Serial Callers: Hatchet Men or Political Communicators?

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Abstract

This article looks at the extent to which radio stations use offensive language, the reasons why serial callers use such language and how this threat to Ghana's peace can be curtailed within the Tamale Metropolis. Using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and content analysis as methods of investigation, the study found that among the political communicators on radio, serial callers used the most offensive language to defend either the New Patriotic Party (NPP) or the National Democratic Congress (NDC). The two parties sponsor the activities of these callers who, in return for stipends from politicians, fearlessly denigrate opponents while trumpeting their parties' achievements. Unsubstantiated allegations against political opponents emerged as the most frequently used offensive pronouncement by serial callers who admit to the dangers of their conduct for peaceful co-existence but insist they must do everything possible to ensure victory for their parties. The study concludes that despite the threat posed by serial callers to peaceful co-existence, employing extra security measures to contain the situation is not an option. Instead, the study recommends that radio stations field technocrats in place of political party representatives to review newspaper headlines during Morning Show programmes.

KEYWORDS: *Offensive language, peaceful co-existence, serial callers, radio, political parties*

Introduction

Long before independence, Ghana, then Gold Coast, discovered the essence of radio as a tool for development. Station ZOY was the first radio station set up on the Gold Coast by the then Governor, Sir Arnold Hodson, in 1935. The station was given a public service mandate of informing, educating and entertaining listeners. From 1939, Station ZOY was used to deliver classroom teaching and as a British propaganda tool for the Second World War. In 1954, the Gold Coast Broadcasting System was birthed and renamed Ghana Broadcast Corporation (GBC) in 1957, after the country gained its independence (GBC, 2016). In the ensuing years, GBC extended its coverage to various parts of Ghana by establishing re-diffusion stations.

From the establishment of Station ZOY up to 1992, the radio broadcast was monopolised by the state. Even when the 1992 Constitution provided for media freedoms and plurality, frequencies were not granted to private operators of radio stations until 1994, when a political activist, Dr Charles Wereko-Brobby, went on air with a pirate radio station called *Radio Eye*. Though security agencies clamped down on the station and seized its equipment, Dr Wereko-Brobbey's action provoked and

pressured the government to liberalise the airwaves for private participation (ghanaweb.com, 2005). University of Ghana's *Voice of Legon*, later renamed *Radio Univers* became the first beneficiary of the liberalisation process when the Frequency Registration and Control Board allocated a frequency to the station in 1995. A year later, the Parliament of Ghana passed the National Communication Authority (NCA) Act 524, which set up the NCA, mandating it to regulate all broadcast services in Ghana (NCA, 2016). Since its establishment, the NCA has, as of March 2021, allocated frequencies to 629 FM stations, out of which 459 were on air, with 31 being public radio stations, five operating as public foreign radio stations, 96 as community radios, 23 campus stations and 474 commercial radio stations (NCA, 2021). Like other parts of the country, Northern Region has benefited from the liberalisation of the airwaves, with the number of radio stations currently standing at 17.

Many studies have long established the role of radio in development. Kwakwa (2012), for instance, established that in the Eastern Region of Ghana, radio programmes provided useful information to facilitate development. FM channels inform the youth about the current social and political issues in their localities, thereby assisting in promoting social and political awareness among the youth and the general populace (Kwakwa, 2012). No wonder that despite the huge influence of social media, radio remains the most consumed medium in Ghana, with a penetration rate of about 90%. A 2018 Afrobarometer report put radio listenership at 56%, television at 42%, internet access at 13% and social media patronage at 15% **(**Nyarko, 2020). In 2022, radio listenership dwindled slightly**,** but the medium remained the preferred news source with 52.5% listeners citing it as their leading daily source of news as against television (47.6 %), social media (30.3%), internet (29.4%) and print newspapers (3.7**%)** (Ghana Center for Democratic Development, 2022). Such high patronage explains why radio continues to impact development in Ghana. In the area of health, the broadcast medium has facilitated the communication of health messages, especially during emergencies. Health education on HIV, Ebola, polio, malaria and COVID-19 has been successfully executed. Radio's effectiveness has enhanced plurality through the use of multiple Ghanaian languages, thereby facilitating the expression of diverse viewpoints. Through political talk shows and phone-in programming, community radio has played a leading role in promoting participation in political discourse within Northern Ghana (Demuyakor, 2021). For some, radio is instrumental in ensuring peaceful conduct of elections in Northern Ghana. Many radio stations within the Northern Region promote peace before, during and after national elections by featuring prominent citizens to preach messages of peace and calm the political atmosphere to bring about violence-free elections (Abdulai et al., 2020). The impact of radio is further enhanced through its integration with social media. Today, most radio stations own websites and stream their broadcasts on social media platforms, thereby, enhancing a two-way discourse that employs phone-ins and online postings **(**Nyarko, 2020)**.**

However, the media is a double-edged sword that could either be used to promote democracy or to derail it. Osei-Appiah (2020) postulates that political journalism in Ghana is characterised by unprofessional conducts and commercialisation of news which do not augur well for democratic development of the country. He expressed

concern about the exclusion of some voices especially those of women and other disadvantaged groups from political discussions in the media. This leads to the projection of few dominant political views which limits the range of options available for enhanced decision-making. Osei-Appiah (2020) called for changes in the news production logic and practices of the media in Ghana to expand the political debate and accommodate more interest groups. Similarly, Abdulai et al. (2020) found that some media practitioners and political activists in the Northern Region often promote violence during electioneering periods through the use of offensive language. The study recommends training of journalists on political reporting and decent use of language for political programming.

