

Bias in Headlines: Evidence from Newspaper Coverage of the 2012 Ghana Presidential Election Petition

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Abstract: A nagging concern that has emerged from media bias is its over-riding and manipulative power to influence public opinion and perception. When this bias is unleashed on consumers of news, it can have a devastating consequence on news production and consumption. Since most casual readers take their news from the headlines without reading the accompanying stories, it is more disturbing when newspapers, with their eyes on profit, tantalize the reading public with biased headlines. Against this background, a corpus of 80 headlines culled from four Ghanaian private newspapers was analysed to explore the infusion of bias in headlines in the coverage of the 2012 Ghana Presidential Election Petition. The results showed that a high percentage (81.5%) of the headlines was biased. It was also found out that influenced by which side of the petition the newspapers supported, they employed word choice as the main type of bias, using linguistic choices such as negative words, invectives and loaded words. The findings have implications for media objectivity and fair reportage devoid of ideological slant and judgmental opinions.

Keywords: Media Bias, Headline, Petitioners, Respondents, Cross Examination, Counsel

1. Introduction

Quite a number of journalists and news producers within the mass media select which events and stories they deem fit, and decide to report them to suit their ideological or political inclination. Thus the selection and content of a media story and how it is reported are at the whims and caprices of journalists. Underwood (1998) opines that the citizens do not have a control over what is reported and how it is reported. As gatekeepers of media-worthy stories, the media can wittingly or unwittingly distort information to influence public opinion on controversial issues. And one tool used by media practitioners to whet their readers' appetite is the headline. In the words of O' Sullivan et al. (2003), "the front page or cover of newspapers and magazines is the key to creating both a sense of identity and a point of contact with the potential reader" (p.122). This is because a lot of casual readers take their news directly from the headlines without reading the full story. Arming themselves with only the headline information, such casual readers fall prey to the manipulative power of the biased headlines, which influence their opinion or attitude towards

a policy, a group, a particular person or an institution. Such headlines which many perceive as biased reveal the newspapers' political slant.

The concern of the study, therefore, is to investigate the magnitude of bias some selected Ghanaian newspapers injected in their headlines during their coverage of the election petition. The specific questions the study sought to answer were the following: 1. *To what extent did newspapers infuse bias in their headlines?* 2. *What type of bias did the newspapers employ in their headlines in their coverage of the 2012 Ghana Presidential Election Petition?* 3. *What language choices did the newspapers employ to inject bias in their headlines?*

Ghanaians went to the polls on December 7 and 8, 2012 to elect their President and 275 Members of Parliament. On December 9, 2012 the Chairman of the Electoral Commission, Dr. Kwadwo Afari Gyan declared the Presidential Candidate of the National Democratic Congress, (NDC), Mr. John Dramani Mahama winner with 5,574, 761 votes (50.70%). His closest rival, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, the Presidential Candidate of the New Patriotic Party, obtained 5,248, 898 votes (47.74 %) (*Aeon*

International Magazine, 2013). The results did not go down well with the NPP, who cited electoral fraud and massive irregularities. As a result, they rejected the results and decided to go to court to seek redress. Accordingly, on December 28, 2012, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, the Presidential Candidate; Dr. Mahamadu Bawumia, the Vice-Presidential Candidate; and Mr. Jake Obetseby Lampitey, Chairman of the NPP, filed a suit at the Supreme Court of Ghana praying the court to overturn the results and declare the presidential candidate of the NPP the validly elected President of Ghana.

The respondents in the suit were President John Mahama and the Electoral Commission. Later, through a joinder filed at the Supreme Court, the NDC won a suit to become the third respondent. In all, nine judges heard the case, which lasted for eight months. The Supreme Court finally gave its verdict on August 29, 2013 and it went in favour of the respondents. The petition went down in history as the first time in Ghanaian politics that the validity and legitimacy of an elected president has been challenged in the highest court of the country.

During the eight-month period of the hearing of the petition, which was telecast live by Ghana Television (GTV), the media landscape was inundated with commentaries and media panel discussions both on radio and television. Newspapers also contributed to the euphoria surrounding the petition. Private newspapers which were sympathetic to either the cause of the petitioners or the respondents were the most vociferous. They took advantage and fanned the excitement and anxiety thereof with screaming headlines. During the hearing of the case, anecdotal evidence suggested that there was misreporting of the court proceedings. This prompted the Supreme Court to come out with a stern warning to social commentators and the media that “those putting twists and spins to what happens in court would be dealt with” (*Daily Guide*, June 25, 2013). The NPP, the petitioners, are on record to have written formally to the *Daily Graphic*, a state-owned newspaper, to protest against its reportage of the case in the June 6 and 7, 2013 editions of the newspaper. The petitioners accused the newspaper of bias in its covering of the court proceedings on those days. Among other things, they wrote: ‘This is in addition to your general duty under the law to ensure that your reportage of court proceedings is accurate, fair and devoid of misrepresentation and judgmental opinions’ (www.ghanaweb.com). Similarly, Kwasi Pratt, a leading journalist and editor of the *Insight* newspaper, an Accra daily lambasted the *Daily Graphic* for showing bias in favour of the petitioners in the May 11 issue of the paper. He described the *Daily Graphic* reportage as “awfully partisan” (www.modernghana.com/news). It could be surmised from accusations of bias that plagued the election petition coverage that when the reportage was not in tune with one’s belief then there was bias. Farhi (2012) sums it all up: “People believe their preferred news sources are objective and fair, while the other guy’s are biased.”

