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The 'serial callers' of Ghana

How 'Serial Callers' Influence Public Debate on Talk Radio and the Implications for Ghana's Public Sphere

Favour E. Nunoo

A research report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of the University of Witwatersrand's Masters by Coursework and Research Report in Journalism studies.

Johannesburg, March 2015

Abstract

The aim of this research is to investigate the 'serial caller' phenomenon in Ghanaian talk radio, by examining how serial callers influence the dynamics of public debate and the implications this has for Ghana's public sphere. It traces the history and development of serial callers who muddy the waters of a clean clear debate on talk radio. The study finds that in Ghana, the discovery of radio as a political voice became an incentive for the systematization of 'serial calling'. With serial callers operating as "hired guns", their entry into public debate was to announce a scandal or a repetition of a scandal, to take turf in the debate for the political party that has hired them. The study also found that 'hijacking' and 'skewing' constituted some of the modes, forms and strategies of interaction serial callers adopted to intervene in the dynamics of the debate and frame the agenda for public discussion. It found also that some media decision-makers in Ghana facilitated the entry of serial callers into the debate in order to attract greater participation of audience and to satisfy advertisers; in doing so, they neglected the professional ethical codes and standards. The study concludes by arguing that, the normative ideals of the public sphere in rational discussion do not apply on Ghanaian talk radio as the discourse is not rich in scope and depth, while also resulting in a politically polarized public sphere.

Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Masters of Arts by Coursework and Research Report in the Department of Journalism, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university.



Favour Ebenezer Nunoo

16th day of March, 2015

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to the Nunoo's family especially my parents Joseph Ralph Nunoo and Faustina Naa Nyeley Nunoo for instilling in me the discipline and character of a modern African Thinker.

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CHAPTER 1

Aim and Rationale

This research report explores the phenomenon of 'serial calling' in the production of public debate in the media in Ghana. Serial callers by definition are individuals who regularly participate in public debate through multiple calls to various talk radio shows. They monitor different radio on-air discussions, and actively insert their opinions in the debate, based on political motivations. They often hijack the radio phone-lines among various blocs of caller groups and in attempts to set an agenda for media discussion (*VOA News*, 2009). This study attempts at mapping out this phenomenon by, first, providing a historical account that describes the origin of serial calling, second, examining how 'serial callers' influence the dynamics of public debate, and, finally, investigating the potential implications of serial calling for Ghana's public sphere.

The media since the late 17th century has often been referred to as the fourth branch of government on the basis of the oversight functions it exercises (Schultz, 1998). It is seen to be indispensable to democracy stemming from its capacity to facilitate public debate among citizens who deliberate on issues of interest to their survival, sustainability and growth (see, for example, Habermas 1989; Murdoch, 1992). Against this background, the research is aimed at examining the role media plays in the production of debate; and discusses how citizens participate on this platform of interplay between opinion and analysis. The idea that media produces and constructs news content through the process of production has been extensively researched and theorised (Schudson, 2000); however, few scholars in media studies have gone a step further to investigate the processes involved in the production of opinion and to critically examine how media facilitates public debate (Cowling and Hamilton, 2010). This research examines how media facilitates or orchestrates public debate, and thus constructs the ways in which citizens participate.

The state of Ghana has had a chequered political history, characterised by the abrupt removal of three democratically elected governments, coup d'états by the military and dictators who denied press freedom (Selormey, 2013). However, after a 12-year military regime under the People's National Defence Council (PNDC), democratic rule was installed in 1992, which ushered Ghana into the current Fourth Republic. Following the tenets of democracy, the ban on private radio ownership in the early 1990s was lifted, resulting in the opening up of the political space, and the emergence of a vibrant industry in the electronic media, especially private commercial FM radio (Gyimah-Boadi, 1990; Adu Boahen, 1988; Ankomah, 1987: 17-19).

During the long spell of military rule, citizen expression of opinion and analysis of politics and the economy had been impossible; public broadcasters were channels of political communication by government and considered tools of the revolution. This meant that broadcasters could not be positioned as platforms for debate, and there was no alternative platform or private media to do so. It was dangerous to be expressive, resulting in a social phenomenon termed the "culture of silence"; defined as "antidemocratic and anti-freedom of expression communication" (Ansu-Kyeremeh, 1999-2001: 31-33), a situation that curtailed the "cultivation and nurturing of free expression" in Ghana.

Twenty-two years after entering its Fourth Republic in 1992, Ghana now has one of the freest media environments in Sub Saharan Africa (Freedom House, 2012) ranking 41 out of 179 countries in press freedom (Reporters without Borders, 2012). According to the Afrobarometer Survey Rounds 1- 4 (1999-2009), there are over 166 privately owned radio stations operating in Ghana; the reports indicate 70% of Ghanaians depend on radio for their political, social, and economic information. Growth in private media has allowed citizens to actively participate in public debate in these media. Ghanaians now speak to issues of accountability, quiz government officials in debates about proper economic management, such as budget deficit financing, and make unmistakable demands for improved public service management (Selormey, 2013).

Many private FM radio stations have emerged, and, in broadcasting content for audiences, have introduced signature talk programmes that attract large citizen participation using land lines and mobile phones. Ruben and Step (2000) define this type of programming where audience participate through phone in segments as talk radio. These programmes are purposely designed by media to invite listener participation, taking advantage of the massive mobile penetration in telecommunications to engage citizen and the state in creative ways reflecting on range of issues via voice calls, and more recently, voice messages, text messaging, and social media (see, for example, Tettey, 2011; Yankah, 2004). Some of these radio talk-shows that invite calls from listeners in Ghana include '*Feed Bac*k', '*Ghana Speaks*' and '*Total Recall'* on Joy FM*,* also '*Ka na wu'* (Lit. *say it and die!*) on Radio Gold, and '*Wo haw ne sen'* (Lit. *what is your problem?)* on Peace FM (Selormey, 2013). These are some of the many examples of radio programmes that directly engage citizens and government on a raft of issues including policy, democracy, economics, public service delivery, corruption, the criminal justice system, elections and a plethora of subjects.

In addition, freedom of the press is now legislated. Chapter 12 and Article 162 of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana states:

> (1) Freedom and independence of the media are hereby guaranteed.
>
> (2) Subject to this Constitution and any other law not inconsistent with this Constitution, there shall be no censorship in Ghana.
>
> (3) There shall be no impediments to the establishment of private press or media; and in particular, there shall be no law requiring any person to obtain a licence as a prerequisite to the establishment or operation of a newspaper, journal or other media for mass communication or information.
>
> (4) Editors and publishers of newspapers and other institutions of the mass media shall not be subject to control or interference by Government, nor shall they be penalized or harassed for their editorial opinions and views, or the content of their publications.

Ghana's Constitution has it enshrined in its pages the independence of media, positioning the mass media as one of the pillars of Ghana's democracy and an important vehicle through which it can establish and sustain its democratic culture. As Baker argues:

> Democracy requires a free [media] – a [media] to which it gives relatively specific assignment. A free and independent [media] can make important structural contributions that are as great as or greater than many of the constitutional and administrative devices. (2002: 132-3)

The media have thus been instrumental in safeguarding Ghana's democratic principles by encouraging broad-based citizen participation amongst other oversight functions. Owing to the understanding of its role in sustaining democracy, media have increasingly engaged in the production of opinion and analysis on talk radio, which have consequently elicited strong interest and feedback from the public. Citizens actively participate in public debate on radio during call-in segments and this space created by media for citizens resulted in the emergence of the 'serial caller' phenomenon. The individuals referred to as 'serial callers' mostly discussed issues of probity, accountability and transparency in democratic governance. As talk shows became regular features in media, so did the number of 'serial callers', whose activity by extension their interests became intertwined subjects that were political.

'Serial callers' now overstep the boundaries of free expression, previously using talk-radio as a conduit for addressing social problems; they now have acquired a taste for controversial, scandalous and emotive arguments for or against certain ideological and political positions. Today 'serial callers' have evolved into characters of public debate, sophisticated in strategy and operations, more recently properly organized into different associations spanning most regional and district capitals across the country (*allAfrica*, 2014). Their functions have gone beyond eliciting opinions on talk-radio and transitioned into on-air lobby groups capable of undertaking strikes and protests against political parties and sometimes the media outfits that refuse them entry to debate on their talk shows. They function also as political communicators

working for political parties, including the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and New Patriotic Party (NPP); to the extent that they now play an important role in the political planning during elections (Ghanaweb, 2012).

Kabral Blay-Amihere, Chairman of the National Media Commission (NMC), has called on editors and radio station managers not to allow 'serial callers' to set the agenda for public discourse; "Stop the trend, it is not good for our profession," he maintains (Ghanaweb, 2012). He argues that their operations portend a threat to the country's democracy, in that the activities of 'serial callers' in the social information chain are affecting the role of media as agenda-setters and gatekeepers. Media decision makers, including editors, producers and presenters, in Ghana have been severally asked by the protagonists at the media regulator to be diligent, in keeping with their gate-keeping roles in the production of debate (Ghanaweb, 2012).

My research proposes to examine the general dynamics of this phenomenon in relation to the theories of public sphere, agenda-setting, gatekeeping, and concepts of orchestration and babelisation in media studies. Media decision makers are conceptualised as "gatekeepers" (literally, opening or closing the gates) by theorists, and often considered responsible for determining what news content to publish or not publish for public consumption (Shoemaker, 1997). While the production of news has been repeatedly analysed and researched by media theorists (Schudson, 2000), scholars like Cowling and Hamilton (2010) observe that the production of debate has "slipped" away from "analytic view", although news and opinion are produced simultaneously. Cowling and Hamilton (2010) attempt to apply the idea of gatekeeping in the selection of news content to the production of debate. Cowling and Hamilton (2010) imagine a space for public deliberation between journalists, interlocutors and the audience interacting on topics set out by journalists; however, the discussion is generally allowed to proceed without interference in the views and opinions expressed by the speakers in debate.

Cowling and Hamilton however argue that debate does not emerge on its own right from the issues “out there”; rather public debate is “actively created” by media involving a process where topics are “deliberately” sought out, the dynamics of the discussion “determined” and an “imagined public” engaged; in producing debate journalists operate not as gatekeepers, but as “conductors” (Cowling and Hamilton, 2010). Relating this idea of “conductors” to demands of the NMC that Ghanaian journalists should not allow serial callers to set the agenda speaks to the notion that public debate is in practice “created”, thus considered as one that requires “orchestration”; a measure of control and direction from journalists (Cowling and Hamilton, 2010).

In Ghana, the attention drawn by the NMC, led by Blay-Amihere, to the idea that journalists should not allow ‘serial callers’ to set the agenda suggests that to some extent in the production of debate, ‘serial callers’ can push their own topics for discussion on talk radio. This implies they probably assume the role of media as agenda setters if the debate is not properly “orchestrated” (Cowling and Hamilton, 2010). Following from this concern raised by the media regulator in Ghana, one major value of this research is to investigate ways in which ‘serial callers’ attempt to become agenda setters. Against this background, my research will investigate how they attempt to push an agenda, the modes, forms and strategies of interaction employed in doing so on talk radio, while also establishing what media decision makers in Ghana understand as their role in the facilitation of public debate.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews theories and conceptual frameworks in media studies that frame my research: the public sphere, agenda-setting, gatekeeping and two concepts drawn from research into the media and the production of debate: orchestration and babelisation.

The media in society is generally upheld as being inextricably linked to democratisation (Curran, 1995). Following the central role of the media in society and later in democratic governance, Edmund Burke referred to it as the Fourth Estate of the realm. Positioning the media as Fourth Estate follows from Burke's analysis of the power relations of the press *vis-a-vis* those of the other powers in Britain; the Lords, Church and Commons. The media later assumed the role as watchdogs over government in efforts to check the power it wielded as Lord Acton (1834-1902) argued for whittling down state power. In which he observed that "all power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely", therefore some external power must be a check on state power. This external power was found in the media, as McQuail (2005: 169) notes that "the power of the press arose from its ability to give or withhold publicity and from its informative capacity".

Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere takes the argument about the role of media in strengthening democracy further by pointing out that the media also creates a platform for public debate between government and its citizens who interact on issues of the common good (Habermas, 1989). This research as a first step adopts Habermas' public sphere theory to analyse the role of media in the facilitation of public debate in Ghana; it looks at the processes and phenomenon of 'serial callers' associated with the production of opinion and analysis on Ghanaian talk-radio.

The second section of the literature review in this study draws on the idea of gatekeeping to offer insight into how media decision makers manage the views and opinions expressed by 'serial callers' during live on-air discussions. This research enquires into the criteria by which certain 'serial caller' comments are given publicity or not given publicity, while at the same time attempting to sketch out some ideas in relation to how their views become public and sometimes the agenda.

The operations that transpire in the production of debate can also be located within the agenda-setting media theory, where decision makers determine which topics enter into their editorial to be discussed on live radio**.** In doing so, this research looks at the potential of the citizen voice; specifically 'serial callers', who in spite of not constituting a part of the production chain have in certain instances attempted or successfully pushed certain topics for discussion during the live phone-in segments. This study will examine which topics are discussed and how they are framed, while also mapping out the how 'serial callers' push their agenda onto the discussion table.

Finally in the literature review of this study, we explore two relevant media and public debate ideas closely linked to the role of media in the production of debate. First it expounds on the concept of "orchestration" in production of debate theorised by Cowling and Hamilton (2010). Orchestration conceptualises public debate in the media as 'actively created topics that are deliberately sought out by journalists, the dynamics of the discussion planned and an imagined public engaged'; such that when this happens the debate can be said to have been "orchestrated" (Cowling and Hamilton, 2010). The idea of orchestration is important to understanding how media decision makers on Ghanaian talk-radio are able to manage the challenge of facilitating public debate against the background of 'serial caller' operations.

Alternatively, it reviews "babelisation" coined by Mwale (2010), which refers to 'a slippage in communication, a cacophony of voices that appear to be in conversation or debate, but in fact speak past each other's' voice'. This concept addresses ways in which media is unable to meet Habermasean ideals of critical rationality, allowing a stalemate to set in during debates. Babelisation will be drawn on to support our analysis of the production of radio talk shows in Ghana.

2.1 The Public Sphere

In pre-modern Europe, French king Louis XIV argued “L’Etat c’est moi”, meaning I am the state (Habermas, 1989). During this Feudal era, public life did not exist as an inclusive space for the representation of all members of society; public life was a preserve of high valued individuals – kings, monarchs and lords. The king was the public, his life and activity was given publicity to the masses, the common people did not constitute the public, as it is understood today (Habermas, 1989). According to Habermas (1989), the structural transformation of the public sphere emerged out of two historical traditions, originally from a literary 'space' during the 18th century where citizens debated issues of the common good in coffee shops, and later, a political public sphere following the rise of the independent press and the emergence of a new social class engaged in an endless cycle of ‘rational-critical debate’ on a range of intersecting issues in the realm of politics, economics, amongst other subjects in the state (Habermas, 1984).