Conceptual framework
The key concepts which underpin this study are offensive language and its synonyms, hate speech and indecent language, and serial callers. In this section, not only are the concepts explained and discussed, empirical studies related to these concepts are reviewed with a view to identifying their relevance to findings of this study.

Offensive language used on radio
Even though radio has proved to be an invaluable asset in development, it has often been abused, particularly by politicians who use offensive language to abuse their opponents. According to Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) (2016) and Marfo (2012), the offensive language used on radio often includes insults, hate speech and ethnocentric slurs. Such language can incite people to violence, especially during election periods. MFWA defines hate speech as insulting and offensive comments, unsubstantiated allegations against a political opponent, remarks endorsing violence, provocative remarks, remarks inciting violence, divisive comments and tribal slurs (MFWA, 2016). In this study, offensive language, hate speech and indecent language are used interchangeably.

Prior to Ghana's 2016 General Elections, MFWA's media monitoring established that daily, political leaders and their supporters routinely traded insults and used indecent expressions on air. Indeed, over three months, a total of 343 indecent expressions were recorded among eight major political parties namely the NPP, NDC, PPP, NDP, PNC, CPP, GFP and NLP. The study found that, 232 out of the 343 indecent expressions recorded, came from affiliates of the eight named parties, with 111 indecent expressions attributed to persons whose political party affiliation could not be established (MFWA, 2016). The study established that insults and unsubstantiated allegations escalated in the build-up to the 2016 Parliamentary and Presidential elections. Radio station presenters could not escape blame for the proliferation of indecency on air since they did little to prevent politicians from uttering indecent language. MFWA (2016) also called into question the regulatory role of the National Media Commission (NMC), the Ghana Independent Broadcasters Association (GIBA) and the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) and urged these bodies to step up remedial measures aimed at sanitising the airwaves. In consonance with the findings of MFWA (2016), Ofori (2016) established that the use of insults during politicking was very pronounced, characterised by personal attacks, vilifications and bickering. Coker and Nartey (2012) classified insults into two major categories: denotative insults and presupposed/inferential insults. The study found

that those who use insulting language often have little or no knowledge of the social mores which prohibit such utterances. For Marfo (2012), the proliferation of broadcast stations and repeal of the criminal libel law is to blame for the upsurge in the indecent language since every Ghanaian expresses him/herself on issues of political interest, a practice that could not even be envisioned during military regimes. The study lamented that such unfettered freedom gave politicians and their followers the license to make deadly pronouncements, inciting statements and recklessly resort to hate speech.

In Ghana's Fourth Republican dispensation, there is abundant evidence of offensive language in the media. Party communicators, including serial callers, are often accused of being major perpetrators of such acts. On *Kessben FM*, a "serial caller" (a frequent contributor to political programmes on radio) told a panellist to stop talking like a fool and wise up (Fordjour, 2016). Similarly, on an *Angel FM* programme aired on 9th March 2015, a party communicator used words such as "bullshit", "bogus" and "useless" to describe the then President's State of the Nation Address. Sometimes, highly placed politicians are the perpetrators of indecent language usage. For instance, during a *Kessben FM* programme aired on 17th March 2015, the then Deputy Attorney General lost his temper and said; "*you are asking me stupid questions, and I am not ready to tolerate that nonsense……my friend, if you misbehave, I will drop the line*", which he subsequently did. Also, a Member of Parliament (MP) once described, on a radio programme, his party members as "*…foolish people who do not have an iota of common sense*" (Fordjour, 2016: 4)*.* The then Chairperson of the Electoral Commission (EC) was not sparred the MP's tirade either. On the same radio programme, the MP alleged that the EC boss granted sexual favours in exchange for her appointment to the position (Myjoyonline.com, 2016). Journalists were equally culpable of the offence of indecent use of language. Before the 2016 General elections, a presenter on *Montie FM*, an Accra-based station, and his two panellists were convicted of threatening the lives of Supreme Court Justices because of their handling of a lawsuit that challenged the credibility of Ghana's voters' register (Citifmonline.com, 2016).

Fordjour (2016) cautioned that the use of offensive language on the radio during political broadcasts was becoming so rampant that, appropriate measures had to be put in place to avoid unforeseeable occurrences. He explained that with the encouragement and support of audiences, some media practitioners use foul language to spice up their messages. According to him, in an era of liberalised media, the use of offensive language is a revolution against the cultural prohibition of foul language, and the culture of silence that preceded the promulgation of the 1992 Constitution. It emerged that some radio presenters deliberately asked public figures provocative questions to elicit abusive words from such personalities. Most of these foul utterances were used as programme promos to entertain the audience or expose the ignorance, incompetence and narrow-mindedness of some public figures (Fordjour, 2016).

Many earlier studies into indecent language during electioneering periods (MFWA, 2012 and 2016; Marfo, 2012 and Fordjour, 2016) adopted content analysis as a data collection method. Such studies attempted to undertake nationwide monitoring of

sampled media houses. However, no study has focused on one of Ghana's political hotspots and violence-prone regions, the Northern Region. The nationwide spread of earlier studies made it impossible to delve deeper into the potential threat that indecent use of language on radio poses to peaceful co-existence in the region. Besides, earlier research into offensive language used on radio focused on analysing the content of media programmes without seeking the views of the main architects of intemperate language. While the content analysis may expose the frequency and types of offensive language used, this data collection method does not capture the complete picture of the language challenge. Aside from analysing media content and interviewing media managers, this study further interviews major violators of language decency, serial callers. This holistic approach was aimed at examining the extent to which radio stations use offensive language, the reasons why serial callers use such language and how this threat to Ghana's peace can be curtailed within the Tamale Metropolis.

