

Prof. Audrey Gadzekpo, Professor of Communication Studies and Former Dean of the School of Information and Communication Studies has advocated for an improved environment where journalists must feel safe and confident to do their job without fear of attacks. Prof. Gadzekpo shared this important insight as she delivered her inaugural lecture on the topic: “Taking the Gown to Town: Reflections of a Scholar-Activist on Media in Ghana’s Democratic Journey”.

Prof. Gadzekpo commenced the lecture by addressing the link between media and democracy stating that a well-functioning press nurtures democracy. She explained that the media as the fourth estate the realm complements and simultaneously acts as a check on the three other arms of government. “As the maxim underscoring the symbiotic relationship between democracy and media holds, where there is democracy, there must be free media and where there is free media, the political system being practised is bound to be democratic”, she reiterated.

Prof. Audrey Gadzekpo in addressing the Ghanaian Media Ecosystem, enumerated the rankings of Ghana in the World Press Freedom index as published by Reporters without Borders (RSF) and stated that despite the rankings, Ghanaian media are free to operate.

She emphasised that the spread of local language media stations across the country has been especially empowering as it has allowed many more Ghanaians to benefit from and participate in issues of national interest. Prof. Gadzekpo indicated that the radio particularly has brought previously marginalised local languages into the public sphere, and encouraged the production of programmes better suited to the needs of the communities in which the languages are situated.

Airing concerns and evaluating the ecological factors affecting media performance, Prof.

Gadzekpo indicated that the lack of any broadcasting legislation was a glaring lacuna in the country’s regulatory system, which critics argue is mostly responsible for excess frequencies in the broadcast space. According to Prof. Gadzekpo, the failure of successive governments to enact

a broadcast code compounded by the lack of transparency in how frequencies are allocated by the National Communications Authority (NCA), has contributed to the political capture of Ghanaian media and skewed authorisation in favour of commercial station applicants.

Sympathising with the media on attack from economic forces, Prof. Gadzekpo said “A variety of factors such as fierce competition from digital media, poor capitalization, among others, have led to a decline in sources of revenue for legacy media. This already precarious condition has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic which has resulted in constricting revenue sources even further and led to job losses across the media industry”.

Criticising the media in its democratic practice in Ghana, the lecturer declared that the media in Ghana have been accused of being partisan, polarised, factionalised, unprofessional and unethical. She cited that some of these criticisms such as sloppiness in reporting, the lack of verification to establish facts, weak research and biased reporting dated back to the beginning of Ghana’s democratic journey. Prof. Gadzekpo said, “Although strong allegations have been leveled against the media, and public trust in them seems to be wavering, there is plenty of evidence to show that the media have played and continue to play very positive roles within the Ghanaian society”. She added that the media have discharged their normative functions in five roles namely; the monitorial, the radical, facilitative, collaborative and cultural glue role.

Prof. Audrey Gadzekpo noted that the monitorial role required journalists to play a surveillance role by monitoring the environment and providing relevant information to people on activities around them, trends and threats. She elaborated further that the media’s performance on the monitorial role has been mixed since the media were providing reasonable and critical information to the public. However, the quality of information they provide could be superficial and not what the people need to make decisions.

The lecturer in her delivery emphasised that the radical role draws from the principles of equality and freedom. She noted that the role called upon the media to strive for equality, justice and the elimination of concentrations of social power within society so that all, especially the marginalised in society, can be included in all societal decisions. She maintained that while the media have shown commitment to equality and freedom, media business was made of mostly males with a few women owning media organisations. “It bears in mind that no matter a journalist’s religious convictions, ethnic loyalties or political views, they have an obligation to educate the public that part of living in a democracy is to tolerate views and values that may go against their own”, Prof. Gadzekpo said.

Examining the facilitative role of the media, Prof. Gadzekpo revealed that the media would provide an inclusive public space for pluralistic debate and civic engagement on public affairs so that the collective wisdom of society would inform governance. She, however, opined that implicit in the facilitative role was also a mobilising role requiring the media to rally and encourage public learning and participation. Prof. Gadzekpo added that the nature of social media allowed people to express themselves without traditional gate-keepers allowing marginalised voices as well as minority and unpopular viewpoints to be accommodated in public disclosure.

Diving into the collaborative role, Prof. Gadzekpo emphasised that the media is perceived as contentious which is suggestive of collusion between media and the state. This, according to her, was partly because journalistic independence was seen in liberal democratic practice as being upheld when the relationship between journalists and the power elite was adversarial rather than friendly. She added that the support for collaborative role countered the media being used to

promote state interests and coinciding with the interests of the public. “In developing countries, such as Ghana, collaboration between the media and state institutions are desirable for developmental purposes”, the lecturer insisted.

She noted that the cultural glue role perceived the media as vital in the preservation and propagation of the culture of a people. Hence, the media have the responsibility of preserving tradition and promoting a common cultural heritage in the interests of future generations. She encouraged the media to act as a cultural unifier that brings people of diverse ethnicities together, highlighting the common norms and values that define them as a unique people to promote tolerance/co-existence, and additionally play a constructive role during conflicts.

As part of the recommendations, Prof. Gadzekpo added that there is the need for retrospection on the part of the media and genuine attempts to address the litany of complaints that diminish people’s trust in the media.

Concluding her lecture, Prof. Gadzekpo said “We must remember that the media are a public good and must be supported to survive, if nothing else in the interest of democracy”.