“The Glorious Revolution of 1688” ushered in political and structural changes in England, which opened up the frontiers of society for critical public debate, bringing an end to censorship (Habermas, 1989). During this time, opinions of the public outside of parliament became relevant issues for deliberation in parliament. As Habermas (1962) pointed out, parliament was no longer an exclusive forum of oligarchic rule, and he argues that in their deliberations they became sensitive and responsive to the voices of public opinion. These economic and political changes favoured capitalism and parliament as Habermas (1989; 1962) noted in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.* Habermas uses the example of Britain to show an evolution of the public sphere and its relationship in the growth of democracy. He notes that through the activities of independent press, a new climate of political criticism arose challenging and transforming traditional authority, the press was positioned as a "critical organ" of a public engaged in political debate. In Britain, the reform bill of 1834 made parliament an organ of public opinion, its activities were brought into the public domain, parliamentarians were increasingly required to justify their positions through "rational-critical" debates, consensus building and parliamentary proceedings were made public (Habermas, 1992). A new

legitimacy emerged, a law-based state whose authority was derived from the universal rule of law, abolishing the state as an instrument of domination into a democracy.

Kellner (1989) argues that whereas theories of democracy posit individuals organizing, deliberating, making decisions, and actively transforming the institutions of their social life. Habermas focuses on "deliberative democracy", which according to him involves the processes which cultivate rational and moral subjects through "reflection, argumentation, public reasoning, and reaching consensus" (Habermas, 1992: 44). According to Habermas (1992: 452), public debates have the capacity to uncover topics of relevance to all of society, interpret values, contribute to the resolution of problems, generate good reasons, and debunk bad ones.

The idea of public sphere by Habermas is indispensable to critical theory (Calhoun, 1992); however, many theorists have critiqued the Habermasean public sphere for various reasons. Nancy Fraser argues that his theory needs to undergo "interrogation and reconstruction" (Calhoun, 1992). Pointing to certain key exclusions in gender, Fraser (1990) cites observations such as Habermas' regard for coffee shops, and neglect of more woman-friendly salons culture in France where public debate ensues. He is also criticised for placing a premium on citizens with higher statuses, where status distinctions determine the levels of access to the public sphere.

Similarly, scholars like Warner (2010) have pointed out his failure to identify in the public, existing counter-publics who after repeated attempts to forward their social and ideological positions to the rest of society, succeed in making their opinions of common concern to the formerly opposed public. This debating public although not confined to common physical spaces, are nevertheless in text-based conversation on a subject of common interest. Warner talks about the public sphere as encapsulating private individuals with private positions. While Habermas considers the public sphere as an aggregate of public interests, Warner in his arguments observes that these members of the public with private subjectivities he calls "counter publics" participate equally in debate, where they express these private positions

distinct from the mainstream public. Warner (2010: 55) notes, “A public is always in excess of its known social basis”.

On the other hand, Critical-Marxists like Herman and Chomsky (1988) are suspicious of the media’s claims to representing the public, they consider media as existing to serve the interests of elites in manufacturing consent, excluding smaller institutions and essentially circumventing debate. Generally, they maintain that the role of media is significantly affected by its use as a tool for propaganda by elites. For Fraser (1991:111-125), the public sphere ought to be characterised by “open access, participatory parity, and social equality”. Still, the theoretical arguments that underpin Fraser’s critique draw on the normative positions of public sphere and democratic theory.

Normative theories of public sphere have remained critical of the role media plays in the production of debate (Gerhards and Shafer, 2009). Many scholars have theorized normative assumptions describing how the public sphere ought to be structured in fulfilling its critical role in public debate. The normative assumptions intimate that the public sphere should be largely accessible (leading scholars of this school include Peter Dahlgren (1991), Paul Hirst (1994), Benjamin Barber (1984, 1996), and Amitai Etzioni (1997). Public debate should encapsulate a wide range of relevant material including topics, evaluations and arguments, reflecting on what Ferree *et al* (2002a: 296ff) maintain as attempts at realising the ”widest possible empowerment”, that is the extensive “popular inclusion” of different actors.

Mass media have significant impact on society resulting from the capacity to reach large audiences, organizing substantial parts of societal self-observation and the production of opinion (Ferree, 2002b: 10). Habermas (1989) pointed out how debate about issues of interest to citizens took place in coffee shops, however today; we see the media as a window into such spaces for discussion, transmitting a multiplicity of voices and opinions (Cowling and Hamilton, 2010). From this standpoint, media are seen as fundamental to the operations of democracy by virtue of their capacity to facilitate citizens’ engagement with the questions of society (Cowling

and Hamilton, 2010). Contemporary media, especially the case of radio talk shows, offer a nuanced platform in public discussion where previously unheard voices and opinions of citizens are given publicity (Garnham, 1986). Audiences today are capable of asserting the right to hold political leadership accountable for the stewardship of public offices. And radio talk shows have made public debate livelier and highly interactive following the introduction of direct phone in segments during discussions, engineering a debating public between the ruler-and-ruled within the public sphere.

2.2 Agenda Setting

In this section, we review literature on agenda-setting theories, which are important to understanding how media are able to deal with a raft of issues in the public domain. We first look at the origin of this theory, as well as its core arguments on how media can influence public opinion, and finally explore the idea of issue proponents in agenda setting.

In Book VII of The Republic, Plato argues that we cannot see the "real" world but merely a reflection of it through our dull senses, as though chained in an underground cave – reflections are reality. Walter Lippmann brought Plato's "shadows of the images" into the 20th century world of mass communication in *Public Opinion* (1922), arguing that the public relies on mass media to gather its view of the world.

The origin of Agenda Setting Theory can be traced to Walter Lippmann's 1922 classical work, *Public Opinion*, in which Lippmann establishes the principal connection between world events and the images in the mind of the public (Lippmann, 1922). Cohen (1963) argues that the media 'may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about'. Cohen made the observation that 'the world will look different to different people depending on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors and publishers of the paper they read' (Cohen, 1963). Following from Cohen's ideas, the theory was later developed by McCombs and Shaw.

In 1972 Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw formally introduced Agenda Setting Theory, which they developed in the "Chapel Hill Study", research on the 1968 presidential election between Democratic incumbent Lyndon B. Johnson who was ousted by Republican challenger Richard Nixon. McCombs and Shaw surveyed 100 residents of Chapel Hill, North Carolina on what they thought were the most important issues of the election and how that compared to what the local and national media reported were the most important issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Developing Walter Lippmann's idea, they examined the media's agenda and compared it to the key issues of the undecided voters; interestingly the outcome of their study was that the voter's agenda highly correlated to that of the news media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This outcome of their study to a large extent speaks to the capacity of media in shaping what ideas and opinions emerge in public debate. Editors, reporters, and broadcasters, McCombs (2003) argues, in the production of news and opinion, play an important role in shaping "political reality". He points out those readers, in consuming news publicised by the media, do not only learn about a given issue in the public domain. They also take notice of the importance attached to the subject in discussion based on the amount of information offered by the media, as well as the relevance given to the issue based on where it is positioned by media decision makers. In its most basic sense, agenda setting talks about the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media (Murley and Roberts, 2005).

The first basic assumption of agenda setting is that the media does not reflect reality, it only filters and shapes the public perceptions on reality. Thus, media serves as a conduit where diversity of ideas is allowed to circulate leading to the formation of a majority opinion (Bennett, 1982). Describing how journalists in making professional choices about what they consider necessary for media consumers, Murley and Roberts, (2005) observe that each little "tree" of information contributes to a larger "forest" of meaning and each individual's worldview.

The second basic assumption of agenda setting is that the media by concentrating on a few issues lead the public to perceive those issues as more important than others (Agenda Setting

Theory, 2012). Time frame remains critical in understanding the agenda setting role in mass communications; “The media agenda is usually indexed by a content analysis of the news media to determine the number of news stories about an issue” argues (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 18). Agenda setting occurs through a cognitive process known as “accessibility,” which implies that the more frequently and prominently the news media covers an issue, the more that issue becomes accessible in the audience’s memory (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

Agenda setting remains one of the most influential theories on the media’s political influence argues (Graber, 2005). While the impact of media on public opinion continues to invite the attention of scholars, another equally important scope of agenda setting theory is concerned with the media’s influence over the agendas of political actors and policy makers in government. This influence wielded by media is often termed ‘political agenda setting’ or ‘agenda building’, with regards how the media transfer issues they have prioritised into becoming political priorities.

Agenda setting is an important paradigm in both media studies and in political science, with regards to the way in which public opinion interacts with policy making. The same concept, however, means quite different things in the two domains. In political science, the political agenda setting approach deals mainly with the limited attention of political actors for a wide range of political issues, while in media it deals with the limited attention of media on a wide range of issues in the public domain.

Dearing and Rogers (1996) in defining agenda setting noted that it is a process where ‘issue proponents’ compete to gain the attention of media professionals. Issue proponents are individuals outside of the media that compete to set the agenda. Such proponents can be seen outside of the media production [or gatekeeping] process competing and trying to influence what gets on to the media agenda. It also includes events that get the attention of the media and thus feature on the agenda. In this research, I am interested in looking at who are the ‘issue proponents’ in Ghana. I also examine the extent to which ‘serial callers’ may constitute

issue proponents and while also determining how these issue proponents are able to influence what the mass media in Ghana places on the agenda in the production of debate.

2.3 Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping theory is helpful in our understanding of news, focusing on the various mechanisms that come to play including news gathering, news writing, and publishing by editors and journalists. However, in this study, unlike the public sphere and agenda setting theories previously discussed that have direct bearing on understanding public debate, the gatekeeping theory is not as applicable to studying media debate, as it is generally focused on news. In spite of this, it is important that we briefly discuss this theory as it will serve as a background for discussing other relevant conceptual frameworks such as "orchestration" and "babelisation" that offer greater insight to our study of media and the production of public debate.

Gatekeeping in news media, which simply implies the selection of news for publication is said to be driven by a combination of factors, organizational objectives, news norms, professional values and also the interests of audience (Shoemaker, 1991). This basic idea of gatekeeping is extensively captured in Shoemaker's valuable review of the literature: ''Simply put, gatekeeping is the process by which the billions of messages that are available in the world get cut down and transformed into the hundreds of messages that reach a given person on a given day'' (Shoemaker, 1991; 1). The origins of gatekeeping theory can be traced to Lewin's (1951) work on community dynamics; here Lewin developed the idea of gatekeeping in relation to food consumption. He studied the selection process by which certain foods reached the dining table, and why others did not. In this study, Lewin realized that housewives were key "gatekeepers", who controlled food items which entered into the "channels" that ultimately brought it from the garden or supermarket, to the household and finally unto the dinner table. He notes that each of the "channels" is walled into sections surrounded by "gates" – these gates thus represent the decision-making points that determine whether the food will enter the "channel"

to start with, or move to the next section. And along the way, forces exert pressure to accept or reject food.

In media gatekeeping, the decision of which story to publish by decision makers is largely affected by a variety of factors, including: organization-level factors such as administrative characteristics, working procedures, and cost and time constraints (see, for example, Bass 1969; Berkowitz 1991; Donohue, Olin, and Tichenor, 1989; Gieber, 1964; Jones, Trohldahl, and Hvistendahl, 1961; Shoemaker et al., 2001). Also, there are story-level factors such as the geographic proximity of the story, visual features, and the clarity of the story to audience. Also the type of news story, thus disasters, economics, violence (see Abbott and Brassfield 1989; Galtung and Ruge 1965) and ultimately professional factors including journalistic values and norms, and accepted views of what is considered to be ‘‘newsworthy’’ (e.g., Gans, 1979; Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman, 1972).

What this means is that the news consumed by the public does not just ‘emerge from events of the day’, and disseminated as it is after being gathered (Cowling and Hamilton, 2010). The information gathered is positioned against a selection criterion such as the various conditions mentioned in the previous paragraph, in a process that ultimately refines the news so that some items are repackaged, or completely rejected, whilst those that finally meet set standards are published. Soroka (2012) argues that what this means is that news is systematically biased, and published content is skewed towards stories that may be highly sensational and sometimes controversial. Biases in news selection have been portrayed by some media scholars as a function of the multiple levels news is positioned against before publication (Shoemaker 1996; Shoemaker et al. 2001; Shoemaker and Vos 2009).

In reviewing literature on gatekeeping theory, it is clear from the above discussion that it remains helpful in studying the selection of stories for news by editors, as mentioned earlier although it has a limited scope in relation to public debate, this theory serves as a background on which the next literature to be reviewed was developed. Media scholars have barely

examined the theory in relation to the production of opinion and analysis. Recent study however by Cowling and Hamilton (2010; 79) suggest that in the production of debate, "producers and journalists are not so much 'gatekeepers' as 'conductors', wielding the baton to swell the noise from one section of the orchestra, while quieting others". Drawing on lessons from their study on South Africa's talk radio the *AMLive* and the linked debate programme, the *After Eight Debate*, the next section of this research will examine their theory which makes for better understanding in our study of media and the production of public debate in Ghana.

2.4 Orchestration: Media and the Production of Debate

Unlike the scripted narratives of news, public debate programming is a distinct arena within the public sphere, which constitutes a form of social interaction organised around opinion and analysis involving livelier debates between journalists, government and the public. Cowling and Hamilton (2010) argue that while the production of news and public debate take place simultaneously, production of news has enjoyed a lot of scholarly attention and review, while public debate has slipped from the "analytic view" of media scholars. This section of the literature review is concerned with the conceptual frameworks of "orchestration" and "babelisation", to help in our examination of the dynamics of public debate on talk-radio which creates a kind of liveliness through audience participation.

Cowling and Hamilton (2010) examine journalistic practice in relation to the production of debate by studying the dynamics of talk-radio. Their study started as a project in the media and public deliberation node of the Constitution of Public Intellectual Life Research Project in 2004, aimed at eliciting ideas about the role of the media in public deliberation in South Africa. According to Cowling and Hamilton (2010), there is a disparity in the production of opinion and analysis, from that of news. They argue that many editors and journalists consider their role in the facilitation of public deliberation as important in democratisation, as a result these media decision makers "intervene in the dynamics of debate" in order to reach their expectations of

"critical rationality" - their findings thus led to the concept of "orchestration" (Cowling and Hamilton, 2010).