Serial callers

Radio programming has become more diverse, with increased plurality and audience participation imperative. In particular, talk programmes that emerged in the early days of media plurality attracted audiences by introducing phone-in segments to enhance audience participation. The growing popularity of mobile phones in the country further enhanced audience interaction through phone-ins, voice messages, text messages and social media (Tettey, 2011; Yankah, 2004). The provision of feedback opportunities to audiences, brought in its wake what came to be known as "serial callers" on radio talk shows. The term "serial callers" refer to radio listeners who frequently monitor and take part in public discourse by making a series of calls to various radio programmes. They monitor different radio talk shows, dominate the phone-in segments and attempt to tilt the discussion in favour of their parties (VOA News, 2009, cited in Nunoo, 2015). Serial callers operate as hatchet men on a smear and image-damaging campaign. They would announce scandals and repeat them to dent the reputation of political opponents using 'hijacking' and 'skewing' as their major strategies. The study established that to enhance audience participation in their programmes, some talk show hosts assisted serial callers in making calls during phone-in segments of programmes. In doing so, however, these programme hosts sacrifice professional, ethical codes and standards on the altar of audience participation (Nunoo, 2015).

Over a period of time, serial callers have graduated to higher levels of scandal peddlers and sophisticated political communicators who engage in emotive arguments for or against particular political ideologies (AllAfrica, 2014, cited in Nunoo, 2015). Their functions have gone beyond expressing opinions on air to becoming political lobbyists who use strikes and protests to attain both political and material gains (Ghanaweb, 2012, cited in Nunoo, 2015). Whenever they felt neglected, serial callers found ways of drawing attention to their needs. For instance, Kojo (2018) reported that serial callers gathered and burnt mobile phones provided by the party to show their disdain for being neglected by the NPP. The serial callers warned their colleagues to desist from further calling or texting into local radio stations to defend the government of President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo.

Similarly, Annang (2021) reported a strike by serial callers within the Bono Region of Ghana. According to the Sunyani East Constituency Communications Officer of the NPP, the callers in the region decided to embark on the strike because the disbursement of monthly stipends of three hundred Ghana cedis (GH¢300) and two hundred Ghana cedis (GH¢200) paid to party communicators and serial callers respectively, was riddled with petty corruption and nepotism. The King of Ashanti, Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, expressed his grave concern about the activities of serial callers and other party communicators:

> *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 fret with anxiety..." (Daily Graphic, 2014).*

A former Chairman of the National Media Commission, Kabral Blay-Amihere, admonished radio gatekeepers to prevent callers from setting the agenda for public discourse since the practice was not good for the journalism profession and portents ill for Ghana's democracy (Ghanaweb, 2012). Some believe that the activities of serial callers have become a security threat for which reason national security intervention is required.

Theoretical underpinning

In the 1990s, Copenhagen School came up with a theory known as the Securitisation Theory. Under the theory, speech values and norms are set by securitising actors, speech acts and referent objects. These speech values become what Buzan, Waever and de Wilde (1995, cited in McDonald, 2008: 563) describe as a "linguistic representation," a situation where securitising actors refer to a speech act as an existential threat. In a "securitising move", a discussion is curtailed once it portends a security threat and has an audience that is present to accept the discourse. This means that the speech act creates insecurity. The consequence of the perceived security threat could be that 'normal' politics gets suspended as the security actors introduce extraordinary measures to deal with the so-called threat.

The theory argues that rather than insecurity being based on an objective analysis of a security situation, securitisation is politicised (Buzan and Waever, 1997: 246). As a result of this, the threat of insecurity could be used to legitimise political action against opponents of a particular regime. In this regard, the Copenhagen School distinguishes securitisation from politicisation, even as they recognise the two as being inter-subjective (Buzan et al., 1998: 30). Fierke (2007:108) goes further to explain that when an issue is political, it becomes a public interest and is subject to normal political or public discourse. However, the securitisation of an issue takes it

out of the context of everyday politics, thereby justifying the need for emergency politics and the institution of decisive measures to deal with the securitising actors. Thus, the state could under the pretext of a security threat and the need to protect citizens legitimise the use of some security measures and technologies to curtail free speech. The theory points to the fact that language could inadvertently be employed to ignite action from an individual or a group based on the fact that the process of securitising language is considered a 'speech act' which is capable of moving an audience to act in a certain way (Waever, 2004). Therefore, a securitising actor (this could be a political communicator) can convince an audience (radio listeners) through a speech act (radio programmes) to endanger the security of the state. This justifies the use of extraordinary measures (arrests or closure of radio stations) to deal with existential threats that are perceived to be inimical to the state's very survival (Taureck, 2006). As Columba and Vaughan-Williams (2010) argued, politicians have an enormous influence on other actors with regard to the use of extraordinary measures to deal with language that has the propensity to incite violence.

In Ghana, some believe that thanks to the politics of insults and inciting language, there is a need for securitisation to ensure peace. Do some people's growing concern over the state of Ghana's political discourse make radio talk shows an 'existential threat' that requires the use of exceptional security measures to handle it? Suppose one argues that the current political discourse threatens the existence of Ghana's democratic dispensation. In that case, political elites, being the securitising actors, have the responsibility to adopt extraordinary measures to protect and consolidate the survival of the present democratic process.

