

Coverage of Library Issues in Ghanaian Newspapers, 2001 – 2006

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Abstract

The study examined the frequency and prominence of library-related articles in state-owned newspapers in Ghana. The editions of the four newspapers, two dailies and two weeklies, published from January 2001 to December 2006 were examined. The editions contained a total of only 174 libraries-related articles, showing that library-related articles were seldom published. The majority of the articles (63.2%) presented what-took-place information on library-related events and episodes, and lacked in-depth background information and analysis of issues. Most of the articles were also on community libraries. Only 23.6% of the articles comprised feature or thematic articles, while 13.2% were letters. Only two of the articles were editorials. The articles were not placed in prominent locations in the newspapers, as only one article was published on a front page and the caption of that article was not as bold and prominent as the other articles on the page. All the other articles on libraries appeared in the second half of the newspapers. Library professionals should work toward writing stories frequently about library issues as they would be able to articulate the issues better than non-professionals. They should also provide information tips and feeds to journalists to enable them write informative stories on libraries.

Keywords

Libraries, newspapers, news stories, Ghana

Introduction

Newspapers, like any other news communication media, aim to inform, educate and entertain. They are usually inexpensive, easily accessible, have diverse social uses, and can be read and reread. They often circulate widely, thereby having potential impact on large numbers of people in a country. Xu (2006) also pointed out that 47.2% of China's huge population consider newspapers as their first source of information, a proportion much higher than for television and radio. Although newspapers' pre-eminence continues to be challenged by radio, television, periodicals and websites, they still remain popular and influential. Yanovitzky (2002) reported that on average, legislators spent 1.8 hours each day reading daily newspapers and 1.5 hours a day watching television news programmes. Kawamoto (2003) also noted the power of the press through which was unfolded, the Watergate scandal that led to the resignation of President Nixon of the USA in the 1970's. Much of the credit went to the Washington Post newspaper whose investigative prowess exposed the deal and led to important social reforms.

Newspapers usually feature news stories, feature articles, advertisements, letters to the editor, editorials, among others. They usually report general interest events that occur within 24 hour periods, although non-daily newspapers provide news covering a longer period of time. They also serve as primary sources of general information due to their local origin. Due to these features, newspapers have become a principal media for serious reporting and analysis of social issues. Government agencies,

commissions as well as individuals have relied heavily on newspapers for the enumeration and characterisation of events. People have investigated what proportions of news as a whole are devoted to specific subject matters of their interest. Some people and businesses advertise their products and services in the newspapers to persuade and to attract customers. But where one wants to promote without directly advertising, one can seek newspaper coverage. Because newspapers serve as an important source of information for many including opinion leaders and policy makers, the frequency and prominence of library-related content in newspapers may influence libraries-oriented policies in government and public opinions and attitudes in communities at large.

Libraries play a major role in the educational system and in the development of a strong human resource base in the socio-economic development of a country. They collect, organise, preserve and make available information and knowledge as and when it is needed. Thus, people use libraries to acquire information and knowledge to improve their lives. Ghana continues to implement various educational reforms in order to provide improving access to quality education by its citizens. One of the factors affecting quality education in the country is lack of well-stocked and well-equipped libraries, which some also attribute as one of the primary contributors to the poor reading habits among Ghanaians. Unfortunately, the promotion and development of library systems in Ghana have not been accorded the priority they deserve (Alemna, 2006). The document, *Meeting the Challenges of Education in the 21st Century* (2002) elaborated on the current state of libraries in Ghana, noting that the libraries in Ghanaian schools are bedeviled with inadequate and obsolete materials, inadequate library buildings and infrastructure, inadequate staffing and inadequate funding. Inadequate funding has negative effects on all aspects of library management, from acquisition of new/current reading materials and equipment, subscription to journals and to staffing.

Alemna (2006) also noted that the poor recognition of the importance of libraries in the educational and development processes was also getting worse, and library facilities and services were getting poorer. Could this be due to inadequate

coverage and reporting of library issues and problems in the most easily accessible social communication media such as newspapers, radio and television? This question, as well as recognition of the great potential influence stories and articles in newspapers can exert on the awareness and attitudes of opinion leaders, politicians, policy makers and members of the society at large motivated this study, which sought to find out the frequency and prominence of libraries-related stories and articles in the national newspapers in Ghana.