2. Literature Review

Media bias comes in many and varied forms. It includes bias by omission, bias by selection of sources, bias by story selection, bias by placement, bias by labelling, bias by spin and bias by word choice. Mullainathan and Shleifer (2002) categorise media bias into two: ideology and spin. Ideology is a newspaper’s attempt to influence reader opinion towards a particular direction. Spin, on the other hand, is the desire for the newspaper to create a memorable story. In other words the newspaper knowing very well that readers are hungry for news and how it is reported, will attempt to satisfy them. Mullainathan and Shleifer (2002) further theorise that there are two players in news dissemination and news consumption. These are the newspaper and the reader. If the readers have divergent beliefs, some newspapers will differentiate themselves and come out with attention-getting news stories in order that they can increase their prices to maximise profit. In a similar manner, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006) argue that based on the information consumers receive, they will revise their opinion, and also use reputation as a basis to choose a media organisation. Their model suggests that consumers are more concerned about media organisations. Nevertheless, consumers rely on their beliefs to evaluate a news item. Media firms, as a result, will slant news to coincide with the beliefs of consumers.

Schmitt (2003) submits that there are four main influences that bring about biased news reporting. These include geographical setting, ideology, institutional affiliations and the nature of the medium, be it radio, TV or newspaper. He, however, admits that not every news item is affected by all these, but in whatever way, most reporting is affected by at least one or two of these influences.

Taking it up, Baron (2004) explains the persistent media bias and the career interests of journalists. He opines that some journalists are obsessed with their career interest to an extent that they are prepared to sacrifice current wages for future opportunities. Consequently, if a media organisation has its eyes on profit, it will condone bias when it realises that it will gain more profit on the supply side than it will lose on the demand side. Also Baron identifies two effects of bias on the demand for news. First, rational citizens receive potentially biased news with a certain level of scepticism, so in making their individual decisions, they do not rely on the news in toto. Second, bias renders some stories more likeable than others. That is to say critical minds do not swallow news stories hook line and sinker. On the contrary, when they see bias in a news story they do not rely on it completely. Again, bias makes some stories more attractive than others.

In Britain, Accuracy in Media (AIM), an organisation which is largely conservative, contends that journalists have a liberal bias while Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) an organisation which is pro-liberal assert the media often have a conservative bias (Rodam, 1998).

Bias reporting has the potential to create disaffection for institutions, governments and individuals, especially politicians. In the United States, Mainstream Media reported

that some groups claimed that President Obama was a Muslim who was also born outside the United States (thus making him unqualified to be President). The media claimed the news had come at the right time; but supporters of Obama called it “political bias” (Rodam 2012: 132).

Boyadi and Samuel (2013) conducted a contrastive textual analysis of selected editorial headlines from *The New York Times* and the *Tehran Times*. They investigated the kind of textual and rhetorical strategies adopted by the two newspapers to propagate their ideologies. The results indicated that the two papers used the headlines to draw attention to the main stories. Besides, the subjective attitudes of the writers influenced their news presentations, using various forms of rhetorical strategies such as parallelisms, irony, pun, antithesis and many more.

Similarly, results of a study (D'Alessio, 2012) on presidential election coverage in America from 1948 – 2008 showed that it is not only *The New York Times* that has a liberal bias in America, and in terms of news coverage the Fox News channel is more conservative than the broadcast network. Chiang (2007) also conducted a study on the 2000 United States Presidential Election to find out how competition in election affects media bias. The results showed that the keener the electoral competition the higher the media bias. It was also found out that media bias emanates from both the demand side and the supply side. Vigna and Kaplan (2007) investigated the entry of the Conservative Fox News in the cable market and its impact on voting in the United States Presidential Elections between 1996 and 2000. They sought to find out whether Republicans gained vote share in towns where Fox News entered the cable market by the year 2000. They found out that Republicans gained 0.4 to 0.7 percentage points in the towns that broadcast Fox News. Fox News affected voter turnout and the Republican vote share in the Senate. In addition, Fox News convinced 3 to 28% of its viewers to vote Republican.

In a comparative study of the news systems in five countries: the United States, Britain, Germany, Sweden and Italy, Patterson et al. (1998) found strong evidence that the partisan beliefs of journalists affected their news decision, and that German journalists were the most partisan. Chun-Fan & Knight (2011) also did a study on the relationship between media bias and the influence of the media on voting in the context of newspaper endorsements of candidates. Their findings suggest that endorsements are likely to influence voters to support the favoured candidate after publication of the endorsement.

The foregoing discussion shows the tantalizing effect of media bias on news production and consumption. It comes as no surprise when former US President Lyndon B. Johnson observed:

I hear the headlines on the radio, see them on TV and read them in the paper. when I hear from the men out there, I sometimes don't believe they are talking about the same situation (Nov 7, 1967).

The President's negative evaluation of headlines draws attention to consumers of news to be wary of stopping only at

the headlines because they do not always reflect the actual news. The present study is no different in its outlook and focus; it has affinity with these scholarly studies in the examination of how media bias is used to influence perceptions and opinions.

3. Analytical Framework

The analysis in this paper is carried out within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA has been described as a recent school of Discourse Analysis spearheaded by Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, Teun Van Dijk and others (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). It is an approach to the study of language use and textual practices that focus on how language, power and ideology are related in discourse of texts. In applying CDA to media texts, Fairclough (1995) proposes a three-dimensional model.