The Copenhagen School's approach identified political, societal, environmental and human security as likely targets of securitisation. The school mentioned ethnic and religious groups in particular as distinctive referent objects of security. For the purposes of this study, serial callers are the subject of securitisation. However, a speech act can only be securitised once the relevant audiences are convinced that it poses an existential threat (Waever, 1995: 56). Therefore, successful securitisation of language is only possible when there is a general consensus that political language, which is insulting or intemperate in nature, is threatening the advancement of democracy and the rule of law in Ghana, and that this requires the allocation of extra resources and institution of extraordinary measures to deal with the problem. Emmers (2007) admitted that applying this theory in a democratic setting paves the way for security actors to meddle in civilian activities, curtail certain civil liberties, and hijack the whole securitisation process.

Many studies on the Securitisation Theory have been Eurocentric. Wilkinson (2007) argued that the Copenhagen School's method of analysing security is Eurocentric in nature and failed to reflect the security realities of other parts of the world. This study brings the theory to the African and Ghanaian contexts by establishing the extent to which the utterances of serial callers on the airwaves of the Tamale Metropolis can be securitised.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative case study design which entailed explanatory, exploratory and descriptive interrogation of the phenomenon (Yin 2003) of offensive language used on radio stations within Northern Ghana. A study of this nature required that the researcher engaged with participants in a real life situation. Therefore, the case study approach came in handy in preventing the researcher from influencing events in the setting of participants (Yin 2003).

Sampling

Out of 17 on-air radio stations within the Tamale Metropolis, quota sampling techniques were used to select four radio stations, two of which were commercial radio stations, one community radio station and a state-owned radio station. *Radio Savannah* is a state-owned local radio station located in Tamale, the Northern Regional capital. It was established on 2nd December, 1996 to promote the cultural and socio-political needs of the people of the Northern Region. The station is one of the regional FM stations which belongs to Ghana's state broadcaster, the *Ghana Broadcasting Corporation* (GBC). It is one of the most-listened-to stations within the Northern Region and transmits on 91.3MHz frequency modulation with programmes mostly in Dagbani, Gonja, Twi and English (GBC, 2012). The station was purposively sampled as the only state-owned station within the Northern Region which is expected to exhibit responsible journalism by ensuring the use of decent language to promote peace and development within the Tamale Metropolis. Also, purposive sampling technique was used to select *Tawasul FM*, the only community-based radio station within the Metropolis at the time of the research. Established by Tawasul Multimedia Association, the station broadcasts on 95.7 MHz mainly in Dagbani and Gonja languages. *Tawasul FM* commenced operations on 21st July 2011, intending to support communal activities and small businesses within the Tamale Metropolis. As a station geared towards serving the needs of marginalised communities, and in keeping with the principles of the Ghana Community Radio Network, one would hardly expect it to tolerate offensive language on its airwaves.

To compare the language used on the two non-profit stations with that of profit-oriented radio stations, simple random sampling techniques were used to select two commercial radio stations within the Metropolis, *Filla FM* and *North Star Radio*. *Filla FM* (89.3 FM) was established on 8th March 2002, to promote peace and development in the Northern Region. Acapella Media Company Limited owns the station which is located in Tamale. It transmits programmes mostly in Twi, Gonja and English (Ghana Media Information, 2016). Like *Filla FM*, *North Star Radio* (92.1 MHz) is a commercial radio station which was established on 1st March 2002, to produce and broadcasting programmes geared towards promoting peace and development of the Northern Region, as well as complementing the activities and businesses of individuals, communities, institutions and agencies. It is owned by Northern Star FM Limited, which transmits programmes in English, Akan, Gonga and Dabgani.

The heads of programmes and morning show hosts of the four (4) media houses were selected purposively for interviews. As major gatekeepers of the content of their stations, the programme heads and Morning Show hosts are programming experts and would be better informed on the reasons for the use of indecent language on their various networks. The Regional Communication Officers and

Media Monitors (Serial Callers) of the two leading political parties, the NDC and NPP, were also purposively sampled for focus group discussions. The two biggest parties have consistently been identified as the media's worst perpetrators of offensive speech (MFWA, 2016). Therefore, those who directly and actively engage in communications on behalf of these two parties, that is the Communication Officers and Serial Callers, are best suited to explain the rationale behind indecent language usage and proffer solutions to the scourge. Also, morning show programmes aired between 1st November and 31st December, 2016 on the selected radio stations were purposively sampled. The selected period is considered to be the peak of the political season in the run-up to the 7th December 2016 elections, and the immediate post-election period. Therefore, politicians were more likely to use indecent language on their opponents during this period. Morning shows are not only aired during peak listening hours, making them the most listened to radio programmes within the Tamale Metropolis, but the programmes also feature a newspaper review segment during which political party communicators are featured to run commentary on newspaper headline stories. The radio phone lines are also activated for listeners to contribute to the discussions, with political party serial callers often dominating the calls.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

Kuranchie (2016) states that the goal of a comprehensive interview is not to get answers to predetermined questions but to find out the participants' perspectives and their experience in the issue at stake. Interviews were conducted with heads of programmes and morning show hosts of the sampled radio stations. The interviews, which sought to establish the reasons for using unacceptable language and ways of curbing hate speech on the airwaves, each lasted an average of 43 minutes. Two focus group discussions were also held with six Media Monitors and Regional Communications Officers each for the NDC and NPP. The discussions each lasted an average of 58 minutes. Responses from the interviews and focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed, coded and subjected to the narrative, descriptive and thematic analyses.