Literature Review

Previous studies that looked at newspaper coverage of different issues suggested that the way in which stories and articles on the issues are portrayed in terms of frequency, prominence and framing influences perceptions and decision making. These studies supported the assumption that intense media attention and coverage of issues are instrumental in attracting policy attention to the public problems that are low on policy-makers' agenda. It also creates a sense of urgency among policy makers to generate immediate short-term solutions to the problems. Yanovitzky (2002) studied effects of news coverage on policy attention and actions in relation to drunk-driving from January 1978 to December 1995. Lexis-Nexis on-line database was searched to generate the census of all drunk-driving related stories that appeared in the New York Times, Washington Post and the Associated Press. One of the findings was that as the average number of news stories per month increased, so also did bills passed to check drunk-driving increase. For example in 1978 to 1980, when the average number of 14.8 stories was published in a month, five bills were passed. From 1985 to 1998 when the average monthly news story rose to 93.4, bills passed increased to 39.

Myhre et al (2002) investigated the nature and extent of alcohol coverage in California newspapers by examining the frequency, positioning and framing of alcohol-related articles in nine newspapers. A sample comprising 1,377 editions of the newspapers was content analysed. One of the findings was that alcohol was mentioned at least once a day in nine daily newspapers serving California communities. It was commented that although alcohol content in the daily newspapers is a small fraction of all news,

the fact that it was mentioned on a daily basis merits attention. This daily mentioning would give California newspaper readers the opportunity to read at least one story mentioning alcohol a day. In addition, the cumulative effect of consistent alcohol coverage suggested that reporters and editors had the opportunity to educate the public on numerous alcohol-related issues. Other studies were of the view that when topics did not receive much publication, it means much importance was not accorded the issue (Essegbey, 1996; Amoakohene, 1995; Woodruff, Berends & Agron, 2003).

Beyond sheer frequency of news stories, how the stories are presented or displayed also influences the way the public interprets and responds to them. A news item which is placed on the front page of the paper in bold title or at the right corner of a page attracts more reader attention than articles placed less prominently. Woodruff, Berends and Agron (2003) examined the news in California's major newspapers during 1998-2000 to determine how newspapers cover childhood nutrition. They noted that substantive articles on childhood nutrition policy were rare. However, whatever substantive news that was available were well placed. They also realized that in-depth articles on important factors that affect children's health were mostly contributions from public health professionals.

Another way of giving prominence to an issue is publishing it as an editorial. Editorial contains the opinion of the editor or the newspaper. It provides a kind of interpretation, comment or opinion that gives the reader added perspective on stories carried on other pages. According to Habel (2006) editorials are viewed as the opinionated extension of what is reported in the news sections. They are perceived as the voice of a community of experts or representing the views of an informed group which can sway the public or serve as a reflection of the views of ideologues. He argued that editorials are under no obligation to present both sides of arguments or to moderate other people's view. They challenge, rebuke or praise as they deem fit. They make statements potentially valuable to serve as instruments for political influence because they have policy influence in mind. Editorials thus have policy ramifications and can change attitudes and behaviours of readers towards matters.

In his study of assessing the level of editorial influence on national policies, Habel (2006) examined all speeches made on the floor of the US Congress (House and Senate) for references made to editorials published by the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal newspapers in 1985, 1989, 1993 and 2002. He found out that the frequency of citing editorials on the floor was 595 times, with 1985 featuring the highest of 229 for the two newspapers during the period. He stated that during the 600 days that congress was in session during the four year period, editorials were cited 331 times, roughly every other day. The trend for both parties – Democrats and Republicans – was also similar. He said those references were made most often to support their positions on issues rather than to criticise opponents. In a similar study Yoo (2001) noted that editorial coverage of newspapers on older immigrants in the United States influenced federal policy reform on supplemental security income (SSI) to those immigrants.

Framing or portrayal of people, situations, or events in the media not only affect policy or decision making but can also damn or enhance the image of a person, profession or event, (Luthman, 2007); Robinson, 2006); Dilevko and Gottlieb, 2004). Whatever is published about a people or a profession, or an issue reveal much about how the public understands that issue. The result from such publications can disprove the initial contentions already published or perpetuate stereotypes already held.

Rooney-Browne's (2007) study focused on how to get journalists and others to write stories on issues. She looked at how a library festival in East Renfrewshire changed the way people look at libraries. She discussed how this library and its information service adapted to changes in cultural demands and user expectations to deliver a concept that communicates its social value to all of its stakeholders. She highlighted all the preparations and activities undertaken to make the festival a success. The end result of this festival was that the library service enjoyed free editorials across a variety of publications among other worthy news generated for the press.

In Ghana, Essegbey (1996) undertook a limited content analysis of some state-owned and private

newspapers published in the country in 1995 with the aim of assessing their coverage of science and technology issues. He found that none of the stories carried by the papers was a front page story.

