

Gendering the Agenda: A Look at Front Page Photographs of a National Newspaper

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Abstract

The study investigates the current trend of photojournalism and provides a content analysis of front page photographs in the Daily Graphic, the Ghanaian state owned national newspaper. The study used a six months review of the paper in a non election year and the variables used for assessment were type, focus, subject and newsworthiness of news pictures. Under type, 80 percent were general news pictures on politics, politicians and current affairs in a non election year. Under subject, 50 percent of the issues were socio-political while under prominence, 83 percent were newsworthy. There were no feature news pictures as well as news pictures on women. The newspaper adopts a pattern of depicting substantive issues as socio-political and their recurrent coverage as the means of setting agenda through which worthiness and prominence are portrayed to the public. This has implications for the politics of gender and engendering the newspaper's agenda setting.

Keywords: Photojournalism, lead, prominence, agenda setting, gender

INTRODUCTION

News is a documentation that details and clarifies key linkages between public communication and the exercise of power; between freedom and control, between reality and representation. It is a discourse which claims to present reality and explain it (Watson, 2003). News is what an authoritative person tells a journalist; the more elite the source, the more newsworthy the story (Bell, 1991). News informs us of what is important or salient about reality. Talk is news only if the right person is talking (Bell, 1991). Gans (1979) says in deciding what is news, mostly high placed federal officials regularly appear on American TV news. Some personalities wear a general mantle of authority and are part of the institutional network where journalists expect to get information. In most countries, the government is the prime supplier of information and most governments make the provision of information to the media a ritual (Watson, 2003). What appears on a newspaper's front page is influenced by the cultural climate of the institution which functions mainly from the type of government and the public (McCombs and Shaw, 1976). Alternative sources of news such as individuals, opposition parties, unions, minorities, fringe groups, the disadvantaged are often ignored and not considered newsworthy enough to be captured on the front page (Bell, 1991). News is not neutral and is not a natural phenomenon; it is rather the manufactured product of ideology (Watson, 2003). The media agenda and the public agenda, therefore, may be identical or may not be identical. This study finds it important to review the current trend of photojournalism and how photographs complement the news to set the agenda.

Photographs in newspapers attract and entice readers to buy them due to their intrinsic iconical and indexical attributes and this enhance the credibility of the news items in the newspapers. Since they depict reality, they also furnish evidence to show the authenticity of a news story or give proof of an event that occurred (Ehidiamen, 2008).

Photographs provide a universal language that everyone understands. When pictures are used in newspapers, they help readers to grasp and retain the information being presented easily. Photographs also enhance the layout of the front pages of newspapers, making them aesthetically pleasing. According to Carter (2000), the size of the photograph and the position it takes on the front page is an important code for the reader as it affects the attention given to the paper. The front page is often seen as the major selling point of the paper. It is what attracts potential readers to buy the paper and to read further.

However, some photos may be subjective or inject the opinion of the journalist on to the text, thereby distorting its meaning (Lester, 1999). This study sets out to investigate what kind of news pictures are on the front pages of the national newspaper and the relevance of the news pictures to the text. Of keen interest to this study, therefore, is to answer the question; what do the front photographs of the national newspaper depict and how do recurrent themes of the photographs position the agenda for public opinion? There are obvious implications of the answers to these questions. If the public look to the media for news, what the media decide is news is what the public recognise as news and what is amplified by media is enlarged in public perception (McQuail & Windahl 1998). Moreover, how an issue is reported is as important as whether it is reported at all and this is propelled by what is known as 'triggers', that is particular incidents or personal involvements by usually well-known people that Rogers and Dearing (1996) refer to as "issue champions." These issue champions contribute to critical issues passing through the agenda-setting process. Gender representation, therefore, is a critical issue of concern (Lont and Bridge, 2004; Dzeble, 2006) that this study highlights.

Theoretical Background

The study is set within the framework of agenda setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The theory is based on the idea of correlation between the rate at which the media cover a story and the extent to which people think that the story is important. The public look to news professionals for cues on where to focus their attention (Griffin, 2009). The media do not just tell us what to think about but also influence the way we think , a process that is described as framing (McCombs and Shaw,1972). Framing defines how a certain piece of media content is packaged so it will influence particular interpretations and it is accomplished through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration (Afonso, da Rosa & Procopio, 2008). Griffen (2009) clarifies this concept and indicates that framing focuses on some aspects of an issue to bring out the vital components in such a way as to better illuminate that issue. Thus through framing, the media is able to connect with society. The media can extend our view of the world in an open-ended way or they can limit or control our impressions through news pictures (McQuail, 2008). The motive for the news could be to satisfy the audience, the media themselves or other social institutions. This introduces subjectivity. Depending on the framing definition, the media agenda and the public agenda may be identical or non identical.