Journalists, presenters, editors and producers involved in producing content for public consumption have been identified as "gatekeepers" as we discussed in the previous section of the literature review (Shoemaker, 1997). In reviewing the theory of gatekeeping, we mentioned that the decision of which story to publish by media decision makers is largely affected by a set of professional and ethical values they ascribe to. Based on this understanding, Cowling and Hamilton (2010) extend the concept of gatekeeping in news, to the production of opinion and analysis. They imagined gatekeeping as occurring on a platform for deliberation, with journalists introducing a subject matter and allowing their interlocutors to the debate without interfering with their various positions and how these views are expressed. This issue of non-interference, they argue, will be inconsistent with ideas of "impartiality", "independence" and "balance" that guide the operations of journalists in news (Cowling and Hamilton, 2010). They maintain that "debate is actively produced by the media", which wields a baton with which they swell the noise from one section of the "orchestra", while quieting others in the course of debate (Cowling and Hamilton, 2010)

Cowling and Hamilton's studied the AMLive and the linked debate programme, the *After Eight Debate*; where they investigated a controversy at the South Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) around the selection of commentators in 2006. This study showed that journalists and producers at the public broadcaster's flagship radio station conducted their work operations with professionalism, viewing their role as representatives of the public, while at the same time accountable to the public by producing news reports and debate simultaneously. However, in this study, Cowling and Hamilton identified practices on the *After Eight Debate* that deviate from traditional forms of gatekeeping in news. The audience were allowed to participate in the debate by opening the phone lines, but what was noteworthy was that callers were coached by presenters in forwarding sound arguments. Callers were challenged to buttress their submissions with a form of evidence, ultimately moving the discussion beyond simple

statements of opinion. They note that the interventions of presenters were directed towards the structure and forms they envision as ideal for the debate, but not the content that the various discussants tabled down. Ensuring that all relevant topics were appropriately set out and exhausted in the debate, thus discussants were required to argue their positions rationally.

Cowling and Hamilton argued that, unlike gatekeeping in news production where journalists allowed certain issues to be published whilst others were rejected, the type of interventions during the debates they studied went beyond the simple notion of media as a platform for public debate. Cowling and Hamilton (2010) argue that in their operations they were better described as "conductors" than "gatekeepers" (Shoemaker, 1997). The producers and presenters in this study conducted and mediated talk-radio discussions based on their understanding of a critical and debating public – hence the intervening processes which Cowling and Hamilton term "orchestration" (Cowling and Hamilton, 2010). This understanding incorporates Enlightenment ideals of a rational debating public and with Habermas' more normative versions of the public sphere. They conclude by defining orchestration in their study of the *After Eight Debate* show as "a set of practices that is not simply the shaping of debate through the general operations of media production, in which production is conceived of as limiting and framing – orchestration is productive and constitutive" (Cowling and Hamilton, 2010).

The concept of orchestration is important to this research study on talk-radio and audience participation following its capacity to elicit some ideas and possibly respond to our questions on what the dynamics of producing opinion and analysis are in media. It sets the stage for our research into what media decision makers' understand as ideal for public debate, and what their perceptions may mean for the public sphere in Ghana more generally. Furthermore, this idea of orchestration helps to examine critically the dynamics of public debate in Ghanaian talk-radio, helping us to examine in Ghana forms of interference in debate that can be located in "orchestration".

The role of media in the facilitation of public debate is critical for sustaining democracies, beyond general elections media allows for broad based participation. Media in the production of debate offers very interesting opportunities for citizens to share idiosyncratic opinions with the rest of the public, while simultaneously shaping their perspectives on issues by engaging with the ideas of other individuals within the public sphere. It is important to point out that "orchestration" by media makes for a livelier and critically engaged debate in the mode of public rationality. By expounding the concept of "orchestration" in production of opinion, Cowling and Hamilton (2010) basically show that "debate in the media does not arise simply and naturally from issues in society; it is actively created". Topics for discussion are deliberately sought out by media decision makers, the dynamics of the discussion planned, an imagined public engaged and discussion thus "orchestrated" to meet the ideals of critical rationality. However, Cowling and Hamilton (2010) concede that particular kinds of orchestration can push the dynamics of debate away from the ideals of critical rationality, by promoting certain issues for discussion while relegating others to the background. These other forms of orchestration circumvent certain issues from the discussion table often resulting in a stalemate; Pascal Mwale has studied the dynamics of such debates elaborately and identifies the process as "babelisation" (Mwale, 2010). The next section of our literature review on concepts in media and public debate, we trace the background to the study of "babelisation", well as its core arguments which speak to how media decision makers produce debate (Mwale, 2010).

2.4.1 Babelisation

Mwale's study focuses on what he calls the "forms and modes of address and interaction – that is, how participants communicate with each other in the public sphere" (Mwale, 2010). He adopts a nuanced approach in studying the production of public debate in media, one that basically goes beyond the regular tabling and framing of issues by media to the dynamics of the debate – the strategies employed in debate. Mwale (2010) argues strongly for orchestration in debate, noting that media decision makers should not imagine their role only as mediators providing space for others to deliberate on the questions of society. This view re-echoes that

idea of “orchestration” discussed earlier in this section (Cowling and Hamilton, 2010). He maintains that in orchestrating debate, journalists must reach for the Habermasean ideal of “rational-critical debate”, while locating their operations to meet the normative-practical demand as agents of public opinion and “custodians of public conscience” (Ettema and Glasser 1998, Habermas, 1989). In advancing his arguments, Pascal Mwale examines public debate in 2002 on genetically modified maize in four southern African countries: Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

According to Mwale (2010) babelisation refers to “a slippage in communication, a cacophony of voices that appear to be in conversation, but in fact speak past each other”. He argues that babelisation is made up of three unique strategies that are used during debate in various forms: reframing, sidestepping or dodging, and telescoping (Mwale, 2010). In speaking to the issue of *“*reframing” in public debate, Mwale notes that the opinions expressed by some participants are reiterated and misrepresented in the debate, by other discussants who give a different interpretation or understanding to the original opinion earlier expressed. In his study on public debate on GM Maize for these countries, he again observes a second strategy in public debate, where participants in discussion over a topic deliberately ignore the need to respond to certain issues raised, he identifies this practice as “sidestepping”. The third component of babelisation he points out as “telescoping”, which involves narrowing the scope of debate from covering broader areas to revolve around one subject or related issues for a considerably long period. For Mwale (2010), telescoping results in preventing other issues that require equal attention from being addressed because some participants do not recognise them as relevant or listen to the voices or parties that raise such issues.

Following from the above strategies employed to arrive at “babelisation”, Mwale points out that the media in public debate sometimes allow reframing, sidestepping and telescoping to proceed without halting such strategies. For Mwale (2010) what journalists do is to report their messages in “relay mode”. In his words, “they [the decision makers] took a hands-off approach to the rhetoric of the debate”, hence were unable to discover that various debate strategies

were at play. Following from this neglect of orchestration, public debates resulted in a "stalemate", characterised by a poor and incoherent dialogue with participants talking across rather than engaging each other. Discussants in debate, Mwale (2010) notes, refrain from addressing key issues which can advance a greater understanding of complex issues, and the discussion then is engulfed in "slippages" and a proper dialogue rich in scope and depth unrealised.

In conclusion, he argues that babelisation is inherent in media debate, pointing out that in the case of Africa, "the question of forms and modes of public communication (publicly mediated address and interaction) on science speaks to the region's conditions of weak media and their epistemic--political vulnerability" (Mwale, 2010).

Conclusion

Expressive or mediated forms of participation, such as writing about public issues in letters to newspapers or calling in to radio and television talk-shows to raise public issues, have rarely been studied by media scholars (Cowling and Hamilton, 2010). Often, they are examined only to the extent that they may encourage, or hinder, involvement in the more traditional modes of political participation (Pinkleton and Austin, 1998).

This research sets out to look into the production of opinion in talk-radio by media professionals. I set out to investigate fundamental questions about the origin of "serial callers", who they are, how they operate, who funds their operations and the motivation behind their activities on talk-radio. In addition, I will enquire into the role of "serial callers" in the social information chain, their impact on public debate and associated implications of their participation in talk-radio for a young democracy such as Ghana.

I draw on agenda setting/gate keeping, orchestration and babelisation in order to make sense of the phenomenon of serial callers and media debate in Ghana. The study will also contribute

to an understanding of how applicable and useful these concepts are in examining media in relation to public debate. Finally, I will examine in the conclusion how the "big theories", such as public sphere, normative ideas of the public sphere, including how some of those contested ideas such as the manufacture of opinion by the elites relate to some of my findings.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 The Qualitative Research Approach

This research adopted a qualitative approach in studying the serial caller phenomenon in Ghana; employing methods including participant observation, in-depth and unstructured interviews in the data collection process.

The qualitative research according to Cresswell (1994) is a process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. In studying such problems, Kvale (1996) observes that the qualitative research using interviews describe the meanings of central themes in the life world of subjects. The main task in interviewing under the qualitative method is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say. Following from the structure and objectives of this research into serial calling, I used in-depth interviews to collect data on individuals regarding history, perspectives, and experiences. Alternatively, I consider participant observation appropriate for collecting data on naturally occurring behaviours and the practices of the subjects under observation in their usual contexts. It is important to note that in studying how serial callers participate on talk radio through phone in segments; this approach adopts a more observational position with little to no participation.

As McNamara (1999) argues, interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant's experiences. In this case, the interviewer is able to pursue in-depth information

around the topic, combined with follow-up questions to further investigate their responses. Qualitative research is concerned with developing explanations of social phenomena, such as the phenomenon of serial callers in Ghana. These explanations according drawn from the qualitative study according to Hancock (2009) purports to elicit meaningful understanding of the society in which we live, speaking to why things are the way they are, why people behave the way they do, how opinions and attitudes are formed. Also, how people are affected by the events that go on around them, how and why certain practices have emerged, developed and sometimes evolved in the way they have (Hancock, 2009).

Generally, qualitative research is a type of scientific research consisting of an investigation that: seeks answers to a question, systematically uses a predefined set of procedures to answer the question, collects evidence, produces findings that were not determined in advance, produces findings that are applicable beyond the immediate boundaries of the study (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Beyond these characteristics, this research method additionally, seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspectives of the local population it involves and the participants responding to questions (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

3.2 Strengths and Limitations of Qualitative Approach

The strength of qualitative research to this study is its ability to provide complex descriptions of how respondents experience and understand issues related to our topic. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994) one advantage of qualitative methods in research studies such is that the use of open-ended questions, informal interviewing style, and opportunities for probing gives participants enough room to respond in their own words, rather than having to provide fixed or limited response options in quantitative method. They argue that using open-ended questions, one is able to collect elaborate data from respondents due to the rich explanatory nature of responses, and capable of the gathering unexpected responses that may be vital to the study, consequently providing new dimensions of the research to explore (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

Denzin and Lincoln also maintain that another advantage of the qualitative method is that it allows the researcher some flexibility to probe initial participant responses, asking questions like why or how. The researcher must listen carefully to what participants say, engage with them according to their individual personalities and styles, and uses follow up questions to encourage them to elaborate on their answers (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

In spite of the benefits of the qualitative method mentioned in this research, some of its limitations are that generally the collection of qualitative data is generally more time consuming compared to other approaches such as the quantitative. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) concede that in the qualitative approach it is less easy to generalise because fewer people will be studied hence it is not possible to generalise results to that of the population in question. However, because of the extensive nature of the qualitative approach it can be suggestive in planning for other kinds of research. Usually exact numbers are reported rather than percentages. Also it is difficult to make systematic comparisons using the different responses collected from respondents that are highly subjective, while also requiring greater skills particularly in the case of in-depth interviews and participant observation (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

The aim of this study was to investigate the 'serial caller' phenomena in public debate on Ghanaian talk-radio using the qualitative approach to data collection. I investigated this phenomenon in two parts, first by looking at the history and development of serial callers, and in the second section their influence on public debate by studying the general dynamics of their operations on talk radio. And in the conclusion I discuss the implications of serial calling in public debate for a fledgling democracy such as this one in Ghana.

In setting the scene for the origins of 'serial callers', the first part of data I collected focused on the background, growth, transition, and *status quo* as core components of the Ghanaian public sphere. I conducted interviews to map out a historical account as a first step at landscaping and detailing how the first known serial callers came onto the scene in Ghana from the

respective accounts of respondents in media. Given this is an initial study into the serial caller phenomenon, and the first attempt by academia to map the history of the phenomenon, I pieced together this history from the various accounts of respondents and where they were positioned at the time of its emergence and growth. I also identified the similarities in their accounts well as differences to exact an idea of how when and how the phenomenon became fully fledged.

3.3 Data Collection

In mapping out the history, I interviewed media experts on the background of talk radio in Ghana, and explored issues such as the social and political events that may have contributed to the phenomenon in question. I also relied on electronic sources such as news websites, and print archives including old newspaper publications to establish how talk radio played a crucial role in the resurgence of free speech in Ghana and how later serial calling emerged into media and public debate.

Secondly, using unstructured interviews, I collected relevant information on when the first known group of serial callers started calling into radio talk-shows. Through informal, conversational interviews, I was able to elicit in-depth responses on questions of the background of serial callers, how one becomes a serial caller, what motivations fuel their activities on talk radio. Well as probing issues that deal with their association with political parties in Ghana.

In the third part of data collection I examined the dynamics of debate by touching on a range of issues with regards to – how 'serial callers' influence debate. In achieving this objective, I carefully examined the forms and strategies adopted in debate by serial callers, which fall within the conceptual frameworks of orchestration and babelisation located in the node of media and public debate. Using participant observation, I established what happens during the production of opinion by examining how serial callers participate in public debate; selected two

serial callers and closely observed them participate in on-going debate via phone calls from their respective locations and also other online records, particularly news websites that capture their operations. I also observed how they trace the debates on air for the different shows, well as their regular preparations before joining the debate. The advantage of using the participant observation approach is that it allowed for a first-hand observation and note taking on how serial callers participated in public debate by observing forms, modes and strategies of their address and interaction.

Using open-ended questions I interviewed serial callers to track the general dynamics of their activities, touching on questions of how they operate, what they understand as their role on talk-radio, how they became regular radio callers and later serial callers, what motivations inform their decisions to be part of public debate in the way they do. I also enquired about their relationship with political parties, and attempted to sample explanations about why they take certain political positions in debate. I also look at the kind of support systems they received from political parties when their services are engaged. In doing this study, I conducted in-depth interviews with three presenters in media namely; Paul Adom-Otchere, Bernard Avle and Alhassan Suhini.