The first consideration is the actual text (spoken or written) drawing on Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar which centers around the notion of how language functions and focuses on the discourses (spoken or written) we produce and the contextual background of the texts. The second consideration has to do with the discursive practice i.e. what might have influenced the writing of the text. Thus it deals with the analysis of how texts are produced, interpreted, distributed and encoded (Shojaei et al. 2013). The last is the social influence of the text i.e. how the text influences the social practice of the audience for whom the text was to reach.

Dijk (1998) contends that access to specific forms of discourse involving politics, science or the media is itself a power resource, and that those who wield power can in one way or another influence discourse. Dijk (1998) further argues that those who belong to more powerful social groups and institutions have more access to and control over one type or more public discourses. Such people include journalists who have access to and control over media discourse. According to Dijk the application of CDA to media studies has unearthed texts, illustrations and photographs containing biased stereotypical sexist or racist images.

CDA stresses that it is crucial to examine critically newspaper language. This is because the ideology of journalists and news producers cannot be easily seen; it is subtly conveyed in the choice of linguistic forms, and it is only when these linguistic forms are critically examined that one can unpack the ideologies that underpin news discourse (Shojaei et al. 2013). Concurring with (Shojaei et al. 2013), Post (2009), maintains that one of the aims of CDA, is to “highlight how language is utilized within texts to construct specific ideological positions that entail unequal relations of power” (p.15). Post (2009 citing North 2004) again observes that those with access to the media are not only able to construct the message, but assure its continued circulation, the redundancy of the ideological message thus seemingly confirms their position as truth. CDA creates the awareness that a speaker's or a writer's choice of words can encode an ideological package of information to reveal his ideological stance on a given topic (Post 2009). Wodak and Busch (2004)

contributing to CDA assert that media texts are considered dialogic since there is an interaction between the readers/listeners or viewers and the media. Studies such as Van Dijk (1988a), McElhinmy, (1997), O'Connor (2002) and (Westchamow) 2003 have applied CDA in their various investigations of media texts.

A major justification for drawing on CDA as the main theory in this study is that it is a helpful tool in the analysis of media texts owing to its appeal to the relationship between language, power and ideology. The three-dimensional approach to the study of media texts proposed by Fairclough (1995), offers an opportunity to analyse and interpret the headlines based on the contextual background, linguistic choice and the influence on the readership.

4. Background of the Newspapers Chosen for the Study

The New Statesman is a private daily newspaper affiliated to the New Patriotic Party, which is the largest opposition party as of the time of writing this paper. It reports on varied local and international issues. However, it devotes most of its political reportage to the cause of the NPP and highlights the negatives of the NDC, at the least opportunity. *The Daily Guide* is also a private daily newspaper which is sympathetic to the cause of the NPP. It therefore portrays NPP in a positive light while publishing the negative side of the NDC. Conversely, *Daily Democrat* is affiliated to the NDC and for that matter more or less a mouthpiece of the party. It is a private daily newspaper opposed to the NPP and therefore comments negatively on its activities. Similarly, *The Herald*, a private newspaper, is anti-NPP and most of its reportage about the party is negative. The political affiliations and ideological stance of these newspapers influence the political stories they publish. The political stories are mostly about the two major political parties: the NDC and the NPP, because these stories sell, especially in an election year.

5. Methodology/Data

The paper is an investigation into how some private newspapers loyal to the cause of NDC and NPP reported the proceedings of the 2012 Presidential Election Petition, with particular emphasis on biased headlines. Four newspapers were selected for the study because of their political affiliations with the parties involved in the petition. Headlines from 20 different editions of each newspaper were examined.

Purposive sampling, based on two considerations, was used to select the 80 editions for the study. First, the edition of a particular newspaper must be within the period of the hearing of the petition i.e. January 2013 – August 2013. Second, the edition must have a headline on the election petition. After the selection, the model provided by FAIR in detecting news bias was employed to determine which headlines were biased. FAIR is the national media watch group based in the United States of America and has since

1986 been offering criticisms on media bias and censorship. Among the tools that FAIR has provided for the detection of bias in news stories are word choice, labelling and tone, and whether the headline matches the story. Then each headline and its accompanying story were read carefully to determine whether they matched. This was carefully followed by a content analysis of each headline and the linguistic choices used. These considerations were adopted in order to select only data that would be relevant to the study.

6. Results

The study found a high level of biased headlines. As high 81.25% (N=65) biased headlines were identified. It was also found out that bias by word choice was the main type of bias used in the headlines; and the strategies employed by the newspapers included the use of negative words, invectives and loaded words.. Table 1 below is a pictorial representation of biased headlines from the various newspapers.

Table 1. Biased headlines according to newspaper.

Newspaper	Frequency	Percentage
<i>The New Statesman</i>	26	40.0
<i>Daily Guide</i>	17	26.15
<i>Daily Democratic</i>	13	20.0
<i>The Herald</i>	9	13.84
Total	65	100

(Source: From field data)

Table 1 above shows that *The Statesman* and the *Daily Guide*, which are sympathetic to the cause of the petitioners (NPP), were more biased in their headlines (66.15%) whereas *Daily Democrat* and *The Herald*, sympathetic to the respondents (NDC) were less biased in their headlines (33.84%). These statistics suggest that during the hearing of the petition, the headlines were couched in language that smacked of accusations and counter-accusations. Not only that, the fact that 66.15 % of the biased headlines came from *The Statesman* and the *Daily Guide* suggests that bias was wittingly infused in their headlines to make the case of the petitioners look good and that of the respondents look bad in the eyes of casual readers.