The researcher aimed to record all 168 morning shows aired on the four radio stations within the sampled period. However, he managed to record only 161 programmes. The programmes were transcribed and in some cases, translated from Dagbani and Gonja into English Language before being coded and classified. First, the programmes were categorised into two broad areas, those that contained offensive language and those that did not contain any offensive expressions. Programmes containing offensive language were coded as follows: political party/actor involved, type of indecent expression used and the theme of the discussion.

Findings and discussion

This study set out to examine the extent to which serial callers use offensive language, the reasons why political actors use such language and how the use of such unacceptable language could be curtailed within the Tamale Metropolis.

Frequency of the use of offensive language

The study tried to examine how frequently intemperate language was used on the radio during political broadcasts in the Tamale Metropolis. Having examined the 161 recorded morning show programmes, it emerged that 114 (70.8%) contained foul language, with the commercial radio stations *North Star Radio* (42.10%) and *Filla Radio* (28.08%) being the worst culprits. State-owned *Radio Savannah* was the most decent in language usage, as contained in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Use of offensive language on radio stations

Radio Station	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Radio Savannah	13	11.40
Filla Radio	32	28.08
North Star Radio	48	42.10
Tawosul Radio	21	18.42
Total	**114**	**100.00**

Source: Content Analysis, 2021

When confronted with the results of the content analysis, heads of a programme of the two commercial radio stations admitted to the use of offensive language on their airwaves and blamed it on recalcitrant party communicators and serial callers. According to the gatekeepers, programme hosts usually try unsuccessfully to rein in the communicators and callers during political discussion programmes. The Head of Programmes of *Filla FM* had this to say:

> *It is perceived by most people that those in private radio stations do not regulate our programmes, but the fact is that we usually devote much time to political show discussions where young politicians are also given a chance to participate in the discussions. We sometimes discuss controversial issues, leading to heated arguments resulting in some panellists going overboard* (In-depth Interview, December 2020).

Violators of decent language usage
An analysis of the recorded morning shows revealed that nearly three-quarters (73%) of all intemperate language used on morning shows could be attributed to serial callers, as indicated in Figure 1 below.
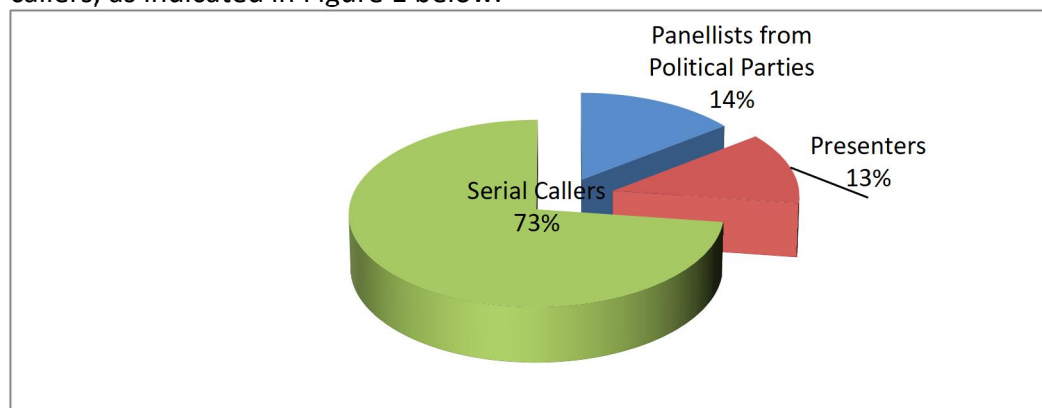
Figure 1: Group of persons who use indecent language most

Source: Content analysis, 2020

Results of this study confirm Nunoo (2015) and Daily Graphic (2014) that serial callers are major perpetrators of indecent language used on radio. The serial callers themselves admitted that their contributions on air have the potential of breaching peaceful co-existence in Ghana. At a focus group discussion, a serial caller had this to say:

> *Whenever I switch my radio on, particularly during this campaign time, most callers use indecent expressions. For instance, last week, one serial caller described another caller's views as "nonsense" and "foolish". For me, this is dangerous, and as a country, we have to do something before things become worse, as it happened in other countries where they experienced wars (Focus Group Discussant, December 2020).*

The Morning Show host of *Radio Savannah* was equally concerned about the breach of language decency on air by serial callers:

> *Some serial callers of political parties do not speak well at all on private radio stations. Because* Radio Savannah *is for the government, you cannot talk anyhow while on air. Sometimes, I cut the line if you do not talk well. One man phoned in during a political discussion and had to be cut off the line when he began making statements that could not be substantiated. He became annoyed and threatened to burn down the station* (In-depth Interview, December 2020).

Even as programmes hosts blamed serial callers for raising the stakes with offensive language, the callers also felt panellists and the programme's anchors themselves were part of the problem. At a focus group discussion, a caller asserted:

> *Sometimes it is very disheartening to hear the insults and unsubstantiated allegations of some of the panellists and hosts of programmes peddled on air. In fact, the least talk about them the better. Just last week, the host of* Filla *in a discussion programme wanted to restrain a serial caller from making an unsubstantiated allegation, but ended up calling the serial caller a bastard (Focus group discussion, December 2020).*

Another serial caller asserted:

> *Look, the situation is serious, listening to a* North Star *presenter on Tuesday, I was very surprised that a whole Presenter insulted a serial caller on an issue. The host of the* North Star *morning show usually does not speak well. How can you refer to human beings as objects? I heard this on one of the shows (Focus group discussion, December 2020).*

A party Communications Officer lamented the extent to which intemperate language is used by other political party communicators. According to him, because some radio stations do not have stringent measures to check the use of intemperate language, most people say whatever pleases them. He explained further:

> *We have children here, and if we choose to tune into radio stations that use foul language like North Star and Filla, the children will learn the wrong things. It [radio should] helps us and educate our children by instilling in them moral values and cultural identity* (Focus group discussion, December 2020).