TABLE OF CURRENT AFFAIRS PRESENTERS INTERVIEWED IN THIS STUDY

NAME	STATIONS	PROGRAMS	YEARS ACTIVE
Paul Adom-Otchere	**Joy FM**	Producer, Joy Super Morning Show (News and Morning Show)	2000 - Present
	Citi FM	Host, Flagship Evening Talk Show (Eye Witness News)	
	Metro TV	Host, Current affairs show, Good Evening Ghana	

Bernard Koku Avle	**Citi FM**	Host, The Citi Breakfast Show (Morning Show)	2003 - Present
	Via Sat 1 TV	Host, The Ghana Report	
Alhassan Suhini	**Radio Gold**	Host, Gold Power Drive (Morning Show) Host, Alhaji & Alhaji (Most listened to Saturday Morning Radio Talk show)	2003 - Present

It is important to point out here that the above presenters agreed to be named and their responses published in this research project. They responded to open-ended questions intended to elicit responses that helped in tracking their understanding of public debate, what they think of 'serial callers', their reasons for allowing or disallowing serial callers to participate in debate, what outcomes they expect of public debate among others. After collecting data on the general dynamics of debate and using it to examine the influence 'serial callers' wield in public debate, I finally drew conclusions on the implications of this phenomena for Ghana's public sphere.

3.4 Method of Analysis

I analysed the data collected from the interviews by simplifying the bulk of data into transcripts, and then into themes. After transcribing my interviews, I first ordered them in a way that answers the Central Research Question, Theoretical Question and well as my Interview Questions. Secondly, I engaged in a secondary analysis by bringing the various themes into conversation with each other, which led to theorisation and conceptualisation of my findings. Following from this, I used the themes to expand and interrogate the data for further

complication, hence conducting a close analysis of transcripts in case new findings which were not anticipated. These include: the origins of talk radio, the entry of serial callers in public debate, the role of private radio and events that contributed to the growth of this phenomenon, types of serial callers, and conceptualisation of operations in the dynamics of public debate among others.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

4.1 Origins of Talk Radio in Ghana: Introduction

In this research I set out to study the phenomenon of serial callers in Ghanaian public debate, which I proposed to investigate in two parts: first by looking at the history and development of serial callers; second, by studying the general dynamics of serial caller operations on talk radio.

This chapter deals with some of the findings that emerged from the interviews, with regards to the origins of serial calling, its emergence and systematization, and a range of intersecting issues surrounding the dynamics of debate. The responses represent the personal interpretation of respondents and where they were historically, socially and professionally positioned at the time of the development of this phenomenon.

In the interviews, I found that my respondents held similar positions about the history of serial calling. Some serial callers interviewed in this study also noted that they remember beginning of radio phone in segments happening on music request shows, but serial calling actually started when political talk shows were introduced. Their narratives were to a large extent complementary rather than conflicting. Some interviewees saw it as starting in 2002, some earlier, but I have discerned – from the interviews – a number of key moments/eras as part of the findings. I outline in the history some of the responses that feature prominently in the narratives, including their complementary accounts on the series of socio-political events that led to the discovery of 'radio as a political voice' and the 'emergence and systematization' of serial calling after the year 2000 and 2004 elections. Another important feature that resonates with the accounts was that individuals found the emergence of serial calling to be inextricably linked to the privatisation of radio following the dismantling of the Peoples National Defence Council (PNDC) military government, and introduction of democratic rule in 1992.

The dismantling of the military regime as discussed in chapter one is significant to this study because it heralded a new political regime where media was given protection under the 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Ghana. This protection resulted in the liberalisation and

pluralisation of the media space from a government controlled state broadcaster towards the establishment of multiple private FM stations, whose entry into broadcasting introduced radio talk shows; the platform that gave rise the serial callers of Ghana.

4.1.1 Early Roots of Serial Calling

The trajectory of Ghana's electronic media has been very interesting in many respects, but it is difficult to exact the dates of entry of talk radio in Ghana and its dividend; serial calling. This sense of inability to pinpoint the time it emerged is expressed by most respondents. For example, here is the view of Radio Gold morning show host, Alhassan Suhini.

> **Question:** When do you recall serial calling becoming a trend on Ghanaian talk radio?
>
> **Suhini:** I am sure that many people will have different experiences with how this phenomenon came about. But I think that I got into radio and met it because I recall around 2003-2004, when I started hosting morning shows where usually you have very heated political discussions taking place in Tamale, we already had people who regularly call into those discussions … each time you had a political discussion they were the first to always get the phone lines when you activated the lines to pick contributions from listeners.

Bernard Avle, a morning show host on private radio station Citi FM, shares similar sentiments.

> **Avle:** I wouldn't say I have a specific date, because when I entered radio as a presenter they were already operating. But I will say it's been something that has been with us as far as commercial radio or political discussions started in Ghana. On Joy FM, in my view, so I can say with the inception of talk radio -that was the first bout.

While respondents linked the emergence of serial calling to the early inception of talk radio on private FM stations as discussed above, others noted that prior to the introduction of private radio in 1995, some key events within the late 1980's and 1990's set the tone for the sort of media liberalization that gave rise to private radio.

Adom-Otchere, in his account, observed that:

> Sometime in the late 80's and into the 90's in preparation for a return to constitutional rule after Ghana had had a long dictatorial military regime in charge, the privatisation of the newspaper industry became an important part of the discussion. So, private newspapers beginning with the *Catholic Standard,* the *Ghanaian Chronicle* and others came onto the scene. The discussion then moved forward to the privatisation of electronic media, which was to allow private people to own radio licences and operate radio the same way the state broadcaster did. The state broadcaster, Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) had a radio channel that broadcast in English and vernacular that had been running for about 50 years. After the 1992 elections had occurred and the first government was sworn in, the National Media Commission[1] which was a creature of the constitution came into force and part of its mandate was to establish private radio in Ghana.

However, at about 1995 government's seizure of equipment belonging to one of earliest private radio broadcasters under the new democracy, *Radio EYE*, raised a great public hue and cry, public demonstrations and criticism, which forced government to issue many radio licenses. This created a new era of what Fuller (2004) terms "broadcast pluralism".

This era of "broadcast pluralism" which introduced interactive radio is where most respondents converge and uniformly consider in their respective accounts as the inception of this phenomenon (Fuller, 2004). The interviewees' identified various periods and events which led to the rise of serial calling; this has been categorized in three phases. Bernard Avle terms the beginning of serial calling as the 'first bout'; being the period that saw the introduction of interactive radio in 1995. This is followed by the second phase which is the Presidential Elections in year 2000 where private media played a key role by introducing interactive political talk shows that dismantled the 'Rawlings factor'. The last phase was after the 2000 elections,

[1] The National Media Commission became a creature of Ghana's constitution on July 7, 1993 by an Act of Parliament, National Media Commission Act 1993 (Act 449). The commission came into force with a mandate to regulate media, promote and ensure the freedom and independence of the media for mass communication or information.

where there was a trial of ex-ministers in the previous NDC government, Adom-Otchere maintains these trials led to the 'discovery of radio as a political voice' and by extension the 'systematization of serial calling' according to Alhassan Suhini.

4.1.2 The 'First Bout' of Serial Calling: Introduction of Interactive Radio in 1995

This section examines how interactive radio was introduced on private radio from the accounts of respondents. With AvIe observing that serial calling first started on *Joy FM*[2] adding that it is 'something that has been with us, as far as commercial radio or political discussions started in Ghana'. Adom-Otchere's account agrees with Avle except that his offers greater insight to the role *Joy FM* played in the introduction of talk radio in 1995, which set the tone for serial calling to follow later.

> **Question:** When do you recall interactive radio becoming a part of the on air programming of private FM stations in Ghana? And can you discuss how this happened at the time?
>
> **Adom-Otchere:** At about 1995 private radio began operations in Ghana, and unlike the state broadcaster private radio's first foray into the Ghanaian market was to be interactive. *Multimedia* began *Joy FM* with an interactive session which was hitherto unknown to Ghanaians, because the state media was not interactive in that manner. Private media's initial point of interaction was the introduction of music shows, where listeners for the first time could request specific music for family and friends on air. This became a big social phenomenon where people could now phone in, speak to radio presenters and hear their voices live on air.

[2] *Joy FM* is a privately owned radio station in Accra, the capital of Ghana. First air date was in 1995, focuses on local news, talk, sports, politics and music. The station is owned and run by the media group company *Multimedia Group Limited*

> So once multimedia introduced the interactive section with phone in segments, that's how phone in segments become a part of the radio broadcast industry. So this is how the interactive bit begun at about 1995.

Adom-Otchere's observation about the non-interactive nature of the state media resonates with Anokwa (1997) who maintains that media, including private newspapers under the PNDC regime focused on lotteries, sports and cultural programs for fear of prosecution. The Secretary of Information Joyce Aryee in defending direct government control in media under the PNDC government stated:

> "I don't see the press as lying outside the political institutions that we already have. This is where I feel people ought to realise that the press differs from country to country. In a situation like ours, where we need to conscientize people, and where we have an illiteracy problem, you use institutions like the press to do the conscientization" (*Wikipedia*, 2014).

The above demonstrates that until the introduction of private radio, media; particularly the state media was seen a as a tool for the revolution, designed to facilitate conscientization of the public under the PNDC government who from this position considered the vast majority of the population as ignorant, lacking the capacity to engage in political deliberations that could question the performance of government.

> **Question:** At what point did interactive radio become political, so that phone lines were not only opened to the public for music requests but for them to participate in political discussions?

> **Adom-Otchere:** It was towards the election of 2000, which was a very heated election. Private radio had then grown from multimedia to three or four more private stations

and election campaigns had heated up in 1999 and live talk shows became an important part of the campaign effort.

Phone lines were opened when these live talk shows occurred, so political party representatives and presidential candidates for both the NDC and NPP made several appearances on radio to articulate their views, elaborating on their campaign manifesto and making appeal to voters. Private radio became very effective in the campaign trail. Phone lines will then be opened for at least 10% of the program and people were invited to call in and then express their views on the arguments of these political parties.

Serial calling had not quite started but some people will call in and say vote for this party or I will vote for that party because of that. Serial calling had not quite started because it was not a deliberate effort of the political parties themselves to arrange for individuals to phone into radio stations. Individuals appeared to phone in voluntarily and we were also enjoying the new phenomenon of being able to communicate on radio and being able to be heard. So that's how it was then.

The interviewees show that the interactive radio began with music shows where the public could call into radio and request songs for family and friends. Unlike the public broadcaster, private radio's initial foray in media was to be interactive, hence the phone-in segments that was introduced on music shows. However by 1999 private radio pushed the envelope further by hazarding interactive political discussions where audience for the first time could speak on political issues in the run up towards the 2000 elections. Like the music shows, political discussions were equally interactive. It is important to note that both Adom-Otchere and Avle agree on the subject that Joy FM introduced interactive radio. The point of divergence is that while Avle says that serial calling started with the inception of talk radio, Adom-Otchere does not agree with that. He posits that serial calling had not quite started at the time because it was "not a deliberate effort of the political parties themselves to arrange for individuals to phone into radio stations. Individuals appeared to phone in voluntarily".

The next section will explore interconnected accounts in the findings relating to the discovery and use of 'radio as a political voice' according to Adom-Otchere, and its relationship with what Suhini terms the 'systematization of serial calling' in the aftermath of elections 2000.

4.1.3 Elections 2000: Ghana and the Rawlings Factor

This section of the findings touches on how radio begun to be identified as a political voice by political parties and radio callers. How certain landmark events in Ghana beginning with the 2000 general elections, trial of ex ministers, murder of the Dagbon King amongst others "excited the system to the extent that people who usually wouldn't call into radio stations called in, and…some of them have since become serial callers" says Alhassan Suhini. Adom-Otchere gave an interesting account on the role media played in the 2000 elections. As he said in the previous section "private radio became very effective in 1999 during the campaign trail in the run towards elections 2000. Political party representatives and presidential candidates for both the NDC and NPP made several appearances on radio to articulate their views, elaborating on their campaign manifesto and making appeal to voters" (Adom-Otchere, August 2014).

Suhini expands on Adom-Otchere's general position on the role media played during the 2000 elections. However, Suhini in this section examines a specific role media played during the 2000 elections which contributed to the removal of Rawlings and the NDC, and how this growing importance of media led to the creation of serial calling.

> **Question:** At what point in time or particular year on Ghanaian talk radio did serial calling become a regular feature?
>
> **Alhassan Suhini:** I think it started after the 2000 elections, the general consensus among stakeholders was that the media was largely responsible for the defeat of the NDC that was at the time led by Jerry Rawlings even though Professor Atta Mills was its candidate for the 2000 general elections. The consensus amongst stakeholders was

> that it was largely [because of] the role the media played that Jerry Rawlings was feared as a dictator and may not hand over power. So the media was highly commended for the role that they played in the 2000 elections.

Suhini touches on one of most interesting subjects in Ghana's electoral history, the 'Rawlings factor' and the related anxiety Adom-Otchere noted in the opening paragraph above that accompanied the 2000 elections. Both Suhini and Adom-Otchere agree that these suspicions about Rawlings led private radio to open participation in the elections to the general public, in a manner that made it difficult for any stakeholder in the elections to employ shenanigans to skew the elections unfairly.

The real test of Ghana's 4th republic came in year 2000 in the run up towards the December 7, general elections, speculations were rife that Ghana's strongman, Jerry John Rawlings[3], would not relinquish power and was effectively scheming to hand over power to his protégé and former vice president, John Evans Atta Mills. The 2000 elections was a significant election year which was billed to mark the end the 20 year rule of President Jerry John Rawlings. It was also going to be the first time in Ghana's political history where a democratically elected government had served its full term in office without a military overthrow.

According to Paul Adom-Otchere, radio then became very effective in this campaign trail; his argument supports Alhasan Suhini's submission that the media after the 2000 elections was congratulated for its role in the elections. The media was congratulated not because it helped remove the NDC but it levelled the political playing field for the opposition NPP to have a platform to voice their message. In terms of publicity, the NPP did not have fair access to the state broadcaster, while the ruling NDC enjoyed a lot of coverage (CDD-Ghana Research Papers 2001: 38). In a 2001 report by the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) on media coverage of the 2000 elections, the report pointed out that the state-owned print and electronic media as well as the private-owned media gave disproportionate coverage and access to the ruling NDC party (CDD-Ghana Research Papers 2001: 38).

[3] Rawlings led Ghana for 12 years under a military regime and for 8 years in the Fourth Republic.

In a *New York Times* editorial reprinted in *The Accra Mail*, a private newspaper, foreign affairs columnist Thomas L. Friedman praised Ghana's 'Low-tech democracy'[4]; this was in reference to the country's FM radio stations and the contribution they made to the electoral success.