Table 2 below shows word choice types and their frequencies

Table 2. Word choice types and their frequencies.

	Headlines with negative words		Headlines with invectives		Headlines with loaded words	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
<i>The New Statesman</i>	13	38	3	16	5	41
<i>Daily Guide</i>	9	26	5	26	3	25
<i>Daily Democrat</i>	8	24	8	42	2	17
<i>The Herald</i>	4	12	3	16	2	17
Total	34	100	19	100	12	100

(Source: Field data)

From Table 2, it could be seen there was high preponderance for headlines with negative words 52% (N=34) followed by invectives, 29.23% (N=19) and loaded words 18.46% (N=12) in that order. The use of more negative words than other linguistic choices bears eloquent testimony that the newspapers from the two opposing camps saw the petition as a dog eat dog affair, in which the newspapers would go any length, even if descending into the gutters, to do their masters' bidding. Individually, *The New Statesman* was more offensive in its headlines. In two out of the three categories of word choice it recorded the highest frequencies.

7. Analysis

This section analyses and discusses 10 of the 65 biased headlines identified in *The New Statesman*, *Daily Guide*, *The Herald* and the *Democrat*. The analysis is based on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model in applying CDA to media texts. These are the contextual background, the actual text and the social influence of the text. The analysis is largely qualitative. The types of words analysed were not decided in advance. Like most qualitative studies, categories emerged from the data analysed.

The first question the study sought to ask was, *To what extent did the newspapers infuse bias in their headlines?* The study found a high percentage (81.25%) of biased headlines. The newspapers deliberately used such headlines not only to sell their papers, but also to win public sympathy for which side of the petition they (the newspapers) support. As Fyfe (2007) rightly observes, headlines are written to grab the attention of readers. According to him it is lamentable that some consumers of print journalism never make it past the headline; for they think that the entire story has been boiled down to that bold print. Such reasoning, in his view, makes biased headlines affect public perception and opinion.

The second research question was, *What type of bias did the newspapers employ in their headlines in their coverage of the 2012 Ghana Presidential Election Petition?* The study revealed that word choice was the main tool used to inject bias in the headlines. Bias by word choice is one of the many biases that journalists employ to influence opinions and perceptions (Egbeyemi 2014, Senden et al. 2014, Duzzet 2011). For instance, Duzzet (2011) maintains that word choice is a key tool that a reporter can use to subtly convey bias. He argues that there is nothing wrong with biased word choice by writers. What is unacceptable is when writers employ biased word choice but pretend to be objective about their news coverage. He cautions news consumers to be wary of bias quietly injected in the news and observes:

Words are never created equal. Even synonyms vary as far as connotation. Because of this, it is important to consider every word a reporter chooses to use, and ask: is this the best possible choice of word here. Is this the least biased way this idea could have been phrased? (p.54)

The implication here is that no two words mean the same. Therefore we need to consider words used by writers and find out whether alternative words couldn't have been used to

remove the bias.

Below are 2 biased headlines throwing more light on word choice.

1. Afari Gyan Fumbles (*Daily Guide*, Tue. June 13, 2013)

This was when Dr. Afari Gyan (Electoral Commissioner) was being cross-examined by lead counsel of the petitioners. The impression created by the word "fumbles" is that the Chairman of the National Electoral Commission, second respondent in the suit, is not telling the truth. Anecdotal evidence in several courts showed that a number of witnesses in court who fumbled for words were later exposed as not having told the truth. The above headline from a newspaper which is in bed with the petitioners will delight their supporters and sympathizers

2. Are the NPP Bleeding Terribly? (*Daily Democrat*, Fri. May 24, 2013)

The background story is that on May 22, 2013 when the Supreme Court sat, it overruled 6 out of the 8 objections raised by the lead counsel of the petitioners, the NPP. The headline is used to appeal to readers' sense of sight. It paints a picture of a person who is wounded or has suffered a serious injury and is bleeding profusely almost to the point of death. The personification involved in the word "bleeding" is suggestive of NPP's porous arguments which weaken their case. The bias inherent in the headline is that the paper could have objectively reported the bare facts. However, the *Daily Democrat* coming from the respondents' camp decided to couch the headline as such, thereby touting its ideological and political inclinations.

The third research question was, *What language choices did the newspapers employ to inject bias in the headlines?* The headlines analysed showed preponderance for the use of negative words, invectives and loaded expressions. A discussion of these linguistic choices follows.

7.1. Negative Words

Egbeyemi (2014) considers the use of negative words to persuade the viewer or the reader, as word choice bias. A negative word is a word used to imply or insinuate that something is bad, wrong or unacceptable. The use of words with negative connotations can influence a reader's opinion about the subject of the story. The headlines below typify the use of negative words in headlines.

In each headline, the negative word/expression is in italics.

Excerpt 1

7.1.1. Asiedu Nketia Goes Haywire (*Daily Guide*, Mon. May 29, 2013)

If something goes haywire it goes out of control or it starts doing the wrong thing.

Contextual background

In the accompanying story, the witness, Mr. Asiedu Nketia, was being led in cross-examination by Mr. Philip Addison, lead counsel for the petitioners, who complained that the witness was being evasive and also talking too much time. The subject of the cross-examination was over-voting.