Methodology

This study was based on a content analysis of the articles written on libraries during the period January 2001 to December, 2006 in two national dailies (*Daily Graphic* and *Ghanaian Times*) and two state-owned weeklies (*Spectator* and the *Mirror*), hereafter referred in this article as *Graphic*, *Times*, *Spectator* and *Mirror*, respectively. They are papers which have been established long ago and are still publishing. These papers were selected for analysis based on their respective size of circulation and spread of readers. News stories whose headlines had the word library in it were selected. The categories of news items covered were feature articles, editorials and letters. Advertisements were excluded. The stories were examined to determine the types of libraries covered, the kind of issues presented and the kind of prominence given to the stories.

Analyses and Results

Frequency of Coverage

The total number of library-related articles (editorials, features and news) published during the period is shown in Table 1. There were a total of 174 articles on libraries during the five-year period. Only 25 articles were published each year in 2001 and 2002, and 26 articles in 2003. The number of articles improved to 32 in 2004, dropped to 28 in 2005, and rose to a new high of 38 in 2006. The annual average was 29 articles.

Year	Number of articles	%
2006	38	21.8
2005	28	16.1
2004	32	18.4
2003	26	14.9
2002	25	14.4
2001	25	14.4
Total	174	100.0

The rate of publication of articles on libraries was very low. *Graphic* and *Times* are daily newspapers published six days in a week, while the *Mirror* and *Spectator* publish once a week. This means about 312 editions for each daily newspaper and 52 editions for each weekly paper per year, for a total of 4,368 editions in the six years. Thus, the library articles per issue rate was a very lowly $174/4368 = 0.0061$. The clear implication is that library-related stories were not frequent. Ameh (1996) suggests that this may be because newspapers focus on political issues more than other social issues such as education under which libraries are usually categorised. Another reason could be that journalists or other persons who wrote stories for the newspapers were just not interested in library issues. Yanovitzky (2002) pointed out that interests, cultural ties and proximity, among others, are factors that affect the selection and presentation of news in newspapers.

Year	Coverage of Newspapers				
	Daily Graphic	Ghanaian Times	Weekly Spectator	Mirror	Total
2006	22	11	3	2	38 (21.8%)
2005	14	10	2	2	28 (16.1%)
2004	10	17	1	4	32 (18.4%)
2003	14	8	2	2	26 (14.9%)
2002	14	8	3	-	25 (14.4%)
2001	8	14	1	2	25 (14.4%)
Total	82 (47.1%)	68 (39.1%)	12 (6.9%)	12 (6.9%)	174 (100%)

Articles published by the Different Newspapers

There was a great difference between the number of issues published by the daily newspapers and the weeklies. Out of the 174 articles the two dailies accounted for 86%. Graphic published 47.1%, Times published 39.1%, and each weekly paper published 6.9%. The statistics in Table 2 shows that during the six year period, Daily Graphic recorded 82 issues; Times recorded 68, Mirror 12 and Spectator 12. One could not explain why Spectator and Mirror covered such low figures. It could only be speculated that since these are weeklies there were other news items that were of priority to them than library issues.

Types of Libraries Covered by the Articles

The types of libraries covered by the newspaper articles fall into the following categories: Public, Special, national, school, community, academic, and children’s libraries. Articles that did not mention any specific type of library, were placed in the General category. Table 3 shows that community library received the most coverage by the newspapers during the period, accounting for 54 articles (31.0%). This was followed by public libraries (24.7%), school libraries (15.5%), and the general category (10.3%). National, academic and special libraries accounted for less than 10 issues each.

Libraries	No. of issues	Percentage
Academic	9	5.2
Children	14	8.1
Community	54	31.0
General	18	10.3
National	4	2.3
Public	43	24.7
School	27	15.5
Special	5	2.9
Total	174	100

Community libraries received so much coverage because their services and materials are community oriented and accessible to all categories of people. They normally provide local information service to

small geographical areas and provide information on any topic, including those on social, domestic, health, educational and other matters. Their information services are expected to focus on the needs of the community. Moreover, community libraries enable the public to gain access to its information services at little or no cost, thereby play vital roles in the eradication of illiteracy. Public libraries were the second most covered category. In Ghana, public libraries have been established all over the country and they provide services similar to those of community libraries. Each region has a public library situated at the regional capital. School libraries are also found in almost all senior high schools in the country. Where a facility is being used by many people much attention is also on that facility, and this could explain the moderately high coverage of public libraries. The least covered type of library, the national library, does not exist in the country. Therefore, only professional librarians and a few other people who know about the importance of national libraries would talk about it. Accordingly, library professionals should motivate journalists to write about national libraries, or write articles about national libraries themselves. Such articles would help push for the establishment of a national library in the country.

