**THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS:**

**Abstract**

This study examines the role of the media in promoting human rights. Central to the study is an effort to find out why the media decide to include human rights coverage as part of their programmes as well as the portrayal of human rights elements in such programmes.

A total of five journalists were interviewed, three of them were BBC journalists involved in the production of the documentary which was filmed in the West African countries of Ghana and Ivory Coast. The remaining two were Swedish journalists included to derive a wider perspective on what the role of the media should be. An analysis of BBC One Panorama documentary- „Chocolate: the bitter truth‟ was done to ascertain how the documentary enhanced human rights promotion. Both the interviews and documentary analysis provided data needed to answer the research questions

Findings from the interviews and the documentary reveal that the media do have a role to play in human rights promotion. This role is important because the mass media audience is often averse to human rights programmes as they consider them boring. However, the seemingly boring human rights programmes can be made attractive when the media adopt a technique which attracts the audience interest and attention to human rights programmes.

Key words: agenda-setting, BBC, child labour, democracy, duty bearers, Ethnographic Content Analysis, human rights, media, press freedom, programmes, rights holders, social responsibility. iv

**List of abbreviations**

BBC British Broadcasting Corporation

CRC Convention on the Rights of the Child

ICHRP International Council on Human Rights Policy

IFJ International Federation of Journalists

ILO International Labour Organization

NGOs Non Governmental Organisations

PRAWA Prisoners Rehabilitation and Welfare Action

RTLM Radio-Télévision Libres des Milles Collines

UDHR Universal Declaration of Human Rights

UK United Kingdom

UN United Nations

UNICTR UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda v

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**Chapter 1**

**1.0 Introduction**

In March 2010, BBC One1 aired a Panorama programme titled „Chocolate: The bitter truth‟. In the programme, the investigative reporter travelled to the West African countries of Ghana and Ivory Coast where he posed as a cocoa dealer. He successfully traced the supply chain involved in the process of delivering cocoa sold in the United Kingdom (UK), and also discovered that the issue of child trafficking and what was referred to as „child slave labour‟ still thrive. What does this development portend for the media? To what extent does it make the media a human rights actor? This is an interesting case of a human rights issue in which the media have made an input in exposing human rights violations, if not stopping them. It exemplifies the role of the media in the promotion of human rights issues.

1 „BBC One‟ television is one of the channels of the BBC. The BBC is said to be the largest broadcasting organisation in the world, whose mission is to “enrich people‟s lives with programmes that inform, educate and entertain”. It has a vision which centres on their quest “to be the most creative organisation in the world”. As a public service organisation, it was established by „a Royal Charter‟ and funded by a license fee which is paid by UK households, (BBC, no date). Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/purpose/what.shtml

2 it is a state party to international laws and treaties, and therefore remains under obligation to

Human rights are „generally moral rights claimed by everyone and held against everyone, especially against those who run social institutions‟ (Orend, 2002:37). With the advent of the United Nations (UN) and the subsequent adoption of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, the concept of human rights has turned out to be one of the most contemporary issues across the globe. The UN Charter, which was adopted in 1945, was the first international document to recognize the protection and promotion of human rights as an obligation to be carried out by individual, as well as collective states (Langley, 1999). The main reason behind the adoption of the charter was, according to Smith (2007) to forestall the reoccurrence of the horrible events caused by two devastating world wars which were caused by massive violations of human rights and unbridled breach of territorial integrity. 2

In addition to the effort of the UN, the state has basically been seen as the main actor in the promotion and protection of human rights2. Unfortunately, states, according to Hakemulder et al (1998), are often the very abuser of the rights of the citizens they are required to protect. However, it should be noted that though the state bears the primary responsibility in issues of human rights, other organs of the society, such as corporations (Addo, 1999) are included in the protection of human rights.3

2 it is a state party to international laws and treaties, and therefore remains under obligation to safeguard human rights

3 The preamble of UDHR states that „...this declaration of human rights as a common standard of achievement...every individual and organ of society...shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms...‟

4 Preamble in the Universal Declaration of human rights

Although there are international human rights instruments which the UN has produced to serve as „common standard of achievement for all people‟4, countless human rights violations occur across the globe. These violations could be committed by non-state actors through direct involvement or indirectly when they consent to such violations. Non-state actors such as „individuals, groups, informal or organised, ad hoc or continuous, may pose as „violators, protectors or intermediaries‟. Consequently, it is imperative that they be examined so that they could be held accountable for these violations. It is also important to ascertain the reasons for state inability to safeguard human rights (Arat, 2006:15-18). The concept of human rights is now widely recognised in several parts of the world, and human rights violations are reported by journalists (Nickel, 2007). However, the 1990s witnessed an increase in the use of the term (Ramos et al, 2000). The importance of the attention given to human rights by the media is noteworthy because their coverage highlights the level of abuses occurring throughout the world (Cole, 2000). Human rights violation is an issue which should be given due attention. This is in line with Orend who argues that „[t]he violation of human rights is a vicious and ugly phenomenon indeed and it is something we have overriding reasons to resist and remedy‟ (2002:34).

