14, 1998).

Perhaps the most important programs with regard to the public service broadcasting mandate to address audiences as citizens (rather than consumers) are those that actively engage the public. These take a variety of forms. As “Opatuo” (The Owl), R. C. Yamoah, popular radio host and Director of GCR, calls attention to all manner of environmental issues including the unsanitary conditions in chop bars and filthy auto mechanics who offend fellow passengers in tro-tros and taxis (“GCR’s Broadcasting Genius Yamoah Ponko,” 1998). Central Radio’s staff is similarly engaged in mobilizing citizens to clean up their compounds and work areas and to put pressure on their neighbours to clean theirs. Rural communication professionals associated with the GDFP and NFED use radio and listening groups to encourage popular participation in programs for health, environmental awareness, and functional literacy (Sadiq Harruna, Director, Simli Radio, personal communication, November 2, 2000; Windborne, 1999). However, as discussed above, there are limits to the time made available for these programs.

Particularly popular in metropolitan areas are public affairs programs like GAR’s Woman to Woman and Godwin on the Beat, and GCR’s Kyere Wadwene on which studio guests, representing a range of perspectives, debate topical issues and take questions from callers. The new radio stations have also taken on the role of mediator between the public and government. For example, persons responsible for services such as water and electricity are invited to the stations to explain policies and regulations and to respond to queries and complaints from listeners. In some cases, station personnel have set up forums at which private citizens and officials listen to each other and work toward consensus and co-operation.

Policy guidelines call for 80% of programming in vernacular languages, a goal that is gradually being met. The mix of languages varies considerably. URAR uses 6 languages widely spoken in the two upper regions whereas GAR has almost no vernacular programming although callers to talk and request shows often use their own languages. Radio Central and GCR make extensive use of Fanti and
Twi, the variants of Akan common in those regions; Savana broadcasts in Gonja and Dagbani; URAR in Gurenne, Dagari, and Kusaal; Volta Star uses Ewe along with Akan and English. Ga, the language of the indigenous population of Greater Accra, was noticeably absent from the airwaves in 1998 except for one program on Groove FM (a commercial station), GBC’s Radio I, and 30 minutes once a week on GTV.

Conclusions
The prospects for public service broadcasting in Ghana are mixed; much depends upon the continuation of democratic governance and on sustained economic growth. In the last 5 years, the GBC has moved closer to realizing public service ideals of impartiality and universality. News divisions have made good faith efforts to provide fair and balanced reporting of all political parities and regional activities, although a November 2000 report by the Media Monitoring Project of the National Media Commission showed that between 32% and 40% of the election news stories in the public and private media monitored concerned the NDC with 18-24% for the leading opposition National Patriotic Party (“NMC Evaluates Media Coverage …,” 2000, p. 3).

The regional GBC stations offer services with which area listeners can and do identify (Windborne, 1999). They have become vital elements in what has become a lively, competitive media environment. FM reception is clearer and more reliable than short-wave; the amount of time devoted to broadcasts in major Ghanaian languages (with the odd exception of Ga) has increased dramatically; and enterprising reporters and producers have taken initiatives intended to encourage citizens to organize to achieve economic and social objectives. Additionally, competition has meant greater attention to audience interests, needs, and listening habits, which is likely to be healthy for all.

But the corporation is still dependent upon annual parliamentary votes for salaries and emoluments as well as capital development and on commercial and NGO sponsorships and spot ads for operating expenses. Current financial arrangements, whereby regional stations in relatively prosperous and industrialized areas effectively subsidize stations in poorer regions, cannot provide adequate funding without sustained economic growth. In any case, these arrangements simply shift dependence from government to commerce or NGOs. There is a real possibility that public service programming will be compromised by the need to produce programs that are attractive to commercial or not-for-profit sponsors or to sell air time to religious institutions (Windborne, 1999). The incompatibility of commercial imperatives and public service broadcasting ideals has been well demonstrated (Barnett, 1998; Engleman, 1996; Herman & McChesney, 1997; Raboy, 1996). The least advantaged segments of the public: children, the elderly, the handicapped, and poor women, who are of little interest to advertisers, tend to be neglected rather than specially catered for. The consequences of dependence on NGOs have not been fully explored, but anecdotal evidence from persons associated with other public service institutions regarding the variability and particular nature of NGOs’ agendas as well as the time and energy
spent writing grant proposals suggests this is not a dependable or cost effective way to finance a public service broadcasting system. What are needed are steady, reliable sources of revenues that do not depend upon the whims of politicians, agendas of NGOs, or imperatives of the market place. One possible source in Ghana is revenues from corporate income taxes currently levied on commercial radio and television enterprises. Such an imposition would be acceptable only if the GBC became truly independent of government and the corporation ceased commercial operations. It would be viable only if commercial stations continued to be profitable. Additionally, parliament could establish an autonomous audiovisual production centre whose facilities and equipment could be rented by public and private producers. Profits from the centre could be dedicated to financing a streamlined GBC. Such a centre would make local production more cost effective, encourage Ghanaian talent and diversity of cultural expression, and resolve the contradictions inherent in a public service broadcasting system driven by commercial imperatives.

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Notes
1. The Gold Coast Broadcasting Commission of 1953 had recommended placing transmitters in Tamale, Kumasi, Skeondi-Takoradi, Accra, and Ho. Inadequate finances and staff were given as the reasons for not implementing the recommendation; however, it seems more likely that the perception that regional radio would be divisive was the reason (Ansah, 1985).
2. Ghana has had nine governments since independence in 1957; five of them military. Rawlings first came to power in a military mutiny in June 1979. In October that year, he handed over power to a civilian government headed by Hilla Limann. On December 31, 1981, Rawlings seized Broadcasting House to announce a “revolution.” The Constitution of the Third Republic was suspended, Parliament was dissolved, and governance was put in the hands of the Provisional National Defence Council (Shillington, 1992). The Fourth Republic came into being in January 1993.
3. The Ghana Frequency Registration and Control Board authorized 10 new FM radio stations, 6 in Accra and 4 in Kumasi, and 3 free on-air commercial TV stations in July 1995. By April 2000, 58 FM radio, 3 free-on-air TV, and 14 subscription TV stations had been authorized. Forty-nine FM stations were on air; of these 11 were state-owned. Of the 17 TV stations authorized, 3 free-on-air and 9 subscription services were operational. Of the on-air stations, only the state-owned GTV had nationwide coverage. Metro TV, jointly owned by GTV and Media No. 1, a private company, could be received in Greater Accra and parts of the Central and Ashanti Regions; TV3, owned by a Malaysian-based company, could be received in Greater Accra and parts of Eastern and Central Regions (National Communications Authority, Ghana, 2000).
4. In fact, the NDC did make extensive use of GTV and Ghana Radio to publicize the party’s role in extending electricity, pipe-born water, paved roads, and other amenities to rural communities (Hasty, 1999; Jeffries, 1998).

5. In 1998, the exchange rate was approximately 2,300 cedis for U.S.$1.

6. Initially, the stations were required to remit 100% of their revenues to Accra; however, the directors complained that this left them with no cash for emergencies and acted as a disincentive to sales departments. Their complaints did not go unheeded.

7. Minister of Finance Kwame Peprah’s report to Parliament on the state of the economy in April 2000 was not promising. The minister cited a steep drop in the price of cocoa on the world market, “confusion in the gold market,” and the rising cost of crude oil as the principal reasons for depreciation of the cedi (Joy FM, April 27, 2000; see URL: http://www.joy-fm.com).

References