Types of Information Reported

The majority of the articles provided episodic or event-based information pertaining to news about inauguration and commissioning of new libraries, ongoing library projects and donations to libraries. These were usually reported after the event. These articles had very little or no background information and analyses. Examples of such articles were those captioned “Suhum Library Inaugurated”, “Gold Fields Supports Tarkwa Library”, “Rotary Club Donates Books to Osu Children’s Library”; “US-based NGO Donates to Balme Library”. Table 4 shows that 63.2% of the articles was informational or episodic following an event, 23.6% were substantive feature articles and 13.2% was letters. The episodic articles lacked in-depth background information and analyses. The thematic articles on the other hand provided background information and interpretations and offered recommendations for improving libraries. Only news stories with background data leads readers to focus on solutions

involving policy makers and public institutions (Myhre et al., 2002). Mu'azu (1991) had emphasised that news stories pertaining to libraries should be written by individuals with knowledge rather than reporters working for the various newspapers. He observed that reports filed by reporters most often reflected the reporters' lack of background information about the subject, and recommended that issue-oriented articles should be written alongside event-related news so that a broader perspective of issues would be reported.

Table 4: Frequency of Types of Information Reported

Content type	Frequency	%
Feature Article	41	23.6
Informational	110	63.2
Letters	23	13.2
Total	174	100

Furthermore, as shown in Table 5, the daily newspapers Graphic and Times carried most of the informational news items, as well as all the feature articles. Out of the 110 informational news items Graphic carried 53.6%, Times carried 37.3%, Spectator carried 8.1% and Mirror carried only 1%. The length of the stories also varied. Some were long and well researched, whilst some talked briefly about the importance of libraries in the educational reforms and the need to inculcate reading habits into the general public, especially school children, in order to improve their reading skills. Some of the stories also took the opportunity to inform the public about other projects that the donors/philanthropists were undertaking and their future plans. Some of these articles were written on events that were organised by librarians or on libraries. It is interesting to note that although Graphic carried more articles on libraries (56.1%), Times published more (56.1%) of the thematic articles.

Letters on and about libraries were also few and far between. Table 5 also shows that Mirror (a weekly) published the largest number (47.8%) of the 23 letters. This was followed by Graphic with five (21.7%), Times had four (17.4%) and the least with three (13%) was carried by Spectator. The impression gained from some of the reviewed literature is that state-owned newspapers and dailies normally carried fewer letters than other types of newspapers. Ameh (1996) noted that daily newspapers published fewer letters than non-dailies. In his study, he found that *Daily Graphic* carried 1.3 letters per issue, whilst *Chronicle* (a non-daily and a privately-owned newspaper) carried 6.5 letters per issue. Citing Karikari, he opined that the reason for state-owned newspapers publishing fewer letters was that the public had little confidence in the state-owned newspapers and fear that such newspaper would censor public opinion by not publishing some of the letters they received. It is rather unfortunate that not many letters were published as, according to views from the literature, letters are supposed to provide a feedback mechanism that shows public participation in the discussion of public issues. The few letters on libraries that were published in the newspapers suggest that members of the public were not voicing their views adequately on the condition of library services in the country.

Prominence of the Library-Related Articles

According to Dominick (1996), stories that are given page one space and eight column headlines are obviously judged to be more important than others, thereby indicating the strong newsworthiness of the issue. Stories about libraries in the newspapers were not given much prominence in terms of positioning on the newspaper page. Only one story was on the front page, and the caption of even that story was not bold as the other stories on the same front page. The reason for the rare front page library story could

Table 5. Reporting by the Newspapers

Content type	Newspaper				Total
	Graphic	Times	Mirror	Spectator	
Feature Article	18(43.9%)	23(56.1%)	-	-	41
Informational	59(53.6%)	41(37.3%)	1(1%)	9(8.1%)	110
Letters	5(21.7%)	4(17.4%)	11(47.8%)	3(13.0%)	23
Total	82	68	12	12	174

probably be that because the story was an outcome from a long strike that affected many people throughout the country.