The degree to which the media agenda is also that of the public, its discourse an influential part of public discourse, depends largely on the standing of the media in public perception and its credibility as a source of information (Ito, 2002). Ito (2002) describes the relationship between media, government and the public in Japan as 'kuuki', that is, the force of public opinion. This tripolar model of agendas suggests the potential for alliances of influence in the public arena. The agenda setting theory provides limited information on whether media effects are direct and intentional or whether agenda setting is initiated by the media, members of the public and their needs or by institutional elites who act as news sources for the media (McQuail & Windahl,1998). The model does not also indicate clearly the link between the media agenda at the centre and the policy agenda by the government and politicians (Rogers &Dearing, 1996).

Afonso, da Rosa and Procopio (2008) provided an elegant review and indicated that in retrospect, McCombs' and Shaw's theory on the formation of agenda setting providing evidence for the cause-and-effect chain of influence has been debated by critics in the field. They summarized, however, that the study of agenda-setting demonstrates a cause-and-effect relationship between media agenda and public agenda, in which the agenda setting function has multiple components: the media agenda (issues discussed in the media such as newspapers, television and radio), public agenda (issues discussed and personally relevant to members of the public), policy agenda (issues that policy makers consider important) and corporate agenda (issues that big businesses and corporations consider important). These four agendas are interrelated and two basic assumptions underlie most research on agenda setting: (1) the press and the media do not reflect reality, but they filter and shape it; (2) media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues. It is, therefore, important to consistently follow what the media depict as news. Also, newspapers use dominant photographs and editors choose front-page pictures carefully to depict important issues to attract readers. Studies on the front page diversity of photographs and gender diversity have reported under representations (Media Management Centre, 2001; Wood, 2007; Dzeble, 2006) and this calls for the need to monitor mediation effects and the gendering of the media agenda.

METHOD

The Daily Graphic is perceived to be the most credible newspaper in Ghana (Owusu, 2004). The selection of this newspaper is purposively done for two main reasons: it is a state-owned newspaper that is published daily and it is national in circulation with fairly large circulation figures. This study used content analysis methods described in previous related studies and the newspaper was analysed to determine the type, quality, relevance and newsworthiness of news pictures (Dzeble, 2006 unpublished dissertation; Sani, Abdullah, Abdullallah & Ali,2012). The study is limited to the period June 1 to November 30, 2011. Sampling for this newspaper was based on a composite week construction where all the days of the week were given equal chances of selection ((Dzeble, 2006; unpublished dissertation). For instance all Mondays in June, were written on pieces of paper, placed in a box and one was randomly selected. The procedure was repeated for Tuesday through to Friday for all the days of the week in each month until all the days of the week were covered. Thirty (30) issues of newspaper were sampled from a population of 131 issues.

FINDINGS

Subject of news picture

Table 1 shows the results of the study. Under type of news, out of the 30 dominant news picture categories on the front page, 83% were general news pictures on current affairs and developmental issues, 10% were on accidents, 3% on spot news and 3% on economic news.. About half (50%) of the subject of the news on the front page was on socio-political issues (dominated by current affairs - durbars, social gatherings, political rallies and campaigns etc), 30% was on politics, 6.7% on education and 6.7% on health. International and developmental news were minimal and issues on business, agriculture and science were not covered. The analysis show the dominance of politics, politicians and media events (giving campaign speeches at durbars and rallies, visiting various developmental sites and projects as well as interacting with party functionaries). The dominant news subject was politics and social news subjects were also mainly current affairs; education, health, business, science and development issues were subjugated. If editors choose front-page pictures carefully to attract readers and inform them, then politics appears to be what is considered news.