Friedman writes:

> For Ghana's poor, illiterate masses, being able to call the radio, or be interviewed in the market by a radio reporter with a tape recorder, has given them a chance to participate in politics as never before. It was this national conversation, conducted over FM radio, that was crucial in enabling J.A. Kufuor, a free-market democrat, to defeat Mr Rawlings's tired, floundering party, which has run Ghana into the ground during 20 years in office.

The accounts of the respondents represent the history of Ghana's media in the Fourth Republic as initially turbulent, but following the liberalisation of the airwaves and issuing of private licenses for FM Radio, media enjoyed greater freedom, contributed to electoral success and the consolidation of multi-party democracy. More importantly, I discern from the history drawn from the respondents an evolution and maturity in Ghana's media whose previously turbulent history had become fairly stable. Media was now ready to take on the role of agenda setters, gatekeepers, and further facilitate public debate in the newly elected government under NPP's J.A. Kufuor.

4.1.4 Discovery of Radio as a Political Voice and the Systematization of Serial Calling: Trial of Ex-ministers, Murder of a King, Radio as Political Voice

After the NPP won the elections, the party formed a new government which took office in 2001. It committed itself to probe acts of malfeasance and illegal acquisitions of wealth by government appointees in the previous NDC regime. Former ministers, including the late Victor Selormey (Deputy Minister of Finance), Ibrahim Adams (Minister of Agriculture), Dan Abodakpi

[4] Thomas L. Friedman, 'Low-tech democracy', *The Accra Daily Mail*, 3 May 2001, p.2.

(Minister of Trade and Industry), Sepa Yankey (Chief Director of the Finance Ministry), Kwame Peprah (Finance Minister), Tsatsu Tsikata (CEO of GNPC), and many others were hauled before the courts for financial misappropriation and imprudent management of the national purse. 'Witch-hunting' became a catchword for sympathizers and stakeholders within the NDC who took to the media to defend their party.

Question: At what point Paul did the transition come into play for political parties to begin engaging the activities of radio callers?

Adom-Otchere: After the 2000 elections when Mr Kufuor became President on the ticket of the NPP, the then ruling party went into opposition and there was a lot of attack, political attack on the opposition party, the NDC, which had then been in power for about 20 years if you include the military era. The opposition party found itself unable to defend the party relating to the way court cases were being taken out against them, their key ministers were on trial and a lot of trial was occurring in the media.

So it appeared that the opposition party decided that they were going to apply the media, same media, to respond to some of these issues. And so particular individuals who had been in government before decided to monitor radio and respond when things were said that they were unhappy with or when things were said and they thought were not factual.

So the use of radio to create a political voice began with the trial of the ex-ministers in the first term of the Kufuor administration, where these ex-ministers and their political party wanted to respond to the trial that was occurring in radio, apart from the trial that was occurring in court. The NPP appeared to be running part of the trial in media where newspapers will catalogue what had happened in court and commentaries were run about stuff that were going on in court. Usually, people were not used to that because matters that were happening in court were thought to be sacrosanct, but here it was that people were being found guilty in the media.

So the NDC also felt the need to respond so they identified the radio platform as a tool to be able to tell their story from the purely political perspective.

Broadcast journalist Alhassan Suhini also identifies events during the first term of the ruling NPP that he notes excited the system.

Question: Have there been events you recall that may have contributed to the emergence of serial calling?

Suhini: I will say yes! Some events served as galvanizing points for people with interest; I will give you some examples.

The murder of the Yaa-Naa[5] in 2002 in Dagbon for example galvanized a lot of young people who spoke for and against the incident on radio. And so each morning you will always as an anchor have to mediate between these two viewpoints anytime a discussion on it came up…and because it's about sentiments and emotions people really got passionate about it and they didn't even require any motivation beyond their own inner feelings to participate in these discussions.

Then if you also recall that Jerry Rawlings before or after the 2000 elections was invited to the BNI for some interrogation. I remember it also excited the system to the extent that people who usually wouldn't call into radio stations called in, and I do know some of them who since have also become serial callers.

You know so sometimes it will take an event that will excite people to begin the process of contributing to radio discussions but even after that event is long gone and resolved they would have cultivated the appetite of contributing to radio discussions already and they will not stop.

Adom-Otchere explains further that:

[5] **Yaa Naa Yakubu Andani II** (1945–2002), king of Dagombas, overlord of Dagbon and victim of murder at Yendi, the capital of the Dagomba traditional area, was born in August 1945 at Sagnarigu, a suburb of Tamale in the Northern Region of Ghana.

By the time elections 2004 occurred, the interest of political parties had increased in monitoring radio. So the political parties created media monitoring desks to monitor what was going on, on radio in order that ideas will not be put across in the media that were either false in their view or that were unpalatable to their philosophy. So when such ideas were put across they will nominate somebody, usually an officer of the party to speak on radio and address some of these things or to hold a press conference.

So radio as a platform for airing political views and also influencing thinking along political lines began to simmer into the political discourse and political planning of key political parties in Ghana ahead of the 2004 general elections.

Suhini agrees that the serial caller phenomenon began emerging during this time; however he sees it as a result of peoples own interest in political activities:

Suhini: But because of the pluralism of the media after the 2004 elections, when political parties noticed how their supporters contributed to their fortunes during the elections by participating in radio discussions either through phone ins or going to the studio to have radio discussions they began to pay attention to it. So you realize that the NPP and the NDC started identifying the people, the young men and women who were phoning into radio stations to defend their policies and giving them some sort of support.

The NPP was in power then so many of their people who may have started calling into radio stations because of personal interest began getting favours from appointees of government who felt that they were foot soldiers or if you like comrades or cadres on the field who advocated the party's position on issues on radio. So they started supporting them with phone credits, giving them mobile phones and sometimes even fixed telephone lines and all of that.

The NDC, which was also in opposition, decided to support some of their people who were bold and were calling into stations defending the party's positions, I think that is when, if I may can call it the systematization of serial calling begun. A system was now

put in place to identify people who called into radio stations and television stations to support party A or party B. Per my analysis, I think it started after the 2004 elections when people from the year 2000 experience realized the role the media could play and from 2004 elections also noticed that their supporters individually on their own contributed largely to forming or shaping discussions, and hence decided to pay attention and invest in it. This is how we cultivated as a people this serial caller phenomenon.

While Suhini gives a more general picture of how the 'systematization of serial calling' started after the 2004 elections, Adom-Otchere offers some detail in his version captioned as the "formalization of serial calling" where he focuses on how the 2008 election strategy of political parties fed into the final construction and establishment of the serial caller phenomenon.

When the elections of 2008 got into full gear, the ruling party at the time appeared to be having a good ride in the economy. The opposition party felt that if the ruling party was doing well in the economy, the way in which you can take them out of office is to bring out certain things that people were not aware of. Some of those things were either scandalous or were not palatable in terms of a political party putting out those kinds of issues, gossips here and there about leading political figures in the government.

What the opposition party then created were certain individuals who did not have a direct link with the party because they were not officers of the party for them to put out some of these scandals. So that the political party itself will not be held accountable or responsible, but here it was an individual who has been "hired" to spew out information against people in government to sort of red herring the whole issue and bring the opprobrium onto the people in government. And that could help even out the political playing field and set the tone for an election for people to choose between morality and economics and all of that.

So the ruling party also responded, they responded by having people of the same ilk who did not belong particularly to any kind of political party but who were speaking for a particular political party to continue to speak in that manner all the time and it was

about denigrating here and denigrating there and became quite nasty and people continued to discuss that, about the new phenomenon that was occurring where serial callers were calling in.

So radio stations were encouraged to stop such serial caller from getting in, which was when serial calling became formalised because political parties now had to deal with radio station producers so that they allow their serial callers to be calling. And the other political party will also deal with their people and allow their serial callers to call in. So it became a battle of serial callers, and serial callers always had very key information that will excite people who are listening to the radio. If somebody had been in a sexual scandal or somebody had taken a bribe or something like that it is the serial callers that will point it out first, and that was the way the game was being played.

The respondents thus agreed that certain events, like elections, trial of ex-ministers, the murder of a King in the Northern Region of Ghana and the hauling of former President Rawlings to the Bureau of National Investigations "excited" the system, such that people naturally developed the interest to call into radio station talk shows. The point of diversion in the accounts proffered by respondents was which political party was first to 'systematize' or 'formalize' serial calling in Ghana. While Suhini felt it was the NPP who first used serial callers, Adom-Otchere came from the position that the NDC started using serial callers and the NPP in response created its own, to level the playing field. Varied as their positions may be, what is important here is that we know that the systematization of serial calling in Ghana was facilitated by political parties. In a sense, the political establishment had reached into the media sphere. While this is not unusual - it happens in more developed countries like US, through spin doctors, communications companies – however this took a different form in Ghana using serial callers masqueraded as ordinary citizens**.** By 2008, the role of interactive radio, an expressive citizenry, and the shenanigans of political parties in a new multi-party democracy had led to the introduction of serial calling in Ghana.

4.2 Types of Serial Callers

> "Well, welcome back," said radio show host Bernard Avle. "This is the talk back segment on the Citi Breakfast Show; I'll start taking your calls" (*Voa News,* 2009).
>
> "Mohammed is calling from Dansoman, and he's my first caller. [Hello my brother.] Mohammed good morning, welcome to talk back on the Citi Breakfast Show. [Thank you]" (*Voa News,* 2009).

This section profiles serial callers by looking at one of most notorious serial callers in Ghana popularly known as 'Appiah Stadium', whom I interviewed, alongside another serial caller Christy Nkansah who was interviewed by international broadcaster, Voice of America in 2009. Here, I explore the fundamental issues including who serial callers are, the motivations that fuel what they do, the general idea about how they practice, well as touching on the objectives they hope to achieve as serial callers.

First, to understand how they work, I shed some light on what a typical day in the life of a serial callers looks like;

Christy Nkansah is a serial caller, working at her small fabric shop in the capital, Accra. She tunes her radio to a program where there is on-going political discussion. Monitoring talk radio discussions from her shop, Christie a serial caller observed; "I spoke on Pink FM...I spoke on Great FM... I spoke on Top Radio..." She notes, "I will listen to them and sometimes write my points down". With two cell phones in hand, she dials at the same time the numbers announced to get through to Radio Universe, other serial callers use more than two phones at the same time in placing their calls through to the radio stations. This morning alone besides the three stations mentioned above, Christy has successfully spoken on Hot FM and Asempa FM as well Obonu FM making a total of six radio stations (*VOA News*, 2009).

Back at the fabric shop, one of Christy Nkansah's phones got through to another station Obonu FM which broadcasts in the local language, Ga. She starts by greeting the host, Rasheed, and saying her name;

> *"Ata Rasheed ago e [ame eh] Yo a choome Christy [yo Christy] Yoo ata Rasheed,"... "NDC bi ke fie politics," said Nkansah. "Ne ni nye like it's a national issue. Nu wo few o ba ko bali ba fie..."*
>
> *"Ata Rasheed it's me calling, [hello there] my name is Christy [ok Christy] Ok Mr Rasheed…NDC is using this subject for politics, this issue is a national issue but they have politicised it..."*

Nkansah in the above phone interaction with the radio presenter maintained that the NDC had politicized the on-going discussion which was rather a national issue. She gesticulated while touching on these issues on phone which was live on air, paced the small space in her office and started to break into a sweat. She took the opportunity to slam the other main political party the National Democratic Congress. She looked quite exhausted when she was done talking. Nkansah noted, "Anybody could go on air and say what they want, Ghana's a free country, after all this is a democracy ... We are in a democracy country. Nobody can tell you not to speak" (*VOA News*, 2009).

Christy said she was not done calling radio stations today. Even after she goes home, she wants to speak on air at least three more times before she goes to bed. If this happens, it probably means that she would have spoken at least nine times on different talk shows only today. She repeats these calls from Monday to Saturday; this will mean that serial caller Christy Nkansah alone would have been heard on air about fifty-four times only this week. In one month she would have featured about 216 times on talk radio and in six months she would have been heard on talk radio by listeners some 1296 times. Extending Christy's over 1000 appearances on radio discussions multiplied by the many serial callers arguing and defending or critiquing one political party or the other, it is not farfetched to estimate that serial callers dominate public debate on talk radio. Christy notes that serial callers, or communicators like her, are here to stay (*VOA News*, 2009).

While Christy Nkansah helps us to understand technically how serial callers operate, 'Appiah Stadium', also a serial caller helps us answer one of most important questions this research seeks to answer, which is to determine the relationship between political parties in Ghana and serial callers. Most of the serial callers I interviewed were reluctant to admit there was any direct relationship between themselves and political parties, although they admit to have a political position in public debate. When queried about what motivates them to actively participate on talk radio defending a political party or critiquing the other, one of such respondents with serial caller name 'Carlos from Odododiodoo' observed "it's out of passion, and love for my country". Appiah Stadium, by contrast, states bluntly that he has direct links with politicians in his activity as a serial caller.

> **Question:** So Appiah Stadium, tell me about how you ended up becoming a serial caller and probably the most known serial caller in Ghana.
>
> **Appiah Stadium:** I remember that before starting to call into talk radio, people used to call into shows to request for songs for their family and friends. But I thought politics was more interesting and contributes to my life so I started calling into political programs whenever the phone lines were opened even when others were sceptical about doing so.

Appiah Stadium started calling into radio stations soon after John Agyekum Kufuor became president elect of Ghana in the 2000 elections. In his previous life, he worked as a security guard, at the Kumasi Sports Stadium. He coined the name 'Appiah Stadium' from his original surname Appiah and the location he often called from, the stadium. Appiah's unique radio name and robust political commentary on talk radio attracted the interest of political parties in the ruling New Patriotic Party to his activities, he observes. However, besides his decision to participate in debate to bring about social transformation in any shape or form, he also admits that he desires fame, like that of local movie stars and successful Ghanaian footballers, which motivates him to be more active on talk radio and over the years has become one the best-known serial callers in Ghana.

Appiah Stadium notes that initially when he started calling into radio stations, he accessed public phone booths using phone cards without any external financial or logistical support. Mobile phones were really expensive and only the middle class could afford them. Sometimes, after his contribution, he passed the pay phone to another radio caller without hanging up, that person then also made a submission to the same show, and then sometimes passed the phone again to another caller without hanging up, unless the presenter then disallowed it. The act of passing the phone on to a second, third and sometimes fourth caller at the same phone booth became known as “back pass”, a term coined by early radio callers in Ghana. This changed, according to Appiah, when politicians started providing them with call credits, mobile phones, and fixed lines to facilitate their operations, part of the systematization politicians introduced. Political parties’ support systems included securing for their convenience conference rooms stocked with over 50 radio sets to help them effectively dominate talk radio to the extent of placing some of them on monthly payrolls. This is how the Serial Caller Appiah Stadium describes the relationship between callers and political parties.