Analysis

It is usually inanimate objects that go haywire, and for a writer to report that a human being has gone haywire then that shows that the person's behaviour or actions were out of control and possibly he was throwing tantrums. Certainly, the supporters of the petitioners will be happy to read that the principal witness of the respondents has been cornered and there is no escape route for him. This will feed into the belief of the petitioners and their supporters that the witness is making desperate attempts to hedge counsel's questions. If so, then it is obvious that he is hiding the truth which will confirm the petitioners' claim of over-voting. Such an interpretation smacks of wishful thinking caused by the headline.

Excerpt 2

7.1.2. CJ& Supreme Court Pampering NPP... Order Tony Lithur to Reveal His Secrets to Bawumia (the Herald, Mon. April 22-Tues. April 23, 2013)

To pamper someone means to treat them too kindly or give them too much attention.

Contextual background

The Supreme Court ordered Mr. Tony Lithur, counsel for the first respondent, President Mahama, to list all duplicated pink sheets and send an electronic version of the list to the court and the petitioners. This was during Tony Lithur's cross-examination of Dr. Bawumia, the second petitioner and star witness of the petitioners. The CJ (Chief Justice) is mentioned in the headline because the respondents were not in favour of the directive from the CJ for a live telecast of the court proceedings (*The Herald*, Mon. April 22-Tues. April 23, 2013, p. 03). It is also the NPP that clamoured for the court proceedings to be telecast live.

Analysis

The reporter considers the court order and the directive from the CJ as pampering. The word "pampering" reflects the writer's opinion that the court is treating the NPP, and for that matter the petitioners, too kindly. By using "pampering", the reporter is subtly inflaming passions, especially among supporters of the respondents and the NDC. This is because "pampering" connotes partiality. The headline is not only impugning lack of fairness on the part of the CJ and the Supreme Court, but it is also questioning their neutrality in the case. It would therefore seem that the headline is alerting the reading public, "Watch it!; the CJ and the court are giving the NPP an unfair advantage over NDC."

Again, the use of the word "secrets" in the headline portrays bias. Nowhere in the directive did the court use the word "secrets". The reporter wants the reading public to toe his line of thinking that in a fierce legal battle as the election petition, if the adjudicators compel one faction to reveal their secrets to the other faction, then it means giving your opponents ammunition to defeat you.

Excerpt 3

7.1.3. The Arrogance of the All-Knowing NPP Again Shows up in Court (the Daily Democrat, Mon. 3rd June 2013)

Contextual background

The report said lead counsel of NPP, Philip Addison tried

to prevent Dr. Afari-Gyan from giving his evidence, and it was the judges who ruled that he should be given the chance to give his evidence in court. The report went on to say NPP did not know much about the electoral laws of Ghana, yet they went to court. "The over pompous all-knowing NPP folks believe they know it all, therefore, they never took pains to learn just the basic laws by the EC, which is why they went to court to learn those laws for the very first time from the respondents."

Analysis

The word "arrogance" in the headline suggests that NPP as a party is proud and that they have demonstrated it in court. The writer considers an objection raised by counsel as arrogance. This posturing of the writer is a figment of his own imagination because in court proceedings, counsel has the liberty to raise an objection on an issue or behaviour he considers inconsistent with court proceedings. What is more, the judges never reprimanded counsel for raising the objection; they only overruled it after conferring. In the same vein "all-knowing" in the headline seeks to cause disaffection for the NPP and make them lose face. There is a perception that people whose actions and utterances portray them as all-knowing are proud. Similarly, the word "again" implies that the NPP has shown arrogance elsewhere and their behaviour in court that day is another show of "arrogance".

7.2. Invectives

Another language choice identified was the use of invectives. Invectives are extremely rude and insulting expressions that people say about others they hate or are angry with. A reporter may show his hatred or contempt for a person by describing him/her in invective language. Agyekum (2004) succinctly puts it:

Invectives are emotionally oriented and considered inappropriate and embarrassing, and intended to offend the addressee(s) or targeted group. In invectives, the speaker says something that is painful to the addressee and thus offends him.

The following headlines exemplify the use of invectives.

Excerpt 4

7.2.1. Bawumia Exposes Lithur's Ignorance (the New Statesman, Wed. April 24, 2013)

Being ignorant means one does not know things they should know.

Contextual background

During the cross-examination of Dr. Bawumia by Mr. Tony Lithur, the latter suggested to the former that he lacked proper understanding of what constituted over-voting and that his method of calculating it was wrong. Dr. Bawumia rejected counsel's suggestion and said, among other things, that counsel's cross-examination was based on conjecture and urged him to speak to the amended evidence before the court. The amended evidence was that he (Dr. Bawumia) had deleted 700 pink sheets from the original list of 11,916 tendered in evidence, and in Dr. Bawumia's view counsel was not aware of the amended evidence; hence, he said counsel's

cross-examination was based on the deleted pink sheets.

Analysis

The reporter thinks Tony Lithur's lack of knowledge of the deletion of the 700 pink sheets from the original list is an indication that he does not have a firm grip over the facts as they relate to the pink sheets. But it could be that Tony Lithur was feigning ignorance; hence he decided to base his cross examination on the deleted pink sheets so that witness could contradict himself. The reporter fails to consider this side of the issue and being politically prejudiced against the respondents, he sees this perceived lack of knowledge on the part of counsel as an opportunity to denigrate him by describing him as ignorant. Describing Tony Lithur, a high profile lawyer, as ignorant is rude and insulting. It portrays the reporter's and by extension the newspaper's lack of respect for the lawyer, who stood counsel for President Mahama in the case. This "dirt" thrown at such a lawyer of high reputation gives supporters of the petitioners a false impression that, after all, the highly acclaimed lawyer of the respondents is an ignoramus.