Newsworthiness of the picture

The study considered the focus of the news pictures. This involves the personalities who are the source(s) or subject(s) of the news items - either male, female, both or a group of more than two persons. The study found that majority (46.7%) of the news picture actors were male, group actors represented 36.6%, followed by 16.7% of both male and female actors. There was no news picture on females in the following categories - politics, politicians, social events (giving speeches, visiting various developmental sites and projects as well as on greeting party functionaries). The analysis reveals the male dominance of front page photographs. Considering the prominence of the news picture in relation to the layout of the page, it was found that almost half (43.3%) of the specifications of the news pictures did not fit the dimensions of the page format (as in 1/8; ¼ ; 1/2; or full page), they either exceeded or were not up to the specified layout size. Eighty three percent of the news pictures tied in with the news value of prominence and 16.7% of the news pictures had impact. Eighty percent of the news pictures were bigger than the headlines, 13.3% news pictures were the same as the headlines while almost 7% of the news pictures were smaller than the headlines. All the news pictures (100%) were in colour with no black and white and dual tone images. The study considered next the relevance of the picture as compared to the news substance in the headline, the lead and the story. Most of the news pictures (83.3%) were relevant to the lead and the story, 13.3% of the news pictures were relevant to the headline. Over two-thirds representing 66.7% of the mood and tone of the news pictures were mostly realistic, 23.3% were factual, 7% of the news pictures were sensational in mood while 3% was humorous. The newsworthiness of these subjects is confirmed by the authentic, accurate and down to earth manner in which they are presented thereby making them prominent and significant enough to justify being on the front page.

The politics of gender and agenda setting

The research approach may limit the extent to which the study is generalised. However, the results of the study, at the second half of a non-election year that ushers in an election year, has relevant implications. The predominance of politics and current affairs on the front page of the national newspaper indicates that these are the issues that the paper uses mainly to set its news agenda on its front page. What is not too clear, however, is what criteria the newspaper uses to determine what is newsworthy enough to merit front page placement. Is it newsworthiness that determine the paper's front page agenda or is it politicians that inform the paper's standards of what is newsworthy to merit the front page and consequently influence the public agenda and public opinion? The preponderance of general news pictures specifically on politics and current affairs presented in a credible, prominent manner for

maximum impact on one hand and the downsizing of feature news on education and health, science, the environment and business in a non election year on the other hand, suggests there might be 'alliances of influence' (Ito, 2002). This finding suggests that agenda setting might be initiated by institutional elites in government and politicians who act as news sources for the media, while the news agenda itself is carried across to the public arena in a convincing manner by the media. Where news agenda results from the government-media agenda, it certainly will have certain consistent biases, which might not make the news neutral (McQuail 2008).

If political issues are the main subject, and if the national government intends in principle to increase women's participation in politics, then the misrepresentation of female politicians on front photographs betrays the practice. The downplay of social issues and the absence of women on the front page corroborates previous views (Lont & Bridge, 2004; Dzeble, 2006, unpublished) that indicate that men are more likely to be quoted in stories about politics, business, parenting, religion and science while women are more likely to be quoted in stories about health, home, food, fashion, travel, education and ordinary people (Media Management Centre, 2001). The reduction of news coverage on female political actors in an age of increasing gender advocacy on the need for gender equality in political processes, is likely to affect female political participation in the evolving political process of Ghana. It is recommended that the agenda setting process of the national newspaper be truly engendered- expanded to include more issues on women and feature news.

CONCLUSION

The study provides a snapshot of the current trend of front page photojournalism in the national newspaper, the Daily Graphic, and concludes that front page pictures are male dominated and the newspaper adopts a pattern of depicting substantive issues as socio-political.

Table 1. Perspectives on News Pictures

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Types of News Pictures		Focus of News Picture	
General News Pictures	83.3	Male	46.7
Accident Pictures	10.0	Female	0
Economic Pictures	3.3	Group	36.6
Spot Pictures	3.3	Both Male and Female	16.7
Relevance of Picture to Text		Subject of News Picture	
Relevance of Picture to Headline	13.3	Politics	30
Relevance of Picture to The Story	83.3	International News	3.3
Relevance of Picture to The Lead	0	Education	6.7
Missing	3.3	Social Issues	50.0
		Developmental	3.3
Size of picture in relation to page		Environmental	0
Quarter Size	23.3	Agricultural	0
Half Size	20.0	Science	0
One-eight	13.3	Business	0
Other	43.3	Health	6.7
Full Page	0		
News Worthiness of The Picture		Placement of Picture	
Impact	16.7	Left	23.3
Prominence	83.3	Centre	46.7
Bizarre	0	Right	30.0
Artistic	0		
Size of Pictures in Relation to Headline		Mood and Tone of News Pictures	
Smaller than Headline	6.7	Humorous	3.3
Same Size as Headline	13.3	Sensational	6.7
Bigger than the Headline	80.0	Factual	23.3
		Realistic	66.7

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