Question: What are some of the systems put in place to support serial calling?

Appiah Stadium: Yes there are things they do to support us, but they pretend to the public about it. Politicians run away from that fact. They hide their faces. Anyone who will tell you that political parties do not sponsor us serial callers, tell the person that I Appiah Stadium I said the person is the leader of all liars!

Right now as I speak to you, the NDC is working hard to put serial callers in their constitution so that they become part of the formal structures of the party.

The NPP on the other hand is pushing to make their serial callers are part of the communicators of the party under the title young elephant communicators.

So both the NDC and NPP party leaders sponsor serial callers. Up to date, if I want to call any radio station in Ghana because the things I say on air is a big blow, I call the NDC leaders, if I want 5 stations, they will feed all the producers with some money and tell them on this and that day Appiah Stadium wants to talk. It is the same thing the NPP too did with me when I was a serial caller for them. But if you ask the politicians they will deny it and say Appiah Stadium is doing his own thing and that they are not involved.

As I am here now, imagine that from NPP time to now that I am NDC serial caller, if you have to talk about my hard work and sweat to raise money for my wife or girlfriend, if a politician does not give me that money I will never get it.

So they motivate us...they SUPPORT!!

In Ashanti Region where you have popular serial callers, there were about 10 of us who are very popular in the party because of our work. What then happens is when our government is in power, this whole government institution will give us work. Small-small contracts for instance to clear the growing shrubs along the stretch of Accra-Kumasi Road. So we are paid to execute such contracts.

Although Appiah Stadium is quite adamant in his submission that political parties support serial callers, this study was unable to find corroborating evidence for some of his claims. However, his standard of living has improved; he no longer works as a “watchman”; he owns a car now which he says the NDC purchased for him, and he has no other job. From this interview, it seems likely political parties do support serial callers, however are very likely they deny as Appiah noted, but the accusation about paying off media producers is not proved or corroborated by any other respondent.

Appiah Stadium’s name as a serial caller resonates with most Ghanaians; he is also the first serial caller to cross the floor from being an NPP caller to an NDC caller. He says that in Ghana’s

2012 elections, he worked closely with the core campaign team of the NDC after he was invited by then sitting President John Dramani Mahama, who retained his seat in that election. Another serial caller "Carlos from Odododiodoo", who initially maintained he is a serial caller because of his passion for a better Ghana and enjoys no support from political parties, admits however that during elections, he worked with the NDC. He and other serial callers were assigned to various polling stations, they moved from one polling station to the other 'to secure the ballot' for the NDC. This admission shows that he is trusted and recognised by the political party as having the capacity to bring them electoral victory. Against the background that during elections there is a lot of money exchanging hands for any form of service, it is suggestive that although Carlos denies financial benefits, like Appiah, he does receive some.

Appiah remains emphatic about this existing relationship they have with politics. He even goes further to reveal how political parties collude with serial callers, radio producers and presenters to manufacture or sketch public debate on talk radio. I have proposed in this research to examine some of these dynamics in public debate in tandem with concepts of orchestration and babelisation, and partially in relation to the theory of agenda setting and gate keeping later in this study.

In collecting data on the serial calling phenomenon, my respondents pointed out that presently, there are two types of serial callers. The first group of serial callers include the likes of Appiah Stadium, Christy Nkansah and Carlos from Odododiodoo. They are often illiterates or semi-literates, but quite effective on talk radio using a mix of English and local languages. But the second group are well educated and more effective, such that some members within the second group evolve from ordinary serial callers to appointees of government who sometimes occupy ministerial positions.

> **Adom-Otchere:** But there are different categories of serial callers in that sense, now there are those serial callers whose job it is to phone in and denigrate and they will only say one thing: either a scandal or they will say something that is very spurious and then they spew it out. That is one category of serial callers.

> There is another category of serial callers who are intellectual, sufficiently trained to be able to analyse. Now they listen to the radio, make an analysis of the discussion and try to intellectualise, you can call it intellectual sophistry. They try to intellectualise the position of their political party and then they put it out. They will always phone in and make a case for party B and against party A, but they will intellectualise it, they will analyse it, they will do the pros and cons, they will do the thesis, they will put out the anti-thesis, but the ultimate aim is that it should end in a certain manner. It should end with a certain kind of outcome which will be for one political party and against another political party.
>
> Now it is this category of serial callers that sometimes evolve over the years and then become ministers of state when their party is in power and are able to take up key positions in the government because they are sufficiently trained to do so.

Adom-Otchere notes that what these two types of serial callers share is that "they are paid and hired almost like hired assassins" to go out and denigrate, take the debate away from an enlightened discussion. He maintains that to the extent that serial calling has become an opening for a certain turf war, the first category of serial callers has to be eliminated. "If we can eliminate that kind of serial caller who comes in to take territory and to enhance the turf war between one party and the other and so they don't say anything that is critical to the discussion they only say something that is for or against another party, then yes we can eliminate that". But on the serial callers who engage in what he calls "intellectual sophistry", Adom-Otchere argues that "we can still leave the intellectual people because you can always see through it and some situations are just indefensible. So if a person tries to defend a case that is indefensible, you find out that it will not wash with people.

Adom-Otchere's view on this is shared by some radio presenters, but others disagree. To understand in detail these dynamics of debate on talk radio the next section of this research will explore how public debate is produced on Ghanaian talk radio, how serial callers participate in the debate and the impact this has on the quality of debate.

4.3 The Dynamics of Public Debate on Ghanaian Talk Radio

This section of the paper examines the production process of public debate on Ghanaian talk radio, touching mainly on what Ghanaian journalists understand as public debate, issues about audience participation in debate, how topics are selected unto the discussion and the choice of discussants and how phone in segments are managed in the production process. The section details what happens in the production process, however, it goes further to analyse how serial callers influence debate in relation to theories and concepts in media studies as discussed in the literature review.

Adom-Otchere describes his understanding of public debate as ventilating any vexed public issue that is important to the population. It involves discourses about whether education should be free or not, whether water should continue to be a public good under government monopoly or it should be privatized for reasons such as efficiency and quality service provision. He notes that it includes debates about whether electricity should be privatized or provided by the government, raises questions about whether contracts between government and the military be made public or subject to parliamentary approval. Generally, public debate is about matters that are of a developmental value, in which the stakeholders in government and the public can ventilate their views on various subjects while also exploring the various thinking's about how it should be to bring about the desired results or development.

Adom-Otchere's observation shows he has a Habermasean understanding of public debate and the public sphere. In Ghana, however, this is only in theory; journalists such as himself and Bernard Avle consider what happens in practice to be far from the Habermasean idea of a critically engaged public in rational-critical discussion.

Avle explains:

> My challenge is that public debate should have a context which is more Ghana centred, for example, if you are discussing quality education, it should not be about which

> political party managed education better or worse. It should be about how to improve quality of education and outcomes for the job market. If you are discussing National Health Insurance, it should not be about which party failed to deliver on the objectives of the health insurance scheme, it should be how you can increase access.

According to Avle "radio discussions in Ghana are around politics or basically the public discourse in Ghana is political" and mostly evolve around "who will win the next election." Even discussions about the economy or things to do with livelihood are all aimed at who is going to win the next election. For Avle, Ghana's radio discourse is highly politicised and the worst part is that even the politics that underscores the discussions is not developmental in nature, but electoral.

> "A proper show should have a context which is more developmental and it should be more targeted at results or solutions-driven rather than simply blame game and name-calling. That is what has been missing in my view in Ghanaian public debate and that is what encourages serial callers".

The above shows that some Ghanaian journalists exhibit a normative appreciation of public debate playing out in the mode of the critical rational. However, beyond this understanding, they admit there are challenges prevailing against the quality of public debate. Some individuals have argued that this challenge can be attributed to how public debate is produced in Ghana, pointing out mainly to how topics are selected for discussion explored below.

4.3.1 How Talk Radio is Produced in Ghana: The selection of Topics and Studio Discussants

According to Adom-Otchere, at least 80% of talk shows in the morning revolve around newspaper topics. There are up to 15 newspapers that the production team brings to the studio and presenter reads the headlines to the public. The talk radio programmes do not produce anything and more than 60% of the news and current affairs presenters on radio, he argues, are

not seized with the capacity to put out a radio editorial for the discussion and this is part of why the quality of debate is low. Radio presenters also invite panellists into the studio to discuss the newspaper headlines; this goes on for four hours in the morning until about 11.00am.

On the selection of panellists for discussion, Avle points out;

> What drives the conversation on radio are the politicians who appear on the program. The format on *Peace FM* or *Adom FM* is Kennedy Agyapong, Sir John, Sammy Awuku, and Kofi Adams. These are politicians who have become pundits on radio, so when that happens and the phone lines are opened, then you have people speaking in favour of one political party or the other because of the direction of the program.

Avle argues that "the parameters of the discussions are not well set by the host, the hosts play into the political equalisation game and the panel reinforces that position." Instead of discussing the National Health Insurance Scheme with a doctor or an expert on health to exact ideas on making the scheme function. Radio presenters bring in the NDC and NPP spokespersons for health and therefore facilitate a discussion which revolves around party politics.

As a result of the politicization of debate, Avle explains that social issues like teenage pregnancy and drug abuse don't enjoy a lot of airtime on radio compared to politics. Certain social issues, like education and health, can easily be politicised, so the debate goes like this;

> One bloc of the debate will argue that the NDC has destroyed the National Health Insurance Scheme, while the other bloc argues it is rather the NPP that destroyed the NHIS. And on education, they debate about whether the NPP's 4 years of Senior High School education policy is better or worse, by comparing it to the NDC's 3 years of Senior High School policy.

The respondents point out that the selection of topics from the newspapers and choice of panellists being politicians rather than experts consistently politicizes the debate. The politicisation of debate from the studios consequently shapes how the audience interpret the issues, by doing so from a political perspective. What happens then is the debate is no longer evolving around rational ideas and intellectualism, it becomes political and the audience polarized along NDC or the NPP.

Suhini agrees with Avle on the politicization of debate, but he goes further in blaming it partly on Ghana's political system.

> I think it's a bit dicey, if you look at it critically, you can blame it partly on our political system. Based on the fact that resources of the nation are controlled by an elected government, the anticipation of citizens is that the government in power is supposed to allocate those resources to fix every problem. So you have a situation where even when the gutter in front of my house is choked due to domestic activities from my own house, it is easy to blame the situation on central government.
>
> For example, if you are talking about teenage pregnancy, that is supposed to be a social issue, but if you open the phone lines, you are going to get about three out of five people who by the time they finish their contribution would want to know what the Ministry for Gender and Social Protection is doing about the situation. They are going to want to know what the Social Welfare Department and other related agencies are doing about it. You are going to less likely have people paying attention to the roles of parents, teachers and churches because by nature we have assigned every role to central government and expect central government to fix everything in our country and that informs the direction of discussions on talk radio.

Thus the respondents agree that in Ghana, public debate is politicized, but identify different reasons for this. Some maintain it is due to the political direction of the discussion from the

radio studios following from the choice of topics, selection of panellists by journalists. Some maintain it's the lack of skills by some journalists to prepare a well thought out editorial, while others blame it on the political system in Ghana which makes citizens extremely dependent on Central Government.

4.3.2 Phone In Segments: Orchestrating 'Stupid Analysis' from Serial Callers

In this section, I set out to examine an important production process which is at the centre of this research, phone-in segments, and discuss this production process against the concept of 'orchestration' in media and the production of public debate. Without phone-in segments, there would not have been a rise in serial calling on Ghanaian talk radio, and the challenges they portend to media in their role as agenda setters and gatekeepers. As discussed in chapter one of this research, the National Media Commission and National Security Secretariat of Ghana have called on Ghanaian media to take control of the airwaves by preventing serial callers from dominating talk radio. In spite of this call, serial callers continue to participate on talk radio. This section examines how is it they continually participate in public debate in spite of the challenges they are perceived to present to journalists in Ghana.

"It's a challenge! I mean it's a big challenge!" argues Suhini when asked about why he continues to open the phone lines to serial callers to participate on his morning show on Radio Gold.

Suhini explains:

> We live in country where, for some reason, people who are considered technocrats or people who have the knowledge as far as issues that are discussed on radio is concerned are very reluctant sometimes when it comes to contributing to those discussions to enrich the debate and inform people. For so many reasons they just don't want to participate in discussions. For some, they just don't like the criticism that they may

> endure, if some other persons disagree with the information that they have to share. And so they rather will stay out and allow the discussion to go on.
>
> But if you have the assurance that you will get the best of brains to contribute to your discussion, you will not worry about listener participation.

Suhini in the above addresses some of his reasons for continually opening the phone-lines. He criticizes professionals, specialists and technocrats for their refusal to participate and "enrich the debate and inform people". He maintains that this compels talk radio hosts to continually pick phone calls from audience. One can deduce from his argument that he admits having technocrats and experts as discussants enriches the quality of debate and this could possibly lead to a greater reach of the show. However, since he is unable to assemble the best brains for the discussion, he opens the phone lines for the audience to participate. Suhini's argument may be an explanation for why radio presenters use representatives of political parties as panellists, following the refusal of technocrats to participate in the debate.

Suhini argues that, when he opens the phone lines, some of the audiences come in with new material and interesting angles that help the discussion or they raise controversial subjects that provoke experts to come into the discussion. Opening the phone lines for audience is almost like bait that some presenters like Suhini adopt, to attract by provocation these experts who are reluctant to participate.

> Because you don't have the quality that you want on your show, you are hoping that if you open the phone lines somebody could be moved enough to contribute to the discussion even if that person is not making sense. It is just possible that he will excite the one who has the material that makes sense to draw your attention that this person is not making sense.

> You get it! Because sometimes people have the information but they don't want to talk until somebody comes on to provoke them with some stupid analysis and then now they participate!

Suhini says another reason for opening phone lines to audiences on Ghanaian talk radio is the competition among the talk shows on different stations. He explains that presenters in Ghana compete among themselves measuring by the number of calls into one's show, to determine whose program and which station is listened to the most. They also open phone lines to satisfy commercial interests, as these phone calls from the public show sponsors and advertisers the program is listened to and that their products or services reaches the target market.

Suhini explains that as a radio station when you bring up a topic for discussion, your interest as a host is varied:

> One! You want to educate your listeners and inform them
> Two! You want to satisfy advertisers because that is how you pay your bill
> And three! You want to demonstrate to others that your program is the most listened to.
> Now how do you do that?
>
> You can satisfy all these three by getting listeners to participate in your discussion. So if I bring up a topic and I want to gauge if people are listening and are informed, I will need listener participation to show that people are listening and following the discussion.
>
> If they are listening, it's either they are disagreeing with me or they are agreeing with me, and I need to demonstrate that through listener participation.