Discussants at a focus group were unanimous in blaming communicators of the two main political parties, the NPP and NDC, as the worst offenders of indecent language usage. One Morning Show host, however, felt that the extent to which indecent language is used on radio stations is on the decline.

> *I cannot deny totally that there has been the use of some vulgar words on the radio, but I think, unlike the 2012 and 2016 election campaign seasons, this year's election [2020] has seen some level of decency in the use of abusive and provocative words. It seems the radio stations are putting some regulatory mechanisms in place to curtail that behaviour by the politicians* (In-depth Interview, December 2020).

Managers of the four selected radio stations admitted that using indecent language on their airwaves was a challenge to the country's security. They confirmed that newspaper reviews on morning show programmes during which representatives of political parties took turns to run commentary on news stories often led to the use of unacceptable language. Like programmes editors and hosts of the morning shows, the station managers appeared helpless in dealing with the situation. As expected, station managers defended their stations' actions with respect to giving access to politically partisan personalities to pollute the airwaves with hate speech. They found nothing wrong in doing so and believed their stations were not breaching any broadcasting code of conduct. To them, the media has an obligation to provide access to party representatives to express their opinions. Once that opportunity is provided, the party communicators are expected to be decorous in the use of language. They conceded to the fact that radio stations should go beyond handing over their airwaves to political communicators and ensure decent use of language by the communicators. They, however, insisted that controlling what someone says on air is a difficult task that programmes hosts have been grappling with. All the station managers claimed to have installed transmission software which delayed for 10 seconds the utterances of guests on their radio programmes to enable the hosts to edit any indecent expressions.

Reasons for the use of intemperate language
Certainly, radio station managers and programme hosts are not as helpless as they claim in preventing the use of offensive language on their networks. Even if the delayed transmission software is not effective in intercepting indecent language before it is aired, many other options exist, including disallowing party communicators from appearing in newspaper reviews. So why are the stations failing to tackle this indecent language scourge? The researcher tried to examine the reasons why serial callers and party communicators use intemperate language on radio programmes.

It emerged from focus group discussions and in-depth interviews that what an NPP communicator describes as the need for "Victory at all cost" was the leading

motivator for indecent language usage on the airwaves. Discussants at a focus group session indicated that their job was to defend their parties at all costs to ensure victory in elections. One serial caller remarked: "*To achieve our victory, we will do whatever possible*". Of course, it is not for nothing that serial callers "do whatever possible" to ensure victory for their parties. Serial calling has become a paid job, as GNA (2021), Kojo (2018) and Annang (2021) established. At a focus group discussion, NPP serial callers confirmed that their party gave them monthly stipends as motivation to enable them to monitor radio stations and phone in to push the parties' messages across to listeners. The ruling party callers were also given smartphones and mobile phone credits as working aids. Though NDC serial callers were not accorded any regular monthly allowances, they were occasionally given motivational stipends, smartphones and mobile phone credit. As a result of the perks serial callers receive, they would go to any length to defend their parties. In the words of one of the serial callers, "For me, the party is first, and any other thing is second. We need to defend our own and nothing else".

Indeed, there is love-lust between serial callers and radio stations. The stations do not just accord these party communicators airtime to ply their political trade. Radio station managers and Morning show hosts cultivate serial callers and sometimes stoke the fires of indecent language. Asked why they would not stop serial callers and other party communicators from reviewing the news, one station manager retorted, "They [party communicators] spice up the station. Getting technocrats to sacrifice time and resources to do the [newspaper] reviews regularly is difficult. Only the politicians are ready to do so daily because they project their parties through that". The Station Manager was of the view that every party must be offered an opportunity to air its messages since preventing them from airing their views amounts to denying them free speech. A popular radio presenter indicated that some of his colleague presenters try making their morning shows popular by hosting political party communicators who use provocative statements that end up drawing sharp rebuttals from serial callers from opposing parties. The foul utterances of these party communicators and serial callers are then used as jingles or programme promos to draw listeners to their programmes. This is in consonance with the findings of Nunoo (2015) to the effect that some media decision-makers in Ghana throw professional ethics to the dogs and encourage serial callers to gain access to their programmes via phone to attract greater participation of the audience and satisfying advertisers.

No wonder the majority of respondents to this study preferred listening to the two selected privately-own radio stations, which recorded higher cases of indecent language, as compared to state-owned *Radio Savannah* and the community station, *Tawosul Radio*. A focus group discussant captured this fact elaborately:

> *…for that station, [North Star FM], you can talk your mind, but for the others [Radio Savannah and Tawosul Radio], they behave as if they always want to cover up the bad deeds of people. The private stations are ready to tell what is happening in this country, and we can express our opinions without fear of intimidation* (Focus group discussion, December 2020).

