

A Platform or Partner: Engaging the Media in Advocacy

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Abstract

What are the roles of media actors in relation to civil society actors in advocacy campaigns, and what factors shape these roles? Interested in media strategies of civil society actors, the paper examines the advocacy for a 'right to information' law in Ghana. While journalists are obvious partners in pushing for the right to information, the civil society-led advocacy encountered a passive media. Focused on mechanisms of engaging media actors as advocates in civil society-led advocacy, this study relies on interviews with key actors in the advocacy campaign and textual analysis of news coverage, spanning 2010–2019. The paper posits that mainly two factors contributed to the media taking a more active role in the campaign; the Civil Society Organisations changed their approach and how they communicated and related to media actors, and media actors developed more awareness and understanding of the advocacy issue. Two important main mechanisms are uncovered in this study. First, it matters how civil society actors perceive of media actors in their media strategy, and how this in turn is received by media actors. Second, when CSOs seek to engage media as partners, it is necessary to also give room for their ownership and advocacy as independent partners.

Policy implications

- Advocacy strategies to 'use the media' should be better developed to include journalists' own agency. CSO strategies should see activist journalists and other influential figures in news content creation as potential partners and seek to harness the agency of journalists in their media strategies rather than merely using the media as a megaphone for their message.
- Media strategies should seek to empower journalists and media practitioners. Training and communication to media actors should not solely focus on the campaign issue, but also on probing awareness of journalists and media practitioners' power in shaping media attention.
- CSO advocates seeking to engage media actors in advocacy should apply a holistic approach in their strategies. They should combine media outreach with outreach to communities concerned by the campaign issue, and they should appeal to media actors' legal and civic responsibility to their respective communities.
- Because CSOs and media actors can experience different kinds of political space for engaging in advocacy, and can affect each other's space for manoeuvre, advocates should consider the media-civil society relationship when making strategies for achieving political change.

1. What role for the media in advocacy?

Advocacy campaigns often employ media strategies; they strategically use mass media to advance a policy initiative in order to leverage the power of the media. In conventional media strategies, civil society advocates seek to use media platforms to spread their campaign message and increase public and political awareness of their demand. Key in these strategies is to influence media *coverage*. By contrast, this paper is concerned with a different media strategy, namely approaching media actors, journalists and other practitioners, as potential partners in advocacy work. The key here is to influence media *actors* and engage them as advocates. How do civil society actors engage journalists and other media practitioners as agents in advocacy campaigns? The paper explores this in the case of a civil society campaign for the 'right to information' in Ghana.

Advocacy for the Right to Information Law (2019) in Ghana is puzzling with regards to the role of media actors. Journalists and media practitioners are regarded as natural advocates for so-called right to information (RTI) laws, as these laws provide all interested parties the right to seek, receive and access government-held documents (Darch and Underwood, 2010). In the 'business of information', journalists and the news media are obvious partners in advocacy campaigns on RTI. Indeed, news media support has been decisive in adopting strong laws that protect the right to information in most advanced democracies (Michener, 2010). Likewise, demands for a RTI law usually rally supporters from the media sector in the Global South (Adu, 2018; Asogwa and Ezema, 2017; Darch and Underwood, 2010). In a study of RTI advocacy in Latin America, Michener (2010) found that voluminous news reporting by leading newspapers greatly improves the likelihood that politicians will commit to enact sweeping, protective RTI laws.

In the case of RTI advocacy in Ghana, however, the media was for a long time a partner missing in action. The civil society campaign on RTI continuously called for the media to take a more active role in the campaign. Finally, a few years before the RTI law was adopted, journalists rallied and the Media Coalition on RTI was set up. This was considered a game-changer and turning point in the advocacy for RTI (CHRI, 2019). The media had moved from being a passive onlooker to taking an active role as partners in the campaign.

This paper investigates the following question: what are the roles of media actors in relation to civil society actors in advocacy campaigns, and what factors shape the roles of media actors in these campaigns? Theorising on different types of media-civil society relationships in advocacy strategies, the paper posits that journalists and media practitioners can play two roles in relation to civil society in advocacy campaigns: as platforms or as partners. Conducting a case study of the RTI advocacy in Ghana, this paper examines the mechanism of engaging media actors in advocacy. Or, in the case of the puzzlingly passive media in the Ghanaian RTI advocacy: what does it take to turn passive media actors into active advocacy agents? There are two sides to this study: the first looks at what role the civil society actors want media actors to take, and how they thereby approach them in their strategies, and the second looks at what role media actors take.