Excerpt 5

7.2.2. Sir John Is a Leaking Chamber Pot (the Herald, Mon. May 13 – Tues. May 14, 2013)

Contextual background

There was an allegation that Mr. Kwadwo Owusu Afriyie (a.k.a Sir John) General Secretary of the NPP had said on *Adom TV* channel that the petitioners knew that they were in battle against "thieves and demons So after serving the judges and the respondents with our evidence we made a soft copy onto a CD ROM." (*The Herald*, Mon. May 13 – Tues. May 14, 2013, p. 07).

Analysis

A chamber pot is a round container shaped like a very large cup that is kept in a bedroom so that people could urinate in them instead of having to leave their room during the night. Also in most homes in Ghana, children and babies use it as a container for defecation.

The invective is couched in a metaphor. Sir John is indirectly compared to a chamber pot. Thus he is despicable just as the chamber pot is stigmatised. It is stigmatised because it is a receptacle for urine and faecal matter. It is always lifted with the left hand. Culturally, Ghanaians treat the left hand with "scorn"; they lift any dirty or unclean object with the left hand. So for a person to be compared to a stigmatised object, then it means that person has been reduced to the level of a contemptible object. So the whole being and person of Sir John is loathsome and disgusting. What is more, Sir John, the chamber pot, is leaking. If a chamber pot is leaking, the foul smell emanating from the leaking matter engulfs its immediate environment such that people around will have to cover their noses. The connotation here is that when Sir John opens his mouth to speak, filthy words that stink to the high heavens come out.

The writer believes by Sir John's vitriolic attack on the respondents, he (Sir John) has stirred up the hornet's nest and he should be replied in equal measure, if not more. In

Agyekum's (2010) view, "in some cases, the expression from the speaker to the addressee compels the target to retaliate with more offensive words" (p.111). Describing Sir John, as a leaking chamber pot is not only meant to scorn him, but also meant to deepen the depth of hatred the supporters of the respondents have for him.

Excerpt 6

7.2.3. EC Forged Foreign Votes - NPP (Daily Guide, Tues. April 9, 2013)

Contextual background

The NPP accused the EC of forging the register for foreign voters. The NPP said the list of 705 voters submitted by the EC as Ghanaians who registered abroad was "actually forged and contained several instances of multiple names and fake identities" (*Daily Guide*, Tues. April 9, 2013, p.3).

Analysis

If someone forges something such as a banknote, a document, or a painting, they copy it or make it so that it looks genuine, in order to deceive or cheat people. The word 'forged' undermines the EC's credibility by suggesting that it is dishonest. This is a serious indictment on the EC in the sense that if the body responsible for the organisation of Presidential Elections in the country can forge names of voters, then it presupposes that the elections are not credible. And if the elections are not credible then the outcome is not credible either. The headline is prejudicial to the integrity of the EC. Any NPP supporter reading it will conclude that something untoward happened during the conduct of the elections, and this can trigger of political disturbances in the country. The headline is misleading in that the evidence that the NPP said they had, was yet to be ascertained by the court. But the writer knowing very well that it will please NPP supporters concludes that the EC forged votes.

Excerpt 7

7.2.4. Nana Akufo-Addo on Votes Stealing Spree (Daily Democrat, Fri. 23rd August 2013)

Contextual background

The petitioners had prayed the Supreme Court to annul all votes in polling stations with unsigned pink sheets and duplicate serial numbers, totalling 3,905,043. But in the view of the respondents, the petitioners selected the bulk of the affected votes from the strong holds of the NDC while they selected few from their strong hold, i.e. the Ashanti Region. The report said in part,

"Ashanti Region commands the largest number of polling stations totalling 4,290. But Nana Akufo-Addo is challenging only 618 (14.9%) of those polling stations in court."

Analysis

Nana Akufo-Addo is branded a "stealer" of votes simply because in the reporter's view, he wanted the majority of votes from the NDC strong hold to be cancelled while he seemed to be protecting the majority of votes from the Ashanti Region, his strong hold. "Spree" is a short period of doing something enjoyable with a lot of energy, especially in an excessive way such as spending money or drinking alcohol. Thus Nana Akufo-Addo on "stealing spree" implies

he is enjoying the votes that he is stealing from the NDC. This interpretation is mischievous and a deliberate attempt to insult Nana Akufo-Addo. The writer's intention is to make Nana Akufo-Addo look bad in the eyes of the general public because stealing is a criminal offence. The writer is aware that Nana Akufo-Addo is not a thief, but because her vision is coloured by political affiliations and callous disregard for him, she resorts to such vilification and inflammatory propaganda. This bias is an eloquent testimony of the writer's hatred for him. Nana Akufo-Addo was not the only petitioner in the suit who was lawfully challenging those votes, but the newspaper chose to single him out as a thief merely because if the votes were indeed annulled he would be the beneficiary.

7.3. Loaded Words/Expressions

One means of injecting bias in reportage is the use of loaded words (ruizreading.webs.com/tone_andbias.htm). Apart from employing negative words and invective language, the newspapers also made use of loaded words/expressions in their headlines. A loaded word/expression has more meaning or purpose than it appears to have because the person who uses it hopes it will cause people to respond in a particular way.