The feature articles included only two editorials, which means that over a period of six years and out of 4,368 editions of the four newspapers, only two editorials were written on libraries. One was written when the Minister for Women and Children's Affairs commissioned the children's library at the Ghana Book Trust, on March 31st, 2001. The second one was written on September 18th, 2006 when the first librarian in Ghana was inducted into the Academy of Arts and Sciences. The explanation for the editorials on these events could be the personalities involved. Dominick (1996) pointed out that for a story to be newsworthy it should have five qualities – timeliness, proximity, prominence, consequence and human interest. One of the stories involved a government minister who was an important political person. The second story above was an uplifting story bordering on the principle of human interest. This principle posits that stories that arouse emotions among people or those that are ironic, bizarre, dramatic uplifting, etc become newsworthy. The emotional story was that of *First Librarian in Ghana* being inducted into such a *prestigious* fellowship.

Discussion

In spite of the importance of libraries in our educational systems and for promoting development as a whole, the major national newspapers that are read nationwide did not carry many stories on libraries. There were only 174 libraries-related stories out of the probably hundreds of thousands of stories that were published in various editions of the newspapers during 2001-2006. This finding is in stark contrast with Myhre et al. (2002), which showed that alcohol – the subject they studied – was mentioned at least once a day in the daily newspapers serving communities in California. This gave the readers in those communities the opportunity to read news on alcohol daily. By contrast, the findings of the present study imply that Ghanaian readers and public policy makers would not have the opportunity to read and be educated about libraries frequently. As stated in the reviewed literature, heightened media attention on issues

attracts greater policy attention and may pressurise policy makers to find solutions to the issues.

A related finding of the present study is that only the daily newspapers – Graphic and Times — published all the substantive feature articles on libraries, whilst the weekend ones – Spectator and Mirror – published none of the substantive articles. This is at variance with Essegbey's (1996) finding that the *Spectator* (a weekend newspaper) published substantive articles on science and technology. This finding of the present study is difficult to explain, but it may be speculated that Spectator was less interested in library issues compared with other matters.

The news stories were not only few but were also not placed prominently. Only one story appeared on front page and only two editorials were published on libraries. This finding corroborates Essegbey's (1996) finding that science and technology news stories did not receive front page appearance because the newspapers were more interested in political news than developmental ones. By contrast, Woodruff et al. (2003) had reported that out of the 88 food and nutrition stories analysed, one-third of them appeared on the front page, indicating the strong newsworthiness of such issues. They also noted that although substantive news stories on food and nutrition were few, they were however often prominently placed.

Most of the articles were also episodic or just informational. This finding corroborates findings by Myhre et al. (2002), Yanovizky (2002), Amoakohene (1995), among others. Such articles lacked important detailed background information that would enable the reader to think deeply and draw appropriate conclusions. Amoakohene (1995), for example, reported that although some of the newspapers she surveyed regularly discussed environmental issues often in a well researched manner, substantive well researched stories were not many as compared to event related news. She recommended that to make the desired impact the media must make the necessary linkage between environmental issues and development, and that such linkage must be presented in a comprehensible manner to readers, as well as to policy makers and authorities. Myhre et al. (2002) also pointed out that even though episodic natured stories may be effective initially in grabbing the attention of readers, thematic stories

are better able to give detailed information and suggest policy solutions to readers. The deduction is that both substantive and non-substantive feature articles are important. There should therefore be a balance in the type of presentation of the stories.

Recommendations

Library issues are connected with education, literacy, research and innovation, and are therefore as important to social development as political, sports, economic, entertainment and other social issues. The findings of this study have significant implications for both the journalists and the librarians. Government and the news media have need to support libraries in the country. Providing well stocked libraries should go hand in hand with any educational reform programme. The attention of the authorities however depends on how much and what reporters publish in the media on libraries. Reporters should do more by writing well researched news and feature articles on libraries in order to articulate library issues adequately, educate the public and galvanise policy makers to necessary developmental action. They should not limit themselves to mere news reporting. Library managers as well as the Ghana Library Association should also network with journalists and news reporters and provide regular news sheets to news media or educate and motivate journalists on what and how to write about libraries. Newsom and Carrell (1991) have suggested that getting news media to cover a story is often the key to getting better coverage. However, background information should also be provided to them, and quickly. This is because media professionals will write their stories from whatever scraps of information they can find if detailed and accurate information is not provided to them in time.

Conclusion

This study has found that news stories on libraries were rarely published in Ghanaian newspapers. Moreover, the few news stories that are published are mostly about events and also not given adequate prominence in the newspapers. It is of concern that not many news stories were reported to highlight the poor condition of libraries in the country and the effects it has on pupils, students, the whole educational system, as well as the life-long learning prospects

of the population. As at the time of writing this paper, news items on libraries continue to follow the same trend as reported in this paper. Stories on libraries are few and far in between, and are mostly informational, episodic and event driven. The findings of this study should galvanise librarians, library advocates and journalists to action towards promoting all types of libraries and information services in the country.

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