**1.1 Aim of study**

The aim of this study is to look into the role of the media in promoting human rights by analysing how BBC One Panorama documentary, „chocolate: the bitter truth was carried out, as well as the reason behind its production in West Africa. 3

**1.2 Research questions**

In considering the role of the media in promoting human rights, the following research questions which are based on the documentary film will be answered:

1. Why did BBC One choose to promote human rights through the documentary in question?

2. In what ways is the documentary‟s content shaped to promote human rights?

**1.3 Statement of the problem**

Journalists often fail to adopt a comprehensive approach in reporting human rights abuses. Even in the absence of such abuses, the media often fail to formulate their broadcast policy to incorporate human rights programmes. The prioritization of profit-making over societal wellbeing dominates media agenda. For instance, Lustgarten and Debix (2005:364) assert that the media‟s preference for „flashy audience–grabbing and ratings-soaring image or story‟ makes them to be nonchalant in matters which are of interest to the public, owing to their inability to pursue events in detail.

Many studies conducted on media and human rights mostly dwell on analyzing the frequency of human rights terms, especially in the print media such as newspapers and magazines. None or few of them centre on an in-depth analysis of television broadcast programmes to find out the possibility of such programmes having an implicit or in-depth treatment of human rights issues.

**1.4 Importance of the study**

Having learnt from the field of Mass Communication that the media educate and inform the public, and also perform the role of agenda-setting which makes mass media audience to consider as important any issue which the media concentrate on, this study will be important to the field of human rights because it will help in 4

proposing a strategy for human rights programmes to stand a chance of being given priority in an era when different media programmes are vying for attention. The study will also provide a viable strategy for engaging in human rights activism through the act of reporting on human rights issues. This research will make a contribution by highlighting the intricacies of media‟s involvement in promoting human rights. It will show that in one way or the other, everybody might either willfully or otherwise be complicit in human rights violations, especially when it comes to the use of some consumer products such as chocolate products.

**1.5 Delimitation**

This study focuses on the role of the media in promoting human rights, whether within its borders or in other places. Based on this, the documentary produced by BBC One would be analysed and used to show one of the ways through which the media, especially the broadcast media could bring human rights issues to public attention. Other forms of broadcast programmes might be dealing with human rights abuses, but this particular programme was chosen so that a thorough and in-depth analysis could be made of it. However, in the course of the analysis, the impact of the programme on its viewers, to see if they did become human rights-oriented is not considered. The responses from the chocolate companies implicated in the programme are also not part of this research. Interviewees were journalists whose opinions were sought in a bid to answer the research questions. The journalists included staff of the BBC involved in the production of the programme. The other journalists interviewed were Swedish journalists whose views on what the role of the media should be were sought in order to have a broader view of how the media think their role should be.

**1.6 Data collection method and analysis**

Ethnographic content analysis of BBC One documentary in West Africa was done to extract data based on human rights violations that were revealed in the programme. Additionally, interviews were conducted with the core BBC One staff involved in the production of the programme, as well as some Swedish journalists through face-to-5

face, email and telephone interviews which consisted of open-ended questions. The findings and analysis will be a combination of data from the film and interviews.

**1.7 Analytical framework**

In trying to understand what role the media can play in the promotion of human rights, certain questions would need to be addressed. It will be relevant to find answers to such questions as: Do the media impact or influence? Should the media influence, and in what ways are they supposed to influence? It is also necessary to ascertain if the media should take responsibility for human rights promotion, or if they have the potential to combat human rights violations.

Divergent views surround the ability of the media to impact or influence human behaviour. For instance, while some authors do not believe that exposure to violent media programmes induces violent behaviour, others have found that media violence influence younger children because of their inability to distinguish fiction from reality, which in turn causes them to practice what the media present to them (Bushman , 2001 in Dawursk, no date). Perhaps, the case of media‟s influence in inducing the Rwandan genocide cannot be overemphasized. Despite the above seemingly overshadowing negative influence of the media, it is the position of this research that the media, as a force in society, is capable of converting this influence into good or positive action which can be exemplified in the promotion of human rights.

In view of the right to freedom of expression5, the media rely on the concept of „freedom of the press‟ which gives them the right to „seek, receive and impart information and ideas‟ in searching and publishing news stories. Thus the application of Press Freedom by the media will be considered. This is important considering that some media outfits have been found to be involved in deception and inaccurate reporting of information, distortion of news stories, faking and lying about them. In some cases, the media are seen to be enmeshed in the exultation of sensationalism at

5 Article 19, UNDHR 6

the expense of serious or important events in information-dissemination (Hargreaves, 2005).

A free democratic society is needed for the media to thrive and carry out their responsibility, for hardly can the media do so in an autocratic rule or dictatorship. Hargreaves (2005:10) argues that „[j]ournalists need to be reminded that it is only through democratic civil society that they have secured and maintained the „free press‟ privileges upon which their effectiveness depends‟. Therefore, exploring the role of the media in a democracy will help in finding answers to the role of the media in promoting human rights.

The agenda-setting theory of the media will serve as the theoretical framework on which the research is based. Many studies indicate the viability of this theory and have shown that the importance which the public attach to issues is dependent on the level of coverage given to them by the media. The analysis of this theory will be instrumental in understanding the widespread role of the media as well as the likely consequence(s) of their inability to promote the human rights agenda.

Finally, the analytical framework for the film will be based on how the major actors are portrayed –whether they are portrayed as rights holders or duty bearers.

**1.8 Content of chapters**

Chapter 1 of this research introduces the background of the study and the analytical framework. Chapter 2 will explore related literature on the media, the act of reporting, and the functions that the media perform in the society. Chapter 3 will explain the methodology and ethical issues arising from the research. Chapter 4 will contain the presentation and analysis of findings, while chapter 5 will provide conclusions and recommendations. 7