> And my advertiser who is putting money on the show needs to know that the show is actually listened to, and the contributions that are coming are really good and that the market that he is targeting is really getting his product.
>
> And again, for you to demonstrate to colleagues that your show is the most listened to, it is only when people participate. I mean it is an awkward moment for every presenter to finish a discussion and nobody calls.
>
> I mean it is not an experience you will like to go through,

Suhini explains that "it is a difficult decision to take not to allow these people known as serial callers to participate in public debate because when they don't you will have that awkward moment."

This is an interesting aspect of the findings in this research, as it shows that "orchestration" of debate by presenters in Ghana is affected by difficulties in attracting experts and specialists, "the best brains", to be part of their radio discussions. The failure of these experts to participate, according to presenters, has led to continually opening the phone lines to audiences and particularly serial callers to call in and make the "stupid analysis", which will in turn provoke the experts to participate by reacting to caller arguments that "make no sense".

This is different from Cowling and Hamilton (2010) description of "orchestrating" debate in a South African radio programme, where journalists draw on Enlightenment ideals of a rational debating public and Habermas's more normative version of the public sphere. In the study of the *After Eight Debate* show, they pointed out orchestration as general operations and interventions in the production process, which shape the debate in a manner that is "productive and constitutive". They discovered that journalists at the *After Eight Debate* orchestrated the debate by way of coaching audiences into giving some evidence to support their respective claims in order to bring about quality in the debate. What is important here

also is that AM Live also tended to use topics drawn from news, but brought in a range of commentators, from experts and politicians to ordinary folk, and they were able to bring them in, although there were some constraints. This suggests a different social context in which they are operating; in which experts make themselves available.

However, in the case of the producers and presenters in Ghana interviewed for this research, orchestration takes a different shape and form. Cowling and Hamilton (2010) in their idea of orchestration consider it as constituting some elements of ethics and professionalism. The Ghanaian cases in this study shows a form of orchestration, where instead of journalists steering the debate like journalists at AM Live do, some Ghanaian, journalists prefer not to interfere, and instead they rather orchestrate the debate by allowing it to degenerate into confusion, pick it up later and reconstruct the issues in a more informed manner. This is done by allowing serial callers to go on with their "stupid analysis" consequently attracting reluctant professionals and technocrats to set the record straight. Following from this practice, one can argue that the perception of media decision makers about public debate and, by extension, their approach to orchestration is that it starts off chaotic and later reconstructive: manage a provocative debate in order to reach greater audiences in one part and in another to attract professionals that may bring sanity and quality in latter parts of the discussion. We also realise that in order not to have the moment of silence, there is pressure to attract callers which constitutes a form of orchestration where there is limited interference. In other words, media decision makers in the production process need to have participants, this explains why they allow certain participants like serial callers because of their imagined need for listener views and reactions which in turn have impact on the dynamics and quality of debate.

4.4 Agenda Setting and Issue Proponents

In previous sections we discussed how serial callers were considered to be taking over the role of media as agenda setters, which consequently led to a call from the National Media Commission for the media to reclaim its role. In this section of the research we examine how

serial callers may be considered as issue proponents, while also looking at some of the strategies of interaction they adopt in pushing their agenda onto Ghanaian talk-radio, which competes with the agenda set by the media. We look at a case in point, the infamous sex scandal about the then sitting president J.A Kufuor with a Spanish lady pushed onto the agenda by serial callers which dominated media for several months.

> **Question:** Can you give an example of any such issues about personalities raised by serial callers that shifted public debate and media agenda to pursue what these serial callers pushed?
>
> **Adom-Otchere:** Well, I mean the big one was then President Kufuor's alleged sexual relationship with the Spanish lady Gizeille Yadzi. The broadcast began with serial callers on talk radio, and then political parties once the serial callers had put it out there on the media took it serious. Then investigations began and it became a big issue that occupied the media agenda for a long time.
>
> **Question:** How long did this issue brought into public debate by serial callers last in the media?
>
> **Adom-Otchere:** It ran for a long time, at least some 8 months.
>
> And recently during the President Mills era, the Alfred Woyome case in which a businessman is reported to have defrauded the state and received a lot of money was first brought up by serial callers. These serial callers claimed they are hearing that some monies had been paid and then you get the media to begin to investigate, it turns out to be true then it becomes the big issue.

The response elicited by Adom-Otchere from this interview shows how serial callers in Ghana are able to push their own agenda onto the media, consequently giving rise to the call for

media to guard its role as agenda setters. What is particularly interesting about the issues serial callers successfully push onto the agenda is how long some of they remain topical discussions treated over long periods, some of which lasting at least eight months as noted in the above example. This shows how serial callers who do not belong to the media, function as issue proponents, and pushing issues onto the discussion table to win the attention of the media such as in the sex scandal discussed above. At the same time it exposes how the role of media as gatekeepers is compromised, following its role in allowing sex scandals against the president of Ghana to circulate on talk radio via some of the strategies in public debate discussed earlier without proper gatekeeping to curtail this information from public consumption. It is against this background that the role of media as agenda setters and gatekeepers in Ghana continues to be hotly contested by serial callers, whom we may also consider as issue proponents.

Alhasan Suhini throws some light on the positive sides of serial calling here; he identifies some key contributions which were helpful to his production team.

> There had been a case, during the 2008 general elections when a serial caller called into our station and alleged that there was a meeting at the legal firms of one of the NPP lawyers at the time.
>
> If you follow the 2008 elections just when the Electoral Commission (EC) was about to declare the results there was an attempt to serve the EC with an injunction to stop it from declaring the results. Now, that injunction was an *ex parte* motion and in fact it was through a serial caller (in fact two serial callers played a key role in this…) that we got to know that there was going to be a case in court the following day and that it was going to be an *ex parte* motion.
>
> So on the day that this motion was going to be heard, because of the alarm that had been raised already, there were lawyers who had prepared to ambush this case. So they showed up as friends of the court and argued strongly against an *ex parte* motion,

especially in an election that was between the NPP and the NDC and other stakeholders. The judge saw the reason in the argument of the NDC lawyers, who appeared as friends of the court and directed that the motion be thrown out and the other parties be served.

And that's how in 2008 the Electoral Commission was able to declare the result without an injunction being put on the declaration of results.

Now after that injunction was thrown out, we got another tip from another serial caller that the lawyers of the NPP after they left the court went to have a secret meeting in one of the chambers of their legal firms to plot their next line of action.

We doubted the credibility of this serial caller, and the serial caller actually led us to someone who was able to get a tape recording of the meeting and we procured the recording which we played. And the lawyer who owns that firm later came out to confirm that indeed such a meeting took place in his office and although the content of the tape was correct he didn't agree to some of the analysis people did on the content. I mean he thought that it was a harmless meeting and all of that.

So I mean serial callers have been that useful sometimes.

In spite of their rather controversial role on talk radio shows, there are still some positives to serial calling, one of which Suhini in the above interview highlights. We realize that these callers sometimes do not scheme their way into pushing an agenda onto public discussion. As members of an audience, they are sometimes abreast with certain issues which are of national importance. It is impossible to ignore the fact that there is some political motivation that informs the need for serial callers, in the above example, to give such information to the radio station. What is equally important and overshadows the political bias with which such an issue may have been fronted is the fact that it is concerned with the outcome of national electoral

results, which is important to democracy. Also important is the fact that they were able to get the media to respond by opening their own investigation into the case, reported it on their radio shows and essentially had other parties participating as friends of the court in an *ex parte* case which would have otherwise possibly resulted in a hold up of announcing election results. By announcing scandals such as the sexual allegations of President Kufuor, gossips about *ex parte* motion, news on the NDC's Alfred Woyome fraud the state and events around elections, they hope to win the attention of the media, and consequently divert the focus of the radio presenters to the issues they are pushing onto the agenda. This again is some justification to the idea that serial callers constitute issue proponents competing for the attention of media [gatekeepers] and by extension setting the agenda.

4.5 Babelisation - 'Hitting below the Belt' and 'muddying the waters of a clear clean debate'

In chapter two of this research, I indicated that the operations of serial callers will be examined alongside media theories of gate keeping and agenda setting, well as the concepts of orchestration and babelisation. This section explores the dynamics of debate including some of the modes, forms and strategies of interaction employed by serial callers in pushing their own agenda onto the media using a range of techniques. This objective of studying the strategies of interaction is complimented here by looking at how media facilitates the production of opinion and analysis within the public sphere.

When asked about how serial callers participate in debates on talk radio, Adom-Otchere retorted:

> Well thing is they don't actually debate: they only come to give information about people who are either in the studio or political leaders who are in the opponent's party just to shift attention from some critical issue onto those personalities and make them look bad, so that they score political points. Fundamentally they come in to score

political points. Their part of adding to the debate is just to bring something that really muddies the waters of a clear clean debate that may be going on.

Question: But it is the duty of presenters and producers as gatekeepers to prevent these personal attacks that muddy the debate?

Adom-Otchere: Well, some talk radio hosts have done a good job by cutting off because you are on radio by telephone so you can always be cut off. Some radio presenters and radio station policies will say that if you come on with a libellous statement, you can't continue with the conversation. So that has brought a bit of check on the serial callers, but because it's a live interaction they always sometimes find a way of chipping in something one way or the other and by the time you cut them off they have already said it.

Some also will behave and abide by the rules, but ultimately they will hit below the belt! They always do!

In the above response, Adom-Otchere shows his understanding of public debate as one that falls within the Habermasean rationale; this notion is expressed in his opinion that serial callers only come to give information hence they do not actually debate. He described public debate as "…matters that are of a developmental sort of angle in which you will ventilate and find out what are the various thinking's about the issue, how and what should be done" (Adom-Otchere, August 2014, Accra). An interesting point that came out of the study is that serial callers often do not come in with a position on the debate, but with scandals and personal attacks or privileged information that moves the discussion away from a debate on issues to news or to gossip. Going forward, this study will examine these findings about serial callers shifting the debate from critical issues in relation to the concept of 'babelisation' (Mwale, 2010).

In the literature review, we discussed how Mwale (2010) considered babelisation as "a slippage in communication, a cacophony of voices that appear to be in conversation, but in fact speak past each other". He argues that babelisation is made up of three unique strategies that are used during debate in various forms: reframing, sidestepping or dodging, and telescoping. Mwale's idea of babelisation, where there is a 'slippage in communication' can be seen operating in Ghanaian public debate, where a 'cacophony of voices' do not just speak past each other, but also launch attacks each other's' personality - "hitting below the belt" (Adom-Otchere, 2014). Mwale (2010) does not discuss in his concept of babelisation the attack on personalities in any of his three unique strategies adopted in public debate. However, in this study on serial callers of Ghana and the dynamics of debate, some respondents have identified the attack on personalities as constituting one of modes of interaction and debating strategies adopted by serial callers in skewing talk-radio discussions from critical issues into the 'stalemate' described by Mwale (2010).

Beyond scoring political points for their paymasters, serial callers adopt another strategy Mwale (2010) identifies, which he refers to as reframing. He looks at reframing in public debate as re-iterating and misrepresenting an original opinion earlier expressed by giving a different interpretation or understanding to it by other discussants. In this research, some of the respondents noted a form of interaction serial callers adopt on Ghanaian talk-radio that falls within Mwale's idea of reframing.

> **Suhini:** Political parties in Ghana prepare talking points on issues that they give to these serial callers to be used in public debate. So if there is an issue like government has gone into a contract with the World Bank to upgrade Senior Secondary Schools, the talking point for the NPP serial caller is that government is going to buy pampers or sanitary towels for students with the entire loan facility, meanwhile that is only a fraction of what the money was intended to do. And you listen to all the serial callers across board and they will say it repeatedly from one station to another! To another! To another!

> And then you go to the NDC party side, and they will also give their serial callers talking points that they want them to propagate. And so you tune in to Citi FM and you are going to hear them say the same thing, you tune into Joy FM you are going to hear the same thing, you tune into Radio Gold and it's going to be the same thing.
>
> And so the political parties have realized that look! If you want to reach a larger audience, it is not enough to put your message on one radio station. After attempting to put it on one radio station, give it to the serial callers too, who will go through all these radio stations at the same time and repeat your version of the debate again and again across these platforms until it settles in the minds of the public.
>
> So that when one serial caller comes on to say ABC, the second serial caller who doesn't agree with him manages to get the line, they will first of all demolish whatever points the first person made and then go on to make theirs.
>
> So it's a crafty way of using radio!

This is how reframing plays out in Ghanaian talk shows, drawing on Suhini's assessment on the repetition of arguments across multiple platforms. Similarly, Adom-Otchere argues that serial callers operate as "hired assassins", who come into the debate with a "scandal or a repetition of a scandal and comes in to take turf or take territory in the debate for his political party or the political party that has hired him" (Adom-Otchere, August 2014, Accra).

Mwale (2010) proposed that babelisation is made up of three unique strategies: reframing, sidestepping or dodging, and telescoping. Although we discuss mainly reframing in this study, sidestepping or dodging and telescoping are equally strategies serial callers adopt in debate. However, the study identified another strategy which does not fall within the concept of babelisation; meanwhile it has some semblance to the concept of orchestration and babelisation particularly from the Ghanaian perspective. Earlier, we discussed how

orchestration by some journalists on the *After Eight Debate Show* in South Africa who were concerned with interfering to ensure an enlightened debate, while in Ghana we noticed journalists' idea of orchestration would be to allow the debate to be reduced first into "stupid analysis" and later becoming constructive. The facilitation of debate into confusion before potentially steering it back to echo enlightenment ideals is complex, and difficult to explore fully by dwelling on tenets that underscore the concepts of orchestration and babelisation. Hence in the next section, we look at this new development emerging out of this study, a debating technique termed in this paper as 'hijacking'.

4.5.1 'Hijacking': An extension of Orchestration and Babelisation

In Ghana, serial callers are often the main persons among audience able to reach the phone lines to make their contributions to talk shows. The public started referring to this practice as 'hijacking' phone lines. While the idea of hijacking is popular among radio listeners in Ghana, what is actually intriguing to the public is how serial callers get the phone lines.

In exploring the issue of hijacking on talk-radio in this research, Appiah Stadium, a well-known serial caller for the first time explains the pros and cons of hijacking:

> **Question:** How are you able to get the phone lines always while the rest of Ghanaians and the public find it difficult to do so?
>
> **Appiah Stadium:** Today, if I want to speak to any issue on radio what I do is call five or six politicians that I want to talk on radio and what they do is to contact the journalists who are behind those shows and tell them Appiah Stadium will be speaking this weekend so allow him. They find something to give these journalists and I will be able to say whatever I want on their shows.