Excerpt 8

7.3.1. "Finger of God" Strikes Afari-Gyan & CO (the New Statesman, Thur. July 18, 2013)

Contextual background

During the cross-examination of Dr. Afari-Gyan by counsel for the petitioners, Philip Addison, counsel suggested that the EC printed pink sheets in triplicates and quadruplicates. One of the polling station pink sheets earlier tended in by counsel was in contention and the court had earlier asked Dr. Afari-Gyan to present to it the EC's copy of that particular pink sheet. However, on the due date, the report continued, instead of presenting the EC's copy, Dr. Afari-Gyan rather presented two different pink sheets with the name "Finger of God Church" written on them.

Analysis

Reading the full story, one finds out that "Finger of God" is a church whose premises were used as a polling station in the elections. As it stands, a casual reading of the headline would make it seem it is the Biblical "finger of God" (as recorded in Exodus 8:19; "Then the magicians said unto Pharaoh, this is the finger of God") that has struck Afari-Gyan and the other respondents. Without reading the full story, one would have thought there was a divine intervention on behalf of the petitioners. Even though the reporter is aware that "Finger of God" is a church, he intentionally invites the public to read spiritual meanings into the headline and implant in them the idea that Dr. Afari-Gyan is acting dishonestly, and deservedly he incurs the wrath of God; hence the finger of God strikes him for his underhand electoral dealings. This is the spiritual connotation that the reporter wants readers, who may not read the full story, to have. Indeed, when God is angry, he strikes: "The Lord at thy

right hand shall strike through kings in the days of his wrath" (Psalm 110:5). The writer takes advantage of the constant refrain that the African is notoriously religious, and uses the headline to activate the people's religious beliefs. The writer hides behind the Biblical allusion to "secretly" inject bias in the headline.

Excerpt 9

7.3.2. "NDC Insects" Invade Supreme Court and Made NPP Big Wigs Restless (The Herald, Fri. May – Tues. May 28, 2013)

Contextual background

The lead paragraph of the story reads, "The Supreme Court... witnessed the invasion of its premises by three prominent members of the National Democratic Congress (NDC), whose real and nick names on the Ghanaian political landscape, mean insects. The three, Johnson Asiedu-Nketia nicknamed "General Mosquito", the enigmatic ex-National Security Coordinator, Kojo Tsikata, nicknamed "Gbagbladza" which means Cockroach in his native Ewe dialect, and Tsatsu Tsikata, nicknamed "the Ant" for his name "Tsatsu" in the Ga language."

Analysis

Two words that make the headline attractive are "insects" and 'invade'. A casual reader may disregard the inverted commas in the phrase "NDC INSECTS" and wonder who or what these insects are. Do NDC have insects which they have let loose at the Supreme Court and stinging or biting NPP big wigs and have made them restless? The metaphor assigns to the personalities the attributes of the insects. The mosquito, the most dangerous of all, infects humans with malaria parasites, which can kill. Therefore, Asiedu-Nketia's bite, that is his evidence, can kill the NPP claims. The cockroach contaminates food and destroys clothes and documents. It might not be as harmful as the mosquito. The ant is said to have a wealth of wisdom as testified by the Bible, "Go to the ant, O sluggard, consider her ways and be wise" (Proverbs 6:6" RSV). Thus the depth of Tsatsu Tsikata's wisdom, gained from many years of teaching law at the university, has made him a legal luminary to rubbish the claims of the petitioners. So he is the ant who has wisdom par excellence, to outwit the respondents.

Also to invade a place means a large number of people or animals enter it in a way that is unpleasant or difficult to deal with. But as far as the story is concerned, nothing was mentioned about how the three people entered the Supreme Court, suggesting that they entered the place in the normal way. All that the reporter seeks to achieve with those expressions in the headline is to cause "fear and panic" in the supporters and sympathisers of NPP.

Excerpt 10

7.3.3. Supreme Court Puts Philip Addison on the Ropes (the Daily Democrat, Mon. 19th August 2013)

Contextual background

According to the story, Philip Addison was arguing in support of his submission that serial numbers played a significant role in the identification of pink sheets, and if

there was duplication of serial numbers then there was foul play. A judge then asked counsel to explain to the court whether serial numbers on election sheets had played any role or had been an issue in past elections held in the country. The story continued, “That was when Philip Addison started to melt as he found himself on the ropes. Addison could not tell the court ... and simply started to beat about the bush with the answer.”

Analysis

“On the ropes” is not an everyday expression; therefore, casual readers who feed on headline information may find it difficult to fathom what it actually means. The reporter draws the imagery from boxing where a boxer forces his opponent to the edge of the ring indicating he is near defeat. The reporter employs the figurative language to mean that as long as Philip Addison was not able to give a satisfactory answer on the role of serial numbers in past elections in Ghana, his argument is crumbling and defeat is staring at him in the face.

8. Discussion

The study showed that newspapers affiliated to each of the two parties in the election petition used their headlines to peddle propaganda about the other party and its activists. This is in consonance with Rodam’s (1998) assertion that AIM believes the media have liberal bias while FAIR thinks the media have a conservative bias. Again, most of the headlines reflected the personal opinions of the writers (newspapers) with the view to influencing the court of public opinion and soliciting sympathy for the party they were backing in the court case. This way of reporting the court proceedings smacked of subjective reporting as observed by former United States President, Lyndon B. Johnson (1963 – 1969), “I hear the headlines on the radio, see them on TV and read them in the paper. When I hear from the men out there, I sometimes don’t believe they are talking about the same situation” (www.umich.edu/~newsbias/headlines.html).