A station manager blamed the use of indecent language on the bigwigs of the NPP and NDC. According to him, when political leaders use intemperate language, their followers emulate the bad examples set by such leaders. He continued:

> *Sometimes our leaders are the cause of this rampant use of intemperate language on our airwaves. For instance, our former president, Jerry John Rawlings, ironically referred to his fellow former president, John Agyekum Kufour, as 'Ata Ayi' [a notorious armed robber in Ghana]. He did not even apologise or justify his statement, which caused some supporters of NPP to reply to this comment by raining insults on former President Rawlings and the leaders of the NDC party. I believe if our leaders desist from this behaviour, their supporters will follow suit (In-depth Interview, December 2020).*

Another station manager expressed similar sentiments regarding the role of political leaders in the pollution of the airwaves with indecent language:

> *We have witnessed a series of offensive and abusive words by our key political leaders in this country without the laws taking them on. No party faithful should be given too much chance to insult people on the radio to jeopardise our hard-won peace (In-depth Interview, December 2020).*

Categories of offensive language

In keeping with MFWA (2016), this study grouped offensive language under seven categories. Namely, unsubstantiated allegations, insulting and offensive comments, provocative remarks, remarks endorsing violence, remarks inciting violence, divisive comments and tribal slurs. As Table 2 below indicates, unsubstantiated allegations and insulting and offensive comments topped the list of violations. This mirrors MFWA (2016), which also found unsubstantiated allegations and insults as the two main categories of indecent expressions.

Table 2: Categories of Indecent Expressions

Category of Indecent Expression	Percentage
Unsubstantiated allegations	45.5
Insulting and offensive comments	24.6
Remarks endorsing violence	11.9
Provocative remarks	8.2
Remarks inciting violence	7.5
Divisive comments	1.5
Tribal slurs	0.8
Total	**100.0**

Source: Content Analysis, 2020

Allegations of corruption levelled against political opponents accounted for the 45.5% unsubstantiated allegations. NPP and NDC political communicators, especially serial callers, traded accusations of corruption against each other. The recurring allegations made against the NPP Government by serial callers who are sympathetic to the NDC were as follows:

- The Disappearance of 500 excavators that were seized at galamsey sites;
- President Akuffo-Addo gave his daughters state money amounting to Gh¢227,000 to establish a company;

- The CEO of Zongo Development Fund was involved in a Ghc5 million procurement deal;
- An amount of Gh¢20 million meant for a street lights project could not be accounted for by the Energy Ministry;
- President Akuffo-Addo granted tax waivers amounting to $24 million to his in-law for the construction of a hotel at the airport area;
- 700 motorbikes and 600 tricycles were missing from the Northern Development Authority;
- In 2019, President Akuffo-Addo spent GH¢62 million on foreign travel within 9 months;
- The government officials demanded from contractors, 25% of monies owed them before paying debts owed these contractors;
- Government paid $175,000 for Daewoo buses valued at $75,000 meant for the Metro Mass Transit Company; and
- Zongo, Inner City Development Minister, and Upper East Regional Ministers spent Gh¢1.2 million on green grass under the guise of building Astroturf.

Serial callers and communicators of the NPP were not to be outdone by their NDC counterparts. The NPP sympathisers cited six main corruption allegations against NDC, namely the "Smartty's Bus branding saga", the "GYEEDA and SADA Scandals", the "Ford saga", and the "Woyome scandal". The NPP constantly referred to an allegation by the Northern Regional Chairman of the NPP that Ibrahim Mahama, a brother of former President John Mahama, tried bribing the Regional Chairman with a sum of GH¢3.3 million and a V8 Land Cruiser. The NPP maintained that the bribe influenced their Regional Chairman to portray the NPP Flagbearer, Nana Akufo-Addo, as a tribal bigot.

The study found that unsubstantiated allegations of corruption often ignited heated arguments that provoked other forms of indecent expressions by party communicators and serial callers. For instance, on a *Filla FM* discussion**,** an NPP serial caller referred to Alfred Agbesi Woyome, an NDC financier who was embroiled in a judgement debt scandal, as a fool. This insulting and offensive comment led to a remark that incited violence. An NDC serial caller's response to the insult on Woyome was:

> *We cannot sit back and watch the other parties insult us. We have to retaliate when possible. The NDC will defend itself and its supporters in the [Northern] region. On the issue of NPP supporters beating some of our supporters, we will do whatever possible to break down their vigilantism*" (Content Analysis, 2020).

The NPP and NDC panellists on the radio programme each sided with their serial callers and almost ended up in fisticuffs in the radio station's studio. Discussants at a focus group admitted that intemperate language was so rampant that no single day passed without party communicators creating ugly scenes on one radio station or another within the Tamale Metropolis.

Unsubstantiated allegations about attempts by the Electoral Commissioner to rig the 2020 elections in favour of the NPP were a recurring source of indecent language. On

one such discussion, an NPP panellist alleged that a former Electoral Commissioner, Charlotte Osei, was in bed with former President John Mahama and rigged the 2012 elections for the former president. The NPP panellist indicated that a failed 2016 Presidential aspirant, Hassan Ayariga, was right in describing Charlotte Osei as a prostitute for disqualifying him as a presidential candidate. This drew the ire of the NDC panellist on the programme, who made a remark inciting violence: "blood will flow if anyone insults JM [John Mahama] and Charlotte Osei".

Political parties guilty of offensive language

From the content of recorded programmes, it emerged that serial callers who use offensive language are invariably aligned with either the NPP or NDC. This supports the findings of MFWA (2012 and 2016), which showed the NPP and NDC leading the pack of political parties whose followers frequently used offensive language on air. The offensive language used by communicators of other political parties was negligible. As shown in Table 3 below, NPP Serial Callers used indecent expressions more frequently than other political parties.

Table 3: Party affiliations and indecent expressions

Category of Indecent Expression	Affiliated Political Party							Total
	NPP	NDC	NDP	PPP	CPP	PNC	Radio Presenters	
Insulting & Offensive Comments	11	9	2	1	0	1	4	28
Unsubstantiated Allegations	19	17	4	3	1	1	7	52
Provocative Remarks	4	3	0	0	0	0	3	10
Remarks Endorsing Violence	7	3	0	2	0	0	1	13
Remarks Inciting Violence	2	4	1	0	1	0	0	8
Divisive Comments	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
Tribal Slur	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Total	**43**	**38**	**7**	**6**	**3**	**2**	**15**	**114**

Source: Content Analysis, 2020

Are Serial Callers a security threat?

An analysis of the indecent expressions shows the content as being securitised rather than politicised. While, bringing up allegations of corruption is a normal political discourse, when the discourse veers into insults, castigations and name calling, it ceases to be politicisation and rather becomes a security threat. Certainly, calling a member of an opposing political party a fool is not part of normal political communication. Also, the process of serial callers marketing their parties is part of normal politicisation. However, issuing threats of breaking down each other's vigilantism or threatening, on air, to spill blood or do everything within their power to win elections assumes the character of securitisation.

In the face of the reckless threat to security, Station Managers and Morning Show hosts appear helpless or unwilling to stem the indecent tirade on radio stations. A host of *Filla FM* exclaimed, "…it is not easy at all. We always try, but you know these our people. It is really difficult handling them [Serial Callers]". One would have expected media regulatory bodies, especially the National Media Commission (NMC),

to step in and sanitise the airwaves. However, as respondents to this study observed, the NMC has proved ineffective in reining in or sanctioning stations which allow serial callers to have a field day. Therefore, some, including the Station Managers, are suggesting something akin to censoring talk programmes on the radio. Some are of the view that enforcing the law by arresting those who use indecent language may be the hitherto elusive solution to containing offensive language. A Host of the Morning Show at *Radio Savannah* indicated that sanctioning political parties is a solution to indecency on the airwaves: "I recommend enforcing the law to the letter. In fact, all those who use intemperate language on the radio should be given out by the radio stations for the law to take its course".

Therefore, some are wondering whether it is not time to take extra security measures to forestall any violence. In keeping with the securitisation theory, some have suggested that the security agencies be brought in to close down radio stations or force such stations to stop morning shows which provide opportunities for serial calls. In other words, the serial callers' indecent language has become the linguistic representation of an existential threat (Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, 1995, cited in McDonald 2008: 563). Few participants in a focus group discussion and in-depth interviews agreed that serial callers were a threat since they have an audience of political party followers who swallowed hook, line and sinker everything that these callers said on the radio. Thus, the threat of serial callers provoking violence is being used to legitimise political action of stopping the airing of Morning Shows, an action which otherwise would be considered illegitimate.

However, most participants were against the securitisation of Morning Shows, arguing that free speech must never be compromised to ensure peaceful co-existence. For such participants, preventing Morning Shows from being aired amounts to gagging the media. They argued that once security agencies are called in to control the use of offensive language, they could engage in excesses against the media and return the country to a state of dictatorship. This view is in line with Emmers (2007), who contends that security actors can meddle in civilian activities, curtail certain civil liberties, and also hijack the whole securitisation process. In a politically polarised country such as Ghana, securitising talk shows could provide an avenue for political elites and governments to influence the security agencies into using extraordinary measures in dealing with a language that has the propensity to incite violence (Columba and Vaughan-Williams, 2010).

If the admonition of Waever (1995) that the process of securitising language can only be successful when there is consensus to that effect is anything to go by, Ghana is not ready for securitisation of serial callers' utterances on radio since this study did not find consensus among respondents on the need for security involvement in containing the use of indecent language.

Conclusions

This study confirms earlier studies that serial callers are a major source of offensive language used on the radio. Evidently, their activities pose a threat to peaceful co-existence in volatile areas such as the Tamale Metropolis. Therefore, preventing serial callers from hijacking phone lines during Morning Shows will sanitise the

language used on the airwaves. However, curtailing the activities of these callers is a difficult assignment that programmes hosts and Station Managers are unwilling to handle. The study concludes that radio Station Managers and hosts of Morning Shows are complicit in aiding serial callers to use offensive language since these callers are perceived to increase the radio stations' listenership. Unfortunately, media regulatory bodies have not also gone beyond admonishing stations which allow the use of offensive language on their networks. Despite the threat posed by serial callers and the inability of media stakeholders to rein in their activities, employing extra security measures to contain the situation is not a popular option.

Recommendations

It emerged from the study that much as all respondents condemned the use of indecent language and recognised its potential for igniting violence, no initiatives appeared to have been taken to curb the use of such language. Yet lack of action on the part of the various stakeholders is not for want of knowledge on the steps required to tackle the menace. The majority of respondents to the study indicated that to deal with the use of intemperate language, there is a need to enforce the law. This study recommends that the National Communications Authority (NCA) revoke the licenses of radio stations found culpable of using offensive language. Radio stations must consider changing the format of newspaper reviews. In place of inviting political party representatives to run commentary on news stories, the stations should be either field technocrats, media personalities or experts in various development sectors to give expert opinions on the news stories. Alternatively, the stories could be read to listeners without any panellists proffering opinions on such stories. No callers should be entertained by newspaper reviews.

In the lead-up to national elections, the NMC, respected statesmen such as the Asantehene and NGOs, especially the MFWA, must prevail on the leadership of the NPP and NDC to either disband or rein in their serial callers. The callers' linguistic weapons are sharpened through the logistical support of political godfathers. Therefore, once the sponsorships dry out, the callers' vitriol will lessen. Additionally, Morning Show hosts should be encouraged to use the delayed transmission devices installed on their stations to prevent the airing of offensive statements on the radio.

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