> Also, I have to say that journalists are part of hijacking; they make it happen if you care to know. Partisanship has entered the media, I am telling you. So journalists help us too and I give you an example.
>
> When the running mate for the NPP Bawumiah was campaigning during the 2008 elections, his wife was supposed to come on air one morning. We met at a politician's house, the radio presenter was present and I was there too. We discussed how the interview will go and everything the evening before the show, we wanted to make sure that the NDC serial callers and possibly neutral audience who will get the phone lines will not ask her any question that may be damning to their political fortunes.
>
> So the next morning the show went on as planned, here is how hijacking phone lines happened. The radio presenter announced the phone lines for the discussion but what the public does not know is that the presenter has the cell numbers of those serial callers who met him that evening as well as others who we had agreed for them to participate. Now, he announces the phone lines …204097, but he calls using those lines or another number from the studio and puts us on air. So he will call us the serial callers on standby one after the other, eventually about seven to eight of us contributed to the discussion in a way that favoured the running mate's wife and by so doing we maintained the subject of the discussion along issues that we planned previously.

Appiah Stadium's admission to collaborating with some radio presenters and producers in the hijacking of phone lines and by extension public debate together with politicians raises questions around the professionalism and ethical conduct of journalists. In locating this practice within concepts in media studies, notably orchestration and babelisation, the hijacking of debate we can say is also a form of 'orchestration'. However, unlike the Cowling and Hamilton studies, which found that many media decision makers hold normative positions about public debate that echoes Enlightenment ideals, the 'hijacking' of debate does not allow for such enlightened debate to occur. Orchestration in public debate in the Ghana examples in this

study is simply concerned with "conducting" the debate towards the desired end of journalists even if it does not echo the 'rational critical' (Cowling and Hamilton, 2010; Habermas, 1989).

Still on hijacking, we see similarities of Mwale's (2010) 'sidestepping' in the concept of babelisation in operation, evidence of which we may conceptualize in this research as side-lining in the process of hijacking public debate. In this case, it is not discussants not responding to key issues raised by other interlocutors in the debate as Mwale's concept of babelisation captures, neither is it the 'dodging' of questions in the discussion that require elaborate response by discussants. Instead, side-lining here is facilitated by media decision makers themselves, who deliberately and technically 'side-line' other contributors from participating in the debate, literally 'dodging' their contributions by way of hijacking the debate into becoming one sided with no varying opinion and analysis beyond what is earlier imagined by these journalists (Mwale, 2010).

In his study, Mwale viewed journalists as facilitating opinion and analysis in "relay mode", to mean that "they took a hands-off approach to the rhetoric of the debate", and were hence unable to discover the various debate strategies at play. However, this research slightly differs with Mwale, in that it is almost certain that media decision makers deliberately employ modes and forms of interaction rather than operating in "relay mode" (Mwale, 2010).

In conclusion, this study agrees with Mwale when he argues that babelisation is inherent in the production of debate in the media, which has been helpful for us in understanding the ways in which media are unable to meet ideals of critical rationality, allowing a stalemate to set in during debates. Not only babelisation but also, varied forms of 'orchestration', the hijacking of public debate and the skewing of opinion and analysis operate in the production of debate in these Ghana examples. Therefore the question of forms, modes and strategies of interaction of publicly mediated discussion in Ghana speaks to the country's weak media in the area of professional conduct and ethics, a lack of "proper dialogue rich in scope and depth", alongside their "epistemic--political vulnerability" (Mwale, 2010).

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In this research, I sought to investigate the phenomenon of serial callers on Ghanaian talk radio, how these players influence public debate and the implications this has for the public sphere. This involved mapping the history of serial calling on talk radio, examining the dynamics of public debate, defining the operations of media in the facilitation of debate and how serial callers join in the discussion through phone calls but manage to establish their dominance on talk radio.

In previous chapters, I discussed how the Ghana NMC asked editors and radio station managers not to allow serial callers to set the agenda for public discourse. This call was made against the background that serial calling weakened the role of media as agenda-setters and gatekeepers. The study showed that journalists in Ghana inhabited a range of positions on the serial calling phenomenon; with most of their viewpoints on the history similar, they however held different positions on the dynamics of debate. While some felt serial calling was unpalatable because they come in to muddy the waters of a clean clear debate, others found serial calling useful as a production strategy to bring into the discussion reluctant experts who will only contribute after they have been provoked by the "stupid analysis" of serial callers.

On the implications of serial calling, some of my respondents in this study pointed out that radio discussions in Ghana are around politics, focusing mostly on who will win the next election. Even discussions about the economy and issues of livelihood are all aimed at who is going to win the next election. As Avle argued, "the parameters of the discussions are not well set by the host, the hosts therefore play into the political equalisation game and the panel reinforces that position".

As a result of how the debate is politically framed, this study found that a major implication of serial calling on Ghana's public sphere was the polarization of debate along strong political lines. With one section of the Ghanaian populace interpreting public debate from the lenses of the social-democrat party; the NDC on the one hand, while the scope of thinking and analysis

by the other draws on the ideals of the property-owning democratic party, the NPP. This polarized public sphere is often characterised by the peddling of falsehood, scandals, vituperative language and combative politics. Following from this, some observers argue the polarization of the public in Ghana where politics has entered the media sphere and public debate framed by media to play into the political equalisation portends a threat to the future of peace and security in a budding democracy such as this one in Ghana.

In spite of the threat that the polarized public sphere presents, I found that some talk radio hosts in Ghana have done a good job by beginning to cut-off serial callers on live radio discussions when they come on with scandalous and libellous statements. Following from this new development, serial callers are becoming aware that the media is becoming critical of their activities on radio and that has brought some check on the serial callers. Despite these developments, serial callers in Ghana continue to find ways of pushing scandalous issues onto the agenda that take the debate away from a meaningful conclusion. Some even do well to comply with the rules set out by radio presenters and producers, but many eventually 'hit below the belt' before the media takes them off air.

The normative theories of the public sphere talk about public debate as a platform that brings together private individuals arguing, reflecting and reaching a consensus about issues of the common good, which strengthens democracy. However, the findings in this study show that in certain cases, such as what is observed in Ghana; public debate does not always reach these normative ideals of consensus building. As seen in this study, public debate has rather resulted in the polarization of Ghana's public sphere and the threatening of its democracy.

The research also found that there is a distinction between setting the agenda; topics discussed and how they are framed which may result in a polarized public sphere discussed previously. And the dynamics of debate; that is how debate is orchestrated which I explore going forward. Journalists in the facilitation of debate, orchestrate the discourse by opening the phone lines, for the entry of serial callers who come in with new material, interesting issues that may help the discussion but at certain times provocative, for instance announcing scandals, spewing gossips and raising controversial subjects that move the debate into a 'stalemate' (Mwale,

2010). Clearly in operation, the dynamics of debate [orchestration and babelisation] and agenda setting are linked; such that serial callers seize the orchestrating role in talk radio in order to push issues onto the agenda using the modes, forms and strategies of interaction discussed in chapter four. These modes of interaction adopted in such unscripted interactions is where serial callers are able to – 'hit below the belt' and launch attacks on personalities constituting; babelisation.

We found also in this study that serial callers could be considered as issue proponents within Ghana's public sphere in competition for the attention of the media using reframing techniques to shift the true meaning of a subject in discussion to their own skewed versions. This argument is based on an interesting point to come out of this study which is that serial callers sometimes do not actually debate; they participate during phone-in segments to announce a scandal, gossip and introduce controversial subjects or talk about other news items or events not related to the topics being discussed. By announcing scandals, gossips and news and events they hope to win the attention of the media, and consequently divert the focus of the radio presenters to the issues they are pushing onto the agenda. This to a large extent justifies the idea that serial callers constitute issue proponents competing for the attention of media [gatekeepers] and by extension manipulating or setting the agenda.

In chapter 4 of this research we discussed that Cowling and Hamilton (2010) maintained that in many media, there is a normative ideal about public debate that echoes Enlightenment ideals. Mwale however noted in his concept of babelisation that orchestration is weak or non-existent, implying that journalists in attempts to orchestrate debates especially in the Habermasean model of the rational-critical fail to reach this objective because orchestration is weak (Mwale, 2010). Mwale's scepticism registered in the above argument is reflective of the challenges media decision makers on Ghanaian talk radio encounter following the dominance of serial callers within its media sphere. Serial callers adopted a range of strategies including 'reframing' which moves public debate into a 'stalemate' (Mwale, 2010). However, from this study we find that some Ghanaian journalists when faced with such strategies of interaction from serial

callers, allowed the debate to ensue, except that their 'orchestration' resulted in a ‘stupid analysis’ as one of the respondents put it and in the likeness of what Mwale (2010) calls a ‘stalemate’ (Cowling and Hamilton, 2010). Revealing that other forms of orchestration do exist, as Cowling and Hamilton (2010) conceded that particular kinds of orchestration can push the dynamics of debate away from the ideals of critical rationality, by promoting certain issues for discussion while relegating others to the background. This type of orchestration where the ideals of critical rationality are not realised can be seen in the case of Ghanaian talk radio, however while the original concept by Cowling and Hamilton (2010) considered all other types as simply 'orchestration', this paper argues that each type of orchestration be defined to suit what is in operation. Hence the types that result in a stalemate in this study is referred to as 'pseudo-orchestration'. Where ‘pseudo-orchestration’ here refers to situation where journalists open up the debate for broad based participation by the public with little or no interference, allow for the debate to reach the point of ‘stupid analysis’, after which they may now interfere slightly to move the discourse towards a reasonable conclusion or even further into a meaninglessness.

Following from the above, the dynamics of debate where orchestration, babelisation, hijacking and pseudo-orchestration are in operation to a large extent reflects the arguments of Cowling and Hamilton (2010) raised in the literature that unlike the general operations of media in which production is conceived of as 'limiting and framing', the production of debate is indeed ‘productive and constitutive’.

In this study, I found that the theories and concepts in media and the production of public debate require more development in order to capture completely certain outcomes in public debate. Neither the concepts of agenda setting [issue proponents], orchestration nor babelisation completely capture some of the findings in the study. In order to analyse some of the findings, I had to define certain operations such as 'pseudo-orchestration' and ‘hijacking’ to better explain how both media and audience can deliberately move public debate into a meaningless conclusion. Babelisation does not address the role of the media being involved in moving debates into a stalemate, rather it points out that media decision makers take a

‘hands-off approach to the rhetoric of the debate’; the findings in this research prove otherwise that public debate is orchestrated either towards critical rationality of meaninglessness (Mwale, 2010). The concept of orchestration by Cowling and Hamilton (2010) does well to identify other forms of babelisation, but is unable to define those operations in public debate that reflect in our findings; such as 'hijacking'. What is also noteworthy is that, certain contested ideas of the normative theory on the role of media is captured in here in what this study terms 'hijacking'. Hijacking thus reinforces the suspicions of Critical-Marxists like Herman and Chomsky (1988) who challenge media’s claims to be representing the public, they consider media as existing to serve the interests of elites in manufacturing consent. We see this in the study with respect to how in pseudo-orchestration, journalists frame the debate to play into the political equalisation game of the elites through the manufacture of opinion which is consequently reinforced by serial callers.

In order to analyse some of my findings on the dynamics of public debate, I had to draw on a range of approaches, adding and adapting certain theories and concepts, while also defining particular operations following from some of the limitations of these theories and concepts. It is against this background that this paper maintains that there is the need for more research and development of media theories in order to completely capture media’s role in public debate; reinforcing what Cowling and Hamilton (2010) intimate that the production of debate has “slipped” away from “analytic view”.

In Ghana, the latest development in relation to media and the production of public debate is that the private broadcasters association is discussing whether or not newspaper review programmes, one of the big platforms for serial callers should continue the way they are aired on radio or not. They are currently thinking of a regime in which they will limit the application of newspaper headlines for the purpose of the selection of topics for radio discussions in the mornings in favour of a carefully designed editorial developed by journalists. And then also, introduce a new structure to the discussion by opening it up mostly to experts rather than politicians who frame the debate along political lines. Some respondents pointed out that new

ways of inviting public participation using social media could affect the influence of serial callers on talk radio, but note that it has to be left to see how this works.

I found from most of my respondents that radio as a tool for public interaction is considered to be important for democracy. However, they agree that what must be avoided is the misapplication of radio platforms for political equalisation. Most of the journalists interviewed also believe that public interaction is going to get stronger in terms of the media as a communication tool and the audience who want to participate will increase. However, while they welcome this, some opinion leaders including traditional leaders in Ghana have cautioned that the phenomenon where people are hired to spew out libellous matters on radio in order to create an advantage for one political party or another is not very palatable and must be checked.

Otumfuor Osei Tutu II, King of The Ashanti Region of Ghana in a National Commission for Civic Education democracy lecture summed up the phenomenon of serial calling in very clear and certain terms;

> "From the morning to midnight all that you hear on radio and TV are these cacophony of noises on air which has no structure, no organization, no logic in it and proffers no solutions. It is jumbled, nonsensical, and just people going at each other and using unprintable words against each other on air...facilitated by mediocre radio and television presenters...The polarized political atmosphere has given rise to a new profession of serial callers, resident praise singers and attack dogs... The media houses in Ghana today have contributed to this poisoned culture of abuse and spewing of malicious political gossips and use of abusive language on air...that defies common sense...resulting in a situation where perpetrators jump in glee while, victims frets with anxiety..." (*Daily Graphic*, 2014)

The production of public debate in Ghana has ushered in a new era that could be described as the 'age of howlers'. Ghana's public sphere since the inception of talk radio and the opening of phone lines brought an end to the 'curtailed cultivation and nurturing of free expression' described by many as "the culture of silence" (Ansu-Kyeremeh, 1999-2001: 31-33). However, the resurgence of free speech has also introduced another; 'the culture of impunity',

characterised by free but irresponsible expression, a tirade of abuse between the people, government and opposition political parties in the production of opinion and analysis on talk radio.

The resurgence of free speech in Ghana which started off around 1995 has reached its climax; the serial caller phenomenon is now stretching to its limit. This new culture of impunity has been sustained by the compulsive and obsessive politicisation of public debate through serial calling, the polarisation of the public sphere and by extension the Ghanaian public. Following from this study, it is paramount that Ghana's media looks at itself in the mirror; confront its own demons and identify a way out of this morass afflicting the media, its people and the entire body politics. Professional practices, ethical codes and standards of operation must be revisited in the production of opinion and analysis in a manner that echoes the Habermasean Enlightenment ideals. That will deepen and sustain Ghana's democratic credentials rather than the status quo, which threatens the gains made since returning to democratic rule under the Fourth Republic in 1992.

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