With regard to choice of words used in the headlines, all the four newspapers employed negative words in various headlines to impugn wrong doing by personalities or institutions. Also, to vilify their opponents in the court case, invective language, found expression in the headlines in all the newspapers. However, it was found that the *Daily Democrat* headlines were more insulting (42%) while *The New Statesman* headlines were more negative (38%). Sixty-six percent of the headlines in *The New Statesman* and *Daily Guide* newspapers loyal to the NPP, the petitioners in the case, were more attacking. But it is not surprising in that these newspapers had been championing the cause of the NPP, who felt they had been given a raw deal in the 2012 Presidential Election and as a result wanted the court to overturn the election result in their favour. For this reason, those newspapers found the petition as a platform to launch a bitter attack on those who, in their view, covertly or overtly contributed to the “defeat” of the NPP. *The Herald* equally used abusive language in its headlines. Unlike its counterpart,

The Daily Democrat was less biased in its headlines.

One instance of bias by photograph was found accompanying a headline. In bias by photograph, the reporter places either a flattering or unflattering photograph by a news story where the story involves the person, usually a famous person, whose photograph is placed there. In this instance, an unflattering photograph of Nana Akufo-Addo, was placed by the headline, *Nana Akufo-Addo On Votes Stealing Spree* (*Daily Democrat*, Fri. 23rd August 2013). There was also one instance of name calling where a *Daily Guide* headline read, “*Palm wine Tapper*” *Mounts Platform*. Asiedu Nketia is the one referred to as “palm wine tapper”. In Ghana, palm tappers are esteemed very lowly on the social ladder. Rumours on the grapevine have it that Asiedu Nketia was once a palm wine tapper in his village. This was what the headline alluded to purposely to spite him.

9. Implications

First the study has educational implications. Most students lack the linguistic competence to interpret texts let alone detecting opinion and slanted information from facts. Such people easily fall prey to all forms of biases including media bias. Teachers and educational authorities should therefore develop strategies and skills in language teaching to enable students to detect bias in both spoken and written texts. The teaching of semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics and analogous courses dealing with how language is used should be strengthened. When students acquire skills of “how to do things with words”, they and for that matter society will be the richer in holding media bias in check.

Second, the study has some socio-political implications. Media bias has the tendency to influence public opinion in all spheres of life. It is a potential threat to national cohesion, integration and peaceful co-existence. In politics, for example, a biased media outlet can subtly cause voters to vote in a particular direction and can also make some politicians or political institutions look bad in the eyes of the public resulting in political polarisation of a country. McWilliams (2013) observes, “A biased media does a great disservice to us all. To a large extent, it is the root of the many political scandals...” What the society needs is an objective and non-partisan media devoid of political, cultural, tribal or gender bias.

10. Conclusion

This paper has examined biased headlines in newspaper coverage of the 2012 Ghana Presidential Election Petition. The data comprised a corpus of 80 headlines culled from four private newspapers loyal to the petitioners (NPP) and the respondents (NDC) in the Supreme Court case. The data were analysed to find out strategies the newspapers used to inject bias in their headlines. First, the study revealed that word choice was the predominant tool that the headlines used to influence public opinion in the case. Second, it was found

out that the choice of words was in three categories; namely: negative words, invectives and loaded words/expressions. While negative words were used to impugn wrong doing on the part of personalities and the Electoral Commission, invectives were employed to denigrate addressees. Loaded words on the other hand were used as a tool for doublespeak. Furthermore, the results indicated that newspapers affiliated with the petitioners were more biased and scathing in their headlines than the newspapers that have political inclinations with the respondents.

Appendix

Table 3. Samples of Biased Newspaper Headlines in the 2012 Ghana Presidential Election Petition Coverage.

NEWSPAPER	DATE	BIASED HEADLINE
<i>The New Statesman</i>	Tues. May 21, 2013	NDC, Mahama, EC Lies Exposed
	Thurs. May 2, 2013	Tatsu Presents Fake Documents?
	Tues. April 30, 2013	The Much Anticipated Tsatsu Show ‘Flops’
	Fri. April 26, 2013	EC Accused of Tampering with Pink Sheets
<i>Daily Guide</i>	Fri. June 7, 2013	Double Voting, Over-Voting Occurred in Election 2012
	Thurs. August, 2013	Judges Blast Tsikata
	Tues. June 4, 2013	I’m confused: Says Afari-Gyan on Over-Voting
	Tues. July 9, 2013	My Boys Did Bad Job: Afari-Gyan
<i>The Herald</i>	Mon. Feb. 18, 2013	EC Is Hot, 3 Officials Arrested
	Wed. May 08 – Thurs. May 09, 2013	Tsatsu Pulls Cutlass on Kumasi
	Mon. April 15 – Tues. April 16, 2013	I Cooked Pink Sheet for NPP
	Fri. April 19 – Sun. April 21, 2013	Disgrace Looms: NPP Sheets ‘Na Double-Double’
<i>The Daily Democrat</i>	Mon. May 13 – Tues. May 14, 2013	Unemployed NPP Gurus Storm Supreme Court
	Mon. 24 th June 2013	NPP Usurps the Powers of the Supreme Court
	Fri. 24 th May, 2013	Are the NPP Bleeding Terribly?
	Mon. 3 rd June, 2013	2012 Presidential Election Candidate Exposes Akufo-Addo
	Fri. 12 th July, 2013	Same Serial Numbers Still Haunting Philip Addison

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