Based on interviews with key members of the civil society coalition and media actors in the media coalition, the study finds that it was essential that the civil society coalition changed their approach to journalists and media practitioners in order for them to engage in the RTI advocacy. For the journalists, the sense of ownership and agency in the advocacy was highlighted as crucial for them to take an active role as a partner and advocate in the campaign. The findings are supplemented with a text analysis of 348 news stories on RTI spanning nearly 10 years, from 2010 to 2019. The analysis of media coverage shows how the journalistic engagement with the RTI issue in the news media increased and improved as the civil society coalition changed its approach to media actors and the media-led coalition on RTI was set up.

This paper contributes with a more agent-centric approach to news media actors in civil society strategies. Importantly, the paper makes a distinction between media actors that are considered part of civil society, and media actors that are part of the mass media and news production. Media actors that take part in civil society are the professional associations and interest groups: broadly speaking, non-governmental organisations supportive of media rights and independence (VonDoepp and Young, 2016). In contrast, standing apart from civil society is the mass news media, which is typically understood to be any of the various means that can reach people *en masse*, either through print, broadcasting or online channels, consisting of media practitioners ranging from owners of media houses and newspaper editors to journalists, presenters and reporters (Eizlini, 2004).

Furthermore, this study of a partial democracy in Africa highlights how the overall political context will affect the

relation between civil society and media actors. The civil society and media sectors in post-colonial societies are especially closely interlinked as young societal institutions emerging under similar circumstances and with much the same mandate: to develop, uphold and advance democracy by promoting a political culture of civiness, accountability and transparency (Anheier and Toepler, 2010).

The paper first presents theoretical considerations on the distinction between conventional media strategies to use the media as a platform and this paper's proposition to engage the media as a partner in advocacy. Next, the study's methodological approach is detailed, before the case of advocating for RTI in Ghana is presented. Findings from the interviews are analysed and complimented with results from text analysis of the news media coverage. The conclusion summarises findings and contributions and suggests some policy implications and avenues for further research.

2. Media strategies and media as partner

Media strategy has become an important element of political strategy across the board the last half-decade (Thrall, 2006). Consequently, there is ample research on how civil society and the media respectively can influence politicians, politics and policy-making. While the media is recognised as a powerful advocacy tool for pressure groups and advocates in the literature on social and political mobilisation (see for instance Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Norris, 2002; Tarrow, 2011), writings in political communication generally inform about the effects of media coverage on both political decision-makers, public opinion and political participation (Fawzi, 2018; Thrall, 2006; Wallack, 1994). There is consensus about the importance of news coverage to advocacy campaigns. However, the focus is often on the effect of media attention or the consequences of 'good or bad' news coverage for advocacy and protest (Tarrow, 2011).

By contrast, this paper seeks to shed light on the relationship and dynamic between civil society organisations (CSOs) and media practitioners when the former is pursuing media strategies. The point of interest is how civil society organisations can engage media actors in advocacy. Key here is the mechanism of *engaging* media actors as active partners in advocacy work, and not merely getting access to and influence media coverage.

This section presents a main distinction in how civil society actors conceive of media in their strategies: from conventional media strategies and using media as platform, to carrying out media advocacy and engaging the media as a partner. In the literature on strategic action, a core assumption is that civil society actors are the impetus of advocacy work (Clark, 2010). While this is also the departure of this paper, wherein CSOs are seen as the strategising actors, the paper proposes to expand the theoretical perception of media actors and what role they can take in advocacy to a more agent-centric approach.

In conventional media strategies, news media largely feature as a platform from which CSOs can communicate their campaign message. Media strategies are defined as 'the

strategic use of mass media to advance a social or public policy initiative' by using 'a range of media and advocacy strategies to define the problem and stimulate broad-based coverage' (Wallack, 1994, p. 242). Common media strategies include news releases, opinion pieces in newspapers, meetings with newspaper editorial boards, interviews, media events, (social) media campaigns, public speaking (Botchway, 2018; Leurer, 2013), but also attempts at attracting media attention by provocation and protest (Tarrow, 2011; Thrall, 2006). Ultimately, in conventional media strategies, the goal for advocates and CSOs is to get media attention and influence media coverage in order to increase public attention, which in turn is expected to lead to greater political attention (Fawzi, 2018).

In examining how CSOs can engage media actors in advocacy, especially in contexts where media actors also become advocates for advancing rights and freedoms, this paper proposes another approach to media actors: namely, the mechanism of engaging them as partners in advocacy. While we know something about how to get favourable coverage or how to counter negative media coverage, and not least the significance of either positive or negative media coverage of advocacy campaigns and protest movements (Kilgo and Harlow, 2019), we know less about the mechanism of actually getting access to the media actors, and how media actors take an active part in promoting a campaign issue. Beyond influencing the media *coverage*, this paper engages with the notion of 'media advocacy' by approaching and influencing media *actors* (Wallack, 1994).

This is a fundamentally different strategic approach to conventional strategies of 'using of media'. Beyond merely capturing media attention, Wallack's (1994) understanding of media advocacy allows for a more dynamic actor-centric understanding of what mechanisms are at play. Media advocacy invokes more emphasis on the agency of media actors, and stresses the significance of the agency of individuals. Importantly, it treats the individual or group as potential advocates, who can use their energy, skills, and other resources to further influence what issue is addressed and how within the overall cause (Wallack, 1994). This means that media actors are potential partners and agents in the advocacy and as such can take ownership of the issue themselves, rather than being merely a platform or a megaphone for advocates to use.

This mechanism leverages on new forms of activism in journalism appearing in all forms of semi-open political regimes. While not a new concept, the idea of journalists as 'champions for change' is increasingly (re-)gaining traction (El-Issawi, 2016). Especially in political contexts and situations where press freedoms are under pressure, new forms of 'journalism activism' can appear, where journalists become advocates for a political issue (Voltmer et al., 2021), whether during political openings and transitions (Chuma, 2020; El-Issawi, 2016; Sözeri, 2016), or in the case of more closed political contexts, seeking to influence politics from abroad (O'Loughlin and Schafrad, 2016). While there is a tension between traditional journalism and these new forms of more activist journalism (El-Issawi, 2016), this paper

proposes that CSOs do seek to harness this agency of journalists in their media strategies rather than merely using the media as a megaphone for their message, especially in contexts where the space for democratic rights and freedoms are not guaranteed, like partial democracies.

This paper proposes that in order to fully understand how a civil society strategy to engage the media works, we need to introduce agency on both sides of the equation, both with the strategising actor and the target of the strategy. The overall argument is that how the civil society actors conceive of the media in their strategy matters for which role media actors will take in the advocacy campaign. This paper posits that the role of the media in advocacy have two main modalities in relation to civil society organisations: the media as a platform and the media as a partner. Which of these roles the media will take depends on two things; first, how civil society advocates approach the media, and second the extent to which media actors feel ownership and agency in the advocacy campaign.

3. The study

This paper presents a case study of the Ghanaian civil society advocacy campaign for a right to information (RTI) law, in order to explore the mechanisms of engaging the media and examine what factors shape the roles that media actors have in advocacy.

The study is based on 32 interviews with civil society and media actors in Accra, conducted at two points during the RTI advocacy campaign, in 2012 and 2019. The primary interview material was collected by the author during a research stay with the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development, CDD-Ghana, in the fall of 2019. As CDD-Ghana was one of the leading civil society actors in the RTI Coalition, this affiliation facilitated contact with nearly all the civil society and media actors in the RTI advocacy work. The interviewees are mainly members of the RTI Coalition, civil society and media members alike, including the leading figures in the Media Coalition on the RTI (see Appendix A for list of interviews). In-depth interviews with key members of the RTI Coalition who were involved over a longer period of time provided insights into the Coalition's strategy processes. Additionally, being in Accra at a time when the RTI Coalition was reflecting on its campaign provided the possibility to observe seminars and training sessions on 'lessons learned' and strategic advocacy work, and to be present when the coalition launched its report on the process of advocating for the RTI bill (see CHRI, 2019).

There are a high number of intersecting roles in the civil society sector among the interviewees, and much of the media perspective in the primary interview material comes from individuals with a variety of experiences within the media sector. A key asset for this study is the secondary source of interview material, conducted during the summer of 2012 by another researcher on developments in the Ghanaian media scene. In addition to contributing a temporal dimension to the interview material, these interviews with mainly media actors in Accra offer contemporary

reflections on the ongoing process of advocating the RTI bill. This valuable insight into another researchers' interview notes provides a long-term perspective on the advocacy work and the role of the media, and some reliability as two leading individual members of the Coalition interviewed in 2012 were re-interviewed in 2019.

The interview material is complemented by a computer-assisted text analysis of the RTI Coalition's press statements and online news coverage on the RTI law in Ghana, spanning from 2010 to 2019. Press statements were obtained from CHRI's head office in Accra, but also by systematic searches on the main member organisations' websites and the Coalition's social media pages. Ranging from February 2010 to April 2019, only 18 press statements are included in the analysis as one statement was issued two days in a row and one is missing an exact date. There are likely some gaps in the coverage (see full list in Appendix B). News coverage on RTI was collected by scraping news stories from the accumulation news site GhanaWeb.com.¹ The search criteria was the string 'RTI + bill' per June 2020. Focusing on news stories published after the first collected press statement, 348 news stories from 15 February 2010 to 31 December 2019 were included in the analysis. Figure 1 visualises the textual data collected for this study, plotted as the spread of news stories in time after the publication of a press statement.

The objective of the text analysis is to examine how textually similar news stories on RTI issues are to the preceding press statement issued by the RTI Coalition. In other words, it measures to what extent journalists rely on and re-use (i.e., copy) text from press statements in writing their news stories. The analysis uses the R package *RNewsflow* (Welbers and van Atteveldt, 2018) to calculate cosine similarities between the news stories and the Coalition's press statements. This approach leverages on well-established methods for analysing textual re-use in news content (Welbers et al., 2018). By analysing online news coverage in relation to the Coalitions' press outreach by press statements, the analysis

examines media engagement with the RTI issue over time, where a higher textual similarity is seen as a higher dependence on the Coalition's communication and less journalistic engagement with the issue, and vice versa.

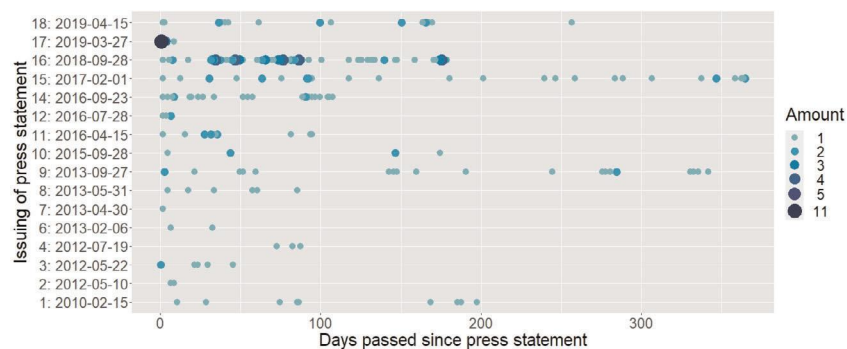
This media analysis corroborates the media perspective on the role media actors took in the RTI advocacy. The advantages of complementing the in-depth interview material with a more quantitative media analysis are manifold. Most centrally, it offers a high degree of reliability as this part of the analysis fully reproducible.² The textual data collected has limitations. Ideally, the analysis should include news coverage from several news outlets, both printed and online. However, as GhanaWeb.com is an aggregation site for news this concern is somewhat accommodated. Even though Ghana has a diverse media landscape online, most of the relevant websites for online news were either not well-suited for scraping large bodies of texts or did not provide a satisfactory online archive for the period of analysis. Despite its shortcomings and supplementary character, however, this analysis contributes to the study of African online news content (Madrid-Morales, 2020).

4. Advocating for the 'right to information' in Ghana

Advocacy for a right to information (RTI) law in Ghana started in the late 1990s (Gyimah-Boadi, 2000). A broad civil society-led coalition was formally established in 2003. When the long-awaited law was passed by the Ghanaian Parliament in March 2019, this was the result of over 20 years of advocacy work. Especially the last 2 years of the advocacy campaign – the 'final push' as described by interