

Exploring New Approaches to Children's Broadcast Programme

Production: The concept of child participation Sarah Akrofi-Quarcoo

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Abstract

The paper discusses the phenomenon of child participation in contemporary Ghanaian children's programmes. It is based on an exploratory study of selected programmes - Curious Minds, Choice Children's Channel and Smart Kids - aired on Radio Ghana, Choice FM and Ghana Television respectively. The study examined the production processes and content of the three programmes with a view to establishing the extent to which child participation ideals are incorporated in production. As background to this paper an overview of children's programmes in Ghana before and after broadcast de-regulation in the early 1990s is provided. The concept of child participation is defined. Subsequently, the paper discusses child participation in practice in the light of some critiques and concerns. It examines production approaches employed in the selected children's programmes as well as the content of the three programmes in the light of children's agenda setting roles. Challenges and factors that account for the adoption of particular approaches are further discussed. The paper argues that full child participation holds great promise for transforming content and programme production practices in contemporary children's programmes. However, programmes owned and controlled by children are more likely than those owned by the stations and individual producers to encourage the full child participation approach.

Introduction

Children broadcast programmes have been significant for promoting target audiences' visibility in society. However, in 1989 following the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) these programmes came under global scrutiny. Content was criticised largely for stifling children's freedom of expression and for muting children's voices, while production processes were considered adult-centric, and for failing to reflect children's realities. Hamelink (2002) noted that often the tendency had been to patronise children, "to silence them, to invade their privacies arbitrarily and to spend some energies filtering messages" for them. Commenting on the content of some children's programmes in Brazil, Carmona (1999 p.287) noted:

Children were always basically used as forms of supporting casts and as a decorative part of the scenery...singing, dancing, and clapping in an excessively happy, light-hearted but unreal atmosphere.

A study by Save the Children undertaken in Barbados, England, Canada, Israel, Namibia, Northern Ireland, Palestine and Romania showed that children disliked such representations of themselves in media content. But what they disliked most (quoted by Jempson (1999: 104) about their treatment in media included:

- being patronised and spoken down to
- being made to perform like circus animals
- being made to look passive when they are not
- adults putting words in children's mouth or interrupting them when they speak
- adults speaking to them when they know more about the subject

Partly to address some of the concerns, a global advocacy programme for child participation in broadcasts was initiated in 1992. The International Children's Day of Broadcasting (ICDB) initiated by the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Council of the National Academy of Arts and Sciences (NATAS) charged broadcasters and producers of children's programmes to consider programme production approaches that encourage children's freedom of expression. Broadcasters were urged to start listening to children and to acknowledge their rights and potentials to impart information and ideas of all kinds as stated in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

"State parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views, the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child..."

To buttress the point, Article 13 also states:

"The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontier, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through other media of the child's choice".

The two articles emphasise children's information rights and suggest a re-organization of production approaches to incorporate children's realities and experiences. Ultimately, children's participation seeks to create a better media environment for today's children - who have become target markets of global media products (Carlsson, 2003) - to be active and critical consumers of media and media products. As uncontested spaces for promoting children's visibility in society, children's radio and television programmes provide one of the rare platforms for them to impart information and knowledge but also to put their agenda in the public space and in the process, learn about media.

Overview of Children's Programmes in Ghana

Children were considered target audiences right from the early days of broadcasting in Ghana. Information inferred from speeches of the then Gold Coast Governor, Sir Arnold Wienholt Hudson, as captured in Ansah's (1985: 2) indicates that "in and out of school children and the "adolescent schoolboy and girl" were target audiences for broadcasting. Apart from reasons of education and propaganda, the Governor meant to use radio "to keep in direct touch with the adolescent schoolboy and girl," in order to change their outlook. The governor's commitment to children and radio was confirmed by a retired broadcaster Chas Wilberforce Bentil, in an account of his experiences in "50 years of Broadcasting in Ghana." He wrote:

"The Governor had staged his first children's theatrical plays known as "Pantomime" the previous year. The "Pantomime" was confined to Accra but the Governor had a vision of the whole country enjoying from that time (1935), both local and BBC news and other forms of entertainment." (GBC, 1985).

A number of musical and educational programmes targeted at children between ages 6 and 18 were subsequently produced locally and aired on the public radio station *Radio Ghana*. These include *Children's Corner* and *Young People's Concert*. The latter featured children school choirs. Local language programmes targeting toddlers and children in primary schools such as *Taataa Tee*, *Maame Ooo Dende* and *Daavi Atuu* (broadcast in Ga, Akan and Ewe) are also notable.

The introduction of television in 1965 similarly saw educational children's programmes such as *How and Why* and *Builders of Today* and as well, cultural and entertainment programmes that featured children in cultural dances. Among the first children's television programmes was *Koliko*, a puppet show, in which the puppets assumed the characters of living creatures that children could identify with and carry "into the world of the adventure and fantasies" (GBC Publication 1985: 45).

With regard to content, format and presentation however, children's radio and television programmes cannot escape the general criticism of adult-centricism. Gadzekpo (2003: 226) noted that children's programmes had been didactic and reflected a hierarchical relationship of teacher-child, or story telling format. Akrofi-Quarcoo (1999) had similarly noted the "auntie" and "uncle" format as a dominant presentation style in which children were made to recite nursery rhymes and poems outside their cultural realities. In a critique that partly confirm the didactic and hierarchical nature of production and content, McCulloch (cited by Oswell, 1989) noted that the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) only engaged a person with "a flair for communicating with children", and who had an "innate sympathy, with a child heart" that enabled him/her to "spontaneously express his or her being to the listener." Yet, such a person "may be far from clear about the nature of the child audience" (Oswell, 1989 p. 4). The BBC example is instructive since most of Radio Ghana's programmes were models from BBC.

In addition to factors such as conceptual orientation, the format, content and presentation of children's programmes have by large, also been shaped by official discourses that gave power to producers to protect national culture and identity and also protect children against the powerful effects of radio. Governor Arnold Hudson in dispatches to the Overseas Office of the British government had indicated that radio was meant to 'inoculate' citizens including children, against "undesirable ideas which might come from outside" (Ansah, 1985).

The liberalisation of the media in the 1990s following Ghana's return to constitutional democracy is significant for the period it occurred. This period marked the initial stages of advocacy for child participation in media. Programmes such as *Teen Beat* and *Fan World* telecast on the public station (GTV) were documented as among the first in Ghana that responded to the ideals of child participation. In this transformed broadcast environment for children, Akrofi-Quarcoo (1999: 339) noted the following as changes in children's productions:

From stereotyped formats fashioned along the lines of adults dishing out advice and moral lessons to kids in heavy doses of traditional tales, through Children's drama, poetry recitals and nursery rhymes, children are now being made to play more serious roles as presenters, anchors, panelists, interviewers and interviewees.

Sadly however, by 2004 these innovative programmes on radio and television that involved children playing more active production roles, had fizzled out of the system. Contrary to expectations, the momentum and interest in programming for children and integrating child participation practices could not be sustained. That year, 16 private radio stations and four private television stations broadcast/telecast in Accra alone. Of the number of radio stations, only six broadcast children's programmes. None of the private television stations telecast locally produced programmes. By 2007 the number had shot up to 24 radio stations and five television stations. The growth and expansion of broadcasting resulted in 24-hour broadcasts by most radio stations in the capital. Conversely the rapid transformation of the environment has not kept faith with programming for children, much less the implementation of the ideals of child participation. Children's programmes have not only become

irregular features of the private stations' programming but also increasingly, less attention is paid to locally produced children's packages.

Joy FM, one of the leading private FM stations in Accra, broadcast a children's programme in the late 1990s that reflected ideals of child participation. Since the programme was taken off air, the only times the station features children, are during the celebration of ICDB; the "Easter Soup Kitchen", a community service programme that fetes children and other minority groups in need, and when the station is promoting products that target children. The situation is replicated by *Joy FM's* sister station *Adom FM*. The Programme Manager, Ahuma Bosco Ocansey noted:

In running programmes on a commercial station, we weigh what goes in and what comes out. The School Link programme we used to run was very expensive. At a point we were running a bill of two hundred thousand cedis a week on refreshments alone. This was too much compared to what the programme was bringing back.

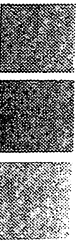
Driven by similar commercial concerns, private television stations have equally been less inclined to develop local children's outside sponsored programmes much less encourage child participation. Yet all the five Accra-based private television stations however run animated cartoon programmes for children. The implications for children's participation cannot be overlooked.

Children's Participation in Broadcasts: Defining the Parameters

Child participation has been defined as giving children "control, power and decision making" (The State of the World's Children 2003 p.53) in programmes involving them. With regard to the media, child participation means giving children space to:

...express themselves, to be left to themselves, to decide what information they need, to control what they want to know about their personal lives, to speak their own language and to be respected in their own cultural identity. (Hamelink, 2002: 39)

Participation however extends beyond the parameters of children's rights. It is considered symbolic of the new and growing culture of empowerment in which children can be "beings for themselves" (Hamelink, 2000 p.39). The empowerment framework sees children in phenomenological terms, as autonomous beings and also as people with creative, problem solving and decision-making abilities capable of participating in production processes. It challenges perceptions about children as vulnerable to "hypodermic needle" effect of media who ought to be protected against deleterious media products and content. Participation is considered a practical aspect of media education - a concept that seeks to empower children to analyse and interpret media text so that they can use media more responsibly. Consequently, participation enables children to cope with the media's "omnipresence" "undoubted power" as well as "their significant impact and penetration throughout the world" (Grunwald Declaration, 1982).



Contemporary programmes have seen children's participation expressed in a variety of broadcast productions roles such as programme initiators, managers, producers, anchors and interviewers among others. From the perspective of media education, Buckingham, (2001) explains that when children are involved as producers of media in their own right they become powerful participants in society. Von Feilitzen (1999 p.27) adds that participation strengthens children's "ability and curiosity, gives them a critical understanding of the media, increases their knowledge of the local community, and inspires social action." Apart from promoting children's agenda setting functions, participation enables young persons to develop a range of non-technical vocational skills such as communication skills, teamwork, creativity, confidence and self-expression. Some radio programmes involving children show that participation through radio is "not only a way of reaching young people, who provide the content and an audience for the radio station, but also a means of restoring pride, and raising the status of children in the community .
(http://www.unicef.org/magic/briefing/childmedia_summary.html).

Child Participation in Practice

Across the world, there are an increasing number of examples of children's involvement in production processes of various media to prove that children really can produce their own media. There are wholly-child produced programmes (Ai-Leen, 1999) and partially-child produced programmes. In some cases, the extent of children's involvement has been limited or under adult supervision. In other instances, programmes are only supported by associations and children play some specific roles. For example in Burkina Faso, the Association for the Survival of Childhood (ABSE), supports the production of children's radio programmes. Groups of children between ages 6 and 16 have communicative space for their various expressions.

In other instances too, children have no stake in the programme ownership but are involved in agenda setting roles, where their views and expressions are articulated. For example, *Blue Peter*, a BBC TV programme, has some of its agenda influenced by children. The programme features do-it-yourself craft activities, celebrates children's successes in a variety of fields and organises fundraising activities to help the less privileged in society. Other examples can be found in Africa; in Senegal, Burkina Faso, Kenya, and Sierra Leone where children between ages 6 and 18 engage actively in similar agenda setting roles at the production level. In Senegal, "*Gune-Yi*" (meaning, youth, in Wolof language) is a production team that runs 50 minutes of weekly programmes by children for children. A magazine programme in Tanzania called "*Sauti ya Watoto*" (Life Today, Voices of Children) also provides children the opportunity to make their thoughts, ideas and opinions known.

Basically, the production process involved in the examples of children's programmes cited above, and many more in developed countries, have been based on two main participatory approaches: full participation at all stages of production - pre production, production and post production; and partial participation. The partial participation approach is grounded in the argument by Casty (www.panosinst.org/radio) that while children should be given the opportunity to experiment, they need to be protected and accompanied because they lack maturity.

One should orient them and correct them when needed, and not impose modes of behaviour, as is practised by us. (Casty, www.panosinst.org/radio).

In this regard, the writer identifies two forms of partial participation. The first is when children participate as managers in the conceptualisation of programmes, and the second, when children participate in the implementation of children's programmes. This second suggests participation at the level of production while the first suggests participation at the pre-production stage. Similarly, Georges (www.panosinst.org/radio) notes the partial participation approach with some degree of adult control based on the arguments of inherent fears of confrontation between adults and children.

Conversely, full participation engages children in all the production process which (Alten (1994) identifies as pre-production, production and post-production. The pre-production stage is where programme conceptualisation takes place. Activities at this stage include consultation and decision making on content; decisions on resource persons needed and logistical planning. Children's participation at this level is important for purposes of giving children the chance to decide on the themes and issues of interest as well as format and content of the programmes. The production stage is where material is recorded or broadcast/telecast live on air. Here, children play roles assigned to them based on their competencies. Such roles include serving as producers, interviewers/anchors, presenters, panelists and studio managers or disc jockeys. This is the agenda setting stage and it provides the opportunity for children to impart their knowledge and ideas and express their opinions on issues of concern. The post-production stage is where recorded material is brought to a final form. At this stage room is provided for the evaluation of content and performance. Other children in the audience have the opportunity through delayed feedback mechanisms, such as "Letters to the Producer", to have their views incorporated in future programmes.

Stephanie Conrad (www.panosinst.org/radio) notes instances of the full participation approach in programmes where children participate as managers, particularly, at the decision making level. Here, children are left free to reveal themselves as managers of their own programmes. The approach works where programmes are wholly-owned and controlled by children without adult supervision.

Not many advocates of children's participation in media may however endorse total adult exclusion from production of children's programme. Adult involvement has been considered important under certain circumstances such as for correctional and orientation purposes (Casty, www.panosinst.org/radio) and for the purposes of protecting children against fear of confrontation with adults (Georges (www.panosinst.org/radio)).

A Critique of Child Participation Practice

In spite of its relatively strong advantages, child participation in broadcast has also been critiqued for its cultural and professional implications. With regard to the agenda-setting functions, child rights advocates have analysed the impact of children's work on decision-making and on political activities (3rd_ws.org/bulletin4.htm) with queries such as: "Who is taking children seriously through their media programmes;" and "How can they reach influential people with their programmes?" In a culture that has perpetuated children's silence, it is feared that children might abuse the opportunity of child rights as some may talk down to adults, or be confrontational particularly when discussing issues they may consider as sensitive. Georges (www.panosinst.org/radio) analysis in this respect is instructive. He argues:

Traumatized by domesticity, such children will never talk in the media about joy, but rather about a great deal of suffering: whippings, beatings, hardships, misunderstandings, various punishments and lack of memory...

Other queries relate to the quality of programmes produced by children without adult engagement and whether such materials should be shown on primetime television and the news media, so that they can reach out to the public (ibid). In a critique of student productions, Ferguson (1981; 44-45) noted that "when plots were attempted, they were often puerile... and often incorporated obligatory punch-ups in pubs and discotheques". Despite their strong commitment to media education and by extension, child participation ideals, writers in the field of media education in the '70's and '80's such as (Buckingham, 1999 p.220) criticised productions by teenagers and students as "politically suspect and educationally worthless" reproducing dominant ideologies that are reflected in content, format, style and presentation of adult productions. Masterman (1980) came to a similar conclusion about student productions. The researcher argues that given the video cameras, students are likely to produce an "endless dreary third-rate imitation of pop shows, embarrassing video dramas and derivative documentaries" (Masterman, 1980 p.140). Such critiques nullify the import of child participation and question the authenticity of reflecting children's realities. In sum, it is noted that rather than develop their own style and format, there has been the tendency of teenagers to "imitate adult produced programmes in the presentation, style and format and even to model adults in their filming behaviour" (Ai-Leen, 1999 p.334).

Another critique which relates to children's competencies in handling broadcast equipment has however been dismissed with the argument that in today's media rich environment, some children's first experience at radio and television are no longer likely to take place in the studios. As Buckingham (1999) points out, the home is no longer a site of media consumption, but a key site for production. However, the concern about how children can combine their studies with broadcast work and also their home work and domestic chores remains a critical challenge to child participation in broadcast.

Study Methodology

The research for this paper focused on three children's programmes Curious Minds, Choice Children's Channel and Smart Kids aired on public and private radio and television. The programmes were purposively selected because they have characteristics of interest - child participation. A triangulation of focus group discussions (FGD), in-depth interviews, field observation techniques and content analysis was used to obtain data from children and adult producers involved in the various programmes. In the focus group discussions (FGD) and field observation, respondents' behaviours and experiences in production roles were explored. Also explored were challenges and problems encountered in the course of implementing children's participation. Live broadcasts were observed; programmes were monitored and recorded simultaneously for later listening. Television production processes were also observed at all three stages. Since the programmes were all recorded copies were obtained for analysis.

Curious Minds, Choice Children's Channel and Smart Kids

Curious Minds, Choice Children's Channel and Smart Kids are among the few children's programmes on radio and television that practice or have a semblance of child participation. *Curious Minds (CM)* is child-owned and run by a production team from the Children and Youth in Broadcasting (CYIB) an advocacy group that promotes children's rights through the media. Members of the group are between ages 8 and 18. The programme is produced and broadcast on public service radio in English and Ga under the supervision of a broadcaster known by the group as the coordinator. Smart Kids (SK) is an hour-long programme on Radio Ghana's sister station - Ghana Television (GTV also a public service station) - produced in-house and targeted at children between 8 and 18 years. Unlike CM, SK has no regular studio or production team. Each week sets of children are selected from various schools, for the programme.

The presenters are the only regular persons on the programme. *Choice Children's Channel* (CCC) is a two-hour sponsored magazine programme broadcast on *Choice FM* a private radio station in Accra. Unlike CM that is handled entirely by a production team of children, CCC is partially handled by a studio team. This is a rather loose group of children from various schools in the neighborhood of the radio station and a few members of the Girls Education Club.

Participatory Approaches

Of the three programmes, *Curious Minds* was noted to practice full participation at all the three stages of production. The group meets twice a week for joint pre-production and post-production meetings lasting two hours or more. Programme conceptualisation takes place at these joint meeting. The meetings provide a forum for consultation, decision making on content format, presentation and themes and as well decisions on budget, contacting resource persons, planning for logistics and assigning roles to members of selected production teams. The previous week's programmes are also evaluated. On production days, a production team takes over the studios. Each programme production team has a coordinator, a producer, an assistant producer and 12 studio contributors. One person manages the console. Four others monitor output while one person each serves as interviewer and a reader. The various roles are rotated weekly for the sake of versatility. With the exception of adult resource persons and the group's coordinator, all others in the studio are children. The children go through these processes every week combining their school and housework with this "professional" undertaking.

The approach is similar to that noted by Conrad . CM is wholly owned and controlled by Children and Youth in Broadcasting (CYIB). The CM approach however is more expansive and embracing as participation is implemented in equal measure at all the production process. Also different from Conrad's proposed approach, *Curious Minds* involves the adult Coordinator occasionally when necessary. But this adult involvement is largely, inconspicuous. Children dominate the programme as managers, agenda setters, as producers, presenters and studio managers.

Choice Children's Channel uses a combination of the partial participation approach noted by Casty with some variation. Children participate partially in both programme conceptualisation and implementation. Although they eventually get to take part at all the three stages, children do not have total control at any of the three stages. Adult influence is greater in deciding format and assignment of roles and also at the production stage where control of studio and equipment is largely adults' responsibility. Participation is shared at pre-production and post production stages during joint meetings before and after the programme. These rather short meetings are held to decide on content and theme and also to evaluate the previous programme. Routinely, the meetings are complemented with telephone and email exchanges among group members and the producer basically to decide on theme and prepare for the upcoming programme. At the production stage, CCC members concerned themselves primarily, with their various assigned roles i.e. as presenter, interviewer, quiz master, story-tellers and debate moderators. Others engaged in recording and assigning code numbers to callers and serving as studio panel members. Unlike CM, these roles are not rotational. Skills are therefore less propagated and this has some implications for child participation.

SK on the other hand is virtually adult-controlled. Apart from the production stage where children played their respective roles as presenters and performers, children are excluded from the two stages which involve consultations and decision making. Children's presence at the preproduction stage is largely for rehearsal purposes. Before then, most of the decisions regarding theme, format and presentation had already been taken. Although it has a semblance of partial participation, this approach is mainly adult driven at all the stages. At the production stage the children are involved as presenters and "featured as casts." The approach is not too different from the traditional production approaches employed before the child rights movement.

In terms of novelty however, the roles played this time by child presenters are significant. As presenters, the children had greater opportunity than those featured as casts, to express themselves in words and style. The other children on the programme did not have that freedom as they tended to reproduce memorized verses and statements taught them by adults.

Dinah Amoo, Head of GTV children's programmes did not dismiss full participation as an ideal approach. She conceded that producers could involve children at the pre-production stage by consulting with them, allowing them to write scripts and taking them on "recce". A producer can also consider suggestions from a child regarding topics for discussion. However it is too much to assign a child to take up a professional role such as producer.

What goes into production is too much for a child and a school child for that matter. Television is very involving, time consuming and needs a lot of money. Children do not have the time, and looking at our situation in Ghana even if a child can do it she can do it only once.

Amoo's position could be understood given the relatively more complex and tasking nature of television production. It was observed that nearly all the activities at the different production stages most often, were carried out at irregular and unscheduled periods. Such periods were inconvenient for children. Producers were put under constant stress because technical persons in control of studios and equipment had not planned adequately for productions. Producers had to postpone pre-production and production days on several occasions because, there was either no vehicle to convey the production crew to location, or equipment for shooting was not available. Post-production was done late at night when the few studios were free and when children might be in bed. As a result of these constraints, recorded programmes had to be repeated.

Content/Format of Programmes

From the perspective that content of children's programmes ought to be driven by their own ideas and opinions, it was obvious from the study that the content of Smart Kids was largely adult influenced. The information content reflected adult ideas. Words used were mainly adult expressions. Children did not flow with certain difficult words making delivery in some cases incoherent. Much of the information had been memorized. Consequently, presentation appeared "manipulative" and "decorative." The presenters tended to imitate adult presenters and anchors as they were coached to display a style inconsistent with their realities and nature. Other children were assigned roles that are stereotypical and inappropriate for their ages or are out of their own realities.

On the other hand, members of CM made independent decisions on content and controlled the agenda setting function of child participation. Using the CRC document and Ghana's Children's Act, the group members set agenda on several pertinent social and political issues such as affirmative action policies in schools, girl child education, and child labour and child abuse. The themes were not only topical and timely but were considered important enough to generate public debate. Members of the production team exuded some air of confidence. In the studio, they expressed their views intelligently on the subject matter.

The content of CCC was quite innovative and creative. It accommodated news, story telling and quizzes and drama. In terms of imparting information and ideas, content was enriched by personal stories and experiences of the children as well as callers on the programmes. Some legacy of adult-centeredness was however, observed in the content of CCC. The use of "Uncle Larry" replayed the old format where the host/hostess in children's programmes was an adult and was referred to as "Uncle" or "Auntie". Uncle Larry tended to handle some of the themes in a rather patronising manner.

Environmental Factors

The participatory approaches employed by the various stations, were largely determined by factors such as the physical and psychological context of the production processes. The physical context of production relates to the studio setting and access to equipment such as the console, the turntable, the cameras, and sound equipment. The psychological context on the other hand relates to the human conditions including relationship with professional broadcasters, and their preparedness to engage with children (Ai-Leen, 1999). Plan International, which has historically been involved in programmes on children's participation in the media, notes that high costs of equipment and insurance implications do not only make the physical context of production child-unfriendly, but also the situation poses particular hazards for children. Generally, the physical context of all the stations studied was child friendly although some studio equipment was not the best and generally not easily accessible to children.

With regard to Radio Ghana, the relatively better equipped studios were not up-to-date on technology. On some occasions and depending on the station manager on duty at the time, children were grudgingly allowed to handle the console. On the other hand, at Choice FM studio, children were not allowed near the console. Television studios are larger and more complex and children were allowed into some of the studios under strict adult supervision. The post-production television studios are restricted to adult employees. With regard to equipment, Dinah Amoo, Head of Children's Programmes at GTV, said she could not allow children "to handle expensive camera considering the policy on equipment". GTV's policy encourages the dismissal of persons who damaged any equipment. Producer of CCC, Larry Benson also did not foresee the possibility that children who take part in the programme would be allowed to manage the console. "Studio managers do not want their jobs to look infantile...like child's play".

With respect to insurance, none of the stations studied ever considered insurance cover for their guests, including children. Although quite critical, insurance cover for studio guests and artistes including children may not have attracted institutional policy attention. "External forces," such as respect for production protocols was an equally important factor. According to Ai-Leen (1999) these relate to production protocols such as how children perceive deadlines and their production behaviours. Children in CM were particular about studio protocols and deadlines.

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Those who arrived late for programmes were not allowed in the team whereas in the case of CCC, children joined in the programmes as and when they arrived.

The psychological context of child participation was not the best. The CM group complained of tension in the studio due to negative attitudes of adults. This confirms Ai-Leen's (1999) findings that adults show resistance and mistrust towards children who are involved in radio. The children complained that studio managers and other adults they encountered during the programme production, talked down to them. Seventeen-year-old Emmanuel Arthur shared this experience during the focus group discussions with CM:

Sometimes you'll be behind the console and one adult from the control room will come and say, "What are you doing here. Don't you know this is a national station? Come on, get out, get out, get out, away from that place." And sometimes if you are playing a tape that will be ending right away, you'll have to leave the place and go and look for your coordinator or someone else to sit behind the console.

Coordinator of Curious Minds, Kinsley Obeng-Kyere confirms the negative attitudes of adult technical staff towards children. According to the Coordinator, adult staff saw children as a problem rather than a potential. They provided different interpretations to children's various engagements with studio equipment. For instance, "an adult will run the console without any interpretations but when a child does it, then is interpreted as fidgeting with the console." Ironically, however, the CM group which shared most of these negative experiences practised the full participation approach. This may be attributable largely to the children's interest and commitment to the programme, their ownership of the programme and the protection and support received from their adult coordinator.

Challenges of Children and Producers

Children complained that most adult resource persons did not take kindly to invitations from children on their show. As one of the adult producers put it, "some adults think children do not have the clout it takes to attract adult resource persons." Fifteen-year-old Ophelia Mensah from Curious Minds recounted this experience:

When you go looking for a resource person the first question you are asked is, who is looking for this person? This small girl, what is she coming to talk about?

Other challenges children encounter are basically related to age. Some Ghanaian cultures consider as disrespectful, children speaking directly to adults and much more to invite them for programmes. In theory and practice, age is equated with experience and maturity. And since children are perceived to be inexperienced, adult studio managers think they had no business being in the studios. Paradoxically too, age was found to be a problem even among the children. Some children in the study did not want to take instructions from other children.

Conflict between children and their parents was another challenge. According to some children, their parents seemed not to understand what participation in the media is all about. Parents tended to think the whole exercise was time wasting and tried to discourage them from attending radio programme meetings by denying them food and money for transportation. However, the same parents felt proud when friends told them "I heard your child on radio or I saw your child on television". Parents of the CCC group were however more supportive. Some support the children by providing refreshment and transportation.

The three producers interviewed mentioned financial support for transportation and refreshment needs of children as a major challenge. Occasionally, the producers had to support such expenses from their own resources because as noted:

The children see you as someone who can meet their emotional and financial needs. They see the broadcast house as a social centre and get disappointed when their needs are not met.

Another major challenge pertains to a station's commitment to children's. The producers think children's programmes are taken for granted as stations fail to provide necessary facilities to undertake quality production.

Summary/Conclusion

The implementation of child participation ideals in some contemporary children's programmes in Ghana has transformed content as well as programme production practices. The transformation is significant in some cases but poor in others. From the case study of Curious Minds, Choice Children's Channel and Smart Kids, it may be argued that three variations of production approaches are practiced. These are full participation in which children take part at all the three stages of production with relatively little adult involvement; partial participation where participation is shared between adult producer and the children as a group. The experience of Curious Minds represents the full participation model while that of Choice Children's Channel represents partial (shared) participation.

The third variant is what may be called adult driven participation in which children are mainly present at the production stages as performers and casts. This example, as seen in Smart Kids appears less influenced by child participation ideals. The ownership status of the programmes, accounted for the different approaches identified in the study. In the case of CM which practiced full child participation, the programme was wholly child-owned, by the CYIB. Children exerted full control over content and felt a sense of commitment, autonomy, and independence and demonstrated a high sense of responsibility during production processes. The children's club idea, based on the CM experience was found to be very useful in facilitating and sustaining child participation. Members of the club supported each other to move on in the face of odds. Friendships formed through clubs engender commitment to the ideals of child participation.

With regard to CCC and SK children functioned independently as loose groups who only met for the programmes. Since the programmes were owned by the stations, control over content and production processes was largely in the hands of adult producers. In this case, the (shared) partial participation approach as in the case of CCC or adult driven participation approach worked for the specific situations. Implementing child participation is largely dependent on producers' disposition to the ideals. Other elements the study found to be critical to child participation in the media relate to power sharing and control, parental/adult support, conducive physical, technical and psychological context, as well as the motivations of children.

There are challenges associated with the different approaches. The full participation approach exerts greater pressure on children. Most of the challenges presented above were recounted by children from the CM group. Conversely, the partial participation approach exerts relatively less pressure on the child but more on the adult. The adult driven approach similarly, exerts the least pressure on children. All the children advocated some level of adult involvement in all the processes. This is significant.

Time was a major challenge for children who participated in all the production processes. By combining broadcast work with schoolwork, housework and homework, most children found themselves under constant pressure. Producers had challenges of obtaining sponsorship to cover production and airtime costs for their programmes as most corporate organisations perceive children's programmes as unattractive to their commercial interests. Problems pertaining to sponsorship therefore have serious implications for child participation. CCC was on air because it was sponsored. According to the producer the programme cannot continue without sponsorship.

The three producers interviewed mentioned financial support for transportation and refreshment needs of children as a major challenge. Occasionally, the producers had to support such expenses from their own resources because as noted: The children see you as someone who can meet their emotional and financial needs. They see the broadcast house as a social centre and get disappointed when their needs are not met.

Another major challenge pertains to a station's commitment to children. The producers think children's programmes are taken for granted as stations fail to provide necessary facilities to undertake quality production.

Despite being in full control of programme production, Curious Minds also suggested some amount of adult involvement perhaps as a protective measure against "unfriendly technical staff" but also for guidance and orientation. CM members unanimously called for continued adult supervision especially at the pre-production and production stages.

We can't do it on our own. We are still gathering experiences. We need support to reach policy makers who think we are too small to invite them for programmes.

Adult supervision is needed to provide guidance, to support children to reach out to adults, and to provide protection to children. Such protection has been useful in events where parents got upset with their wards for getting home late or in instances where adult studio managers and children got into conflict with each other.

Public radio remains a more open platform for children to experiment with and participate in broadcasts. It may be difficult to apply the full participation approach in a public station and also in a television station for reasons of equipment use. In the latter case however, production processes are time consuming and complex. However, producers could involve children in other situations such as in script writing and theme selection as suggested by Amoo.

Programmes owned and controlled by children have greater potential to facilitate the expansion and implementation of child participation approaches in production practices. It has been learnt that in situations where full participation is encouraged, children display a high level of creativity and innovation. Participation is as important for the flow of the programme as it is for the style and format.

Notes

- 1 Broadcasting was introduced in Ghana in 1935.
- 2 Radio Review, June 1960 Vol. 1 No. 15
- 3 The BBC influenced the content of most radio programmes in Ghana during the colonial and post colonial period because of Ghana's colonial past. When radio broadcasting was introduced by the colonial government, the bulk of programmes on then Station ZOY were relayed from the BBC.

- 4 The study on which this discussion is based was conducted in 2004. That year only a fraction
of the 16 registered private stations operating in Accra, aired children's programmes.
- 5 Ahuma Bosco Ocansey, Programme Manager of Adom FM was interviewed by the
researcher on phone on June 26, 2004.
- 6 Ga is the language of the indigenous people of Greater Accra
- 7 The producer and his assistant are members of the group who are now older than 18 but still
work with the group.
- 8 See Stephanie Conrad at (www.panosinst.org/radio)
- 9 www.panosinst.org/radio
- 10 According to Dinah Amoo, Head of Children's Programmes, GTV, the production stage
accommodates child participation because children are the key players of the stage. Adults
cannot play the role they play here. The children are made to "role-play for the benefit of other
children."
- 11 Dinah Amoo is Head of Children's Programmes, GTV. The researcher interviewed her on
June 26, 2004.
- 12 Recce is the short form of the word, reconnaissance. As part of pre-production processes,
television producers conduct a recce of an area to ascertain best location for shooting etc.
- 13 See State of the World's Children, 2003: 5
- 14 Quote by CCC Producer Larry Benson was recorded in an interview with him on June 30,
2004.
- 15 Children in CM reported these complaints during the FGD. About half of them are from
relatively poor families that cannot afford to spend money on such "luxury" activities.
- 16 *ibid* money on such "luxury" activities. .

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Achieving Effective Employee Relations: The public relations perspective

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Abstract

Organisations depend mainly on the mutual understanding and goodwill of the employees to achieve their objectives. This paper takes a look at public relations role in employee relations, the two-way communication, and the tools used for employee communications, the objectives, the benefits, and the guidelines for effective employee communications. A conclusion is drawn from the discussion.

Introduction

Public relations influence the attitudes and actions of the management that employs it. It can help management express opinions and articulate views; it can secure public attention through competence in communications. It can counter arguments of those with opposing views by furnishing information and view points, Public relations can encourage an uncommitted segment of the public to take a favourable position on specific issues. According to Keghku (2003:2),

The cardinal principles of publications is that the general good must be served, and this can best be done by making available to the public at the appropriate time the fact and interpretations of events behind the scenes in the languages they can understand.

Public relations according to the Mexican statement (1976) is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization leaders and implementing a planned programmes of action, which will serve both the organization and public interest.

Public relations aim at satisfying the interest of its public. The number one public of an organization is the employees. Employees are the lifeblood of an organization. These are all those who work for such an organization. This ranges from Junior to Senior Staff. Public relations activities are designed to achieve effective employee relations. This is necessary because it is the workers that implement all organization policies, and are the catalyst for the achievement of organizational goals and objectives. It is therefore necessary to have a deliberate plan of activities that will make them understand, accept, appreciate and participate fully in organizational programmes. Good public relations begins at home with company newsletters, social events and internal and external recognition of superior performance. To achieve a successful free enterprise sector, top management must implement a policy of good human relations with all employees. Those who trade in high streets cannot be isolated from the social distress of the high streets. Full, frank, two-way communication, open management and above all respect for the contribution people can make, given encouragement are foundations of effective policy of good human relations which cost time, effort and money (Haywood 1984).

A sure way of achieving organizational goals and objectives is to have a good communication flow within the organization. With this the organization will have stable staff, ready acceptance to change, high productivity and good profit.

The hallmark of good organizational employee relations is primarily rooted in efficient management principles and practices, which help an organization to conduct its businesses most profitably and thereafter commit the organization to provide the requisite enabling environment good working conditions; recognition and respect for human dignity, personal values, right and privileges; free and

equal opportunities for advancement and growth, recognition and reward for excellence (accomplishments); adequate latitude for self discovery (potentials) and expression towards a mere progressive and enlightened leadership; responsibility backed with the concomitant authority; proper supervisions without being unnecessarily high handed; payment of wages and benefits that are not only commensurate with productivity, but also in line with prevailing practice in other similar establishments.

An organization that disregards the welfare of employees and goes ahead to treat them as mere tools or means to an end, erodes itself of the desired goodwill, support and understanding of its workforce and also works its untimely perdition. Employee relations determine internal morale. According to Ajala (2001),

Morale is reflected in the attitudes, which employees bring to bear on their work performance and personal relationship. Organizational climate dictates the true feelings of members towards their employers. Organizational climate must evolve a spirit of cooperation; the climate must be conducive to motivate employees to work willingly and effectively. In our organization the climate must be healthy in order to get the best of our management staff as well. In search of excellence therefore our communications must establish the right climate for our ambassadors. (Ajala 2001, p.200)

Employees relations can be achieved through what we call employee communication, which aims at creating understanding and winning support among employees to enable the company to operate more efficiently. According to Haywood (1984 p75), today's employees expect "communications". But, even in most sophisticated companies in the most advanced countries, most employees are communicated "at" rather than "with". Often little more than lip (or open) service is paid to the concept of two-way communications.

The employees of an organization have an information right, need and desire and these are not the same. Information rights are laid down by law. The public relations adviser will need to have a clear view and understanding of the information that has to be provided by statutory right, union negotiation or trade precedents, which should be provided in the interest of good understanding and which is confidential and does not have to be freely available until a time the company decides that it is appropriate. Employee communications ensure that the work force is informed, involved and is sharing in the success of the company. A sense of belonging to the organization and a sense of excitement in the job bring about committed work force. Employee communications cannot be left to informal networks. It is a primary, planned and sustained part of management responsibility to employees from their recruitment through termination. According to Belch and Belch (2001:582)

Maintaining morale and show casing the results of employee efforts are often prime objectives of the public relations programme. Organization news letter, notices on bulletin boards, paycheck envelop stuffers, direct mail and annual reports are some of the methods used to communicate with these groups, personal methods of communicating may be as formal as an established grievance committee or as informal as an office Christmas party. Other social events, such as corporate bowling teams or picnics, are also used to create goodwill.

The communication programmes as a consequences should be such that it is able to provide the employees with enough information about their organizational issues and events in which they have a stake, such as employment job security, in service and after-service fringe benefits, nice working conditions, promotions, discipline, wage/salary and method of payment, facilities for improvement



and self expression, new product, sales and marketing arrangements, fund generation (sources) and many other matters affecting their general welfare. Well informed employees and this positive disposition predictably lead to greater productivity, improved accomplishment of organizational goals and enhance public relations status and credibility. This is based on the belief that well-informed employees usually interact with the publics (external) and can impact significant positive effects on the existing community, customers, investors and the general public, thereby translating into favourable organizational climate, increased productivity and better rewards.

Sound and effective communication, based on two way flow of information, therefore is a crucial factor in organizational success, for it creates conducive fora for employees to express to management their opinions about their working conditions and other issues regarding their general welfare and also provides them with additional opportunity to ask questions about their organization's philosophies policies and actions. It equally enhances better understanding, trust and harmony. According to Baskin and Aronoff (1988)

Ideal organizational climate are characterized by feelings of trust, confidence, openness, candor, supportiveness security, satisfaction, involvement, pride in the organization and high expectations to a large extent, successful employee relations in general and effective employee communication in particular depends on positive organizational climate. (Baskin and Aronoff, (1988, p. 145).

Since employee communication is the key to employee relations let us briefly consider the tools for public relations approach to employee communications. Ajala (2001:201) spelt out the tools as follows:

- (i) Employee indoctrination video (on production)
- (ii) Employee Newspaper to recognize outstanding performances.
- (iii) Bulletin board.
- (iv) Payroll stuff and (Gift vouchers)
- (v) Employee handbook to contain grievance procedure.
- (vi) Staying tuned in to the grapevine in order to release full facts when harmful rumors spread.
- (vii) Management/supervisors/employees meeting.

Haywood (1984:83) listed the following tools for employee relations.

Company newspapers or magazines, regular news sheets, notice board bulletins, telephone information service, news video or films, CCTV discussion, tape/slide presentations, company radio stations, information seminars local or trade press relations, local radio and TV news, new corporate identify, poster or wall charts, information folders, induction programmes, regional and national conferences, policy leaflets, direct-mail to home, annual reports, company history, community sponsorship, open days and facility visits.

Public relations strive to identify the communication needs of employees of an organization, assesses the communication problems and establishes the solution. These actions bring about the achievement of employee relations which in turn create conducive atmosphere for the achievement of the organizations goals. The company or organization has the following to benefit from employee communication (1) low level of absenteeism (2) high productivity (3) low labour turnover (4) low industria conflict (5) profitability and growth.



Now that the benefit of employee relations and what it entails is fully discussed, it is necessary to think of a way forward, a direction or a guide for the achievement of employee relations, below is a guideline for effective employee communication.

- (i) Establishment of a goal oriented communication policy that helps employees to fully know and understand the details of the terms and conditions of service - facilities and benefits that exist in their organization once the primary needs of employees are taken care of they predictably become most receptive to information.
- (ii) Adequate knowledge of their organizations background polices, programmes, activities, procedures, structures, accomplishment and problems and other relevant information that can meaningful assist them in understanding better the organization for, which they form part.
- (iii) Establishment of a labour management team with sound work relations, with a view of building progressive and enlightened leadership through regular consultations on pertinent staff matters that give the workers a voice of decision. Without this feeling of sense of belonging, employees are bound to distance themselves from such an organization and its management.
- (iv) Establishment, planning and execution of an employee communication or information programme that will take care of the communication needs of the labour force.
- (v) The willingness on the part of the management to develop an open mind and share vital information with the employees, bearing in mind that an informed employee is ultimately a happy and proud employee, always willing to represent and defend the organization.
- (vi) Information dissemination must be based on the principle of completeness, timeliness, accuracy and need and must be factual to avoid misconception, misunderstanding and suspicion. Communication should also be dishd out in small does and repeated often for clearer and better understanding. Management must therefore be sincerely willing to share relevant information with employees, and further ensure that information (messages) dissemination flows through clearly defined structures - vertical, horizontal, upward at downward etc.
- (vii) There should be appropriate functional media for specific and general communication goals of the organization. The media should be available and accessible to the employees, and the existing communication policy should encourage workers to use such media as and when necessary.
- (viii) Written communications (message) are most desirable and advisable in official relationship in order to avoid ambiguity, distortions and controversy after associated with oral communications.
- (ix) Messages must be well prepared by experienced communicators. This suggests that the communication of important formal information should not be entrusted with persons of limited communication experience. The public relations executive and his staff should oversee this serious assignment message content must also accommodate both the organizational need and human interest stories revolving around employee job security and other welfare programmes in the organization.
- (x) Method of presentation should involve more persuasive appeals, rather than coercion or pernicious propaganda inputs. It instead should be a two-way information flow between management and employees.

Conclusion

Since employees are organization's ambassadors to the general public, and on whose truck/van an organization's gospel is preached to the outside world, there is a need to provide them with timely and accurate information which is the basis for good community and general public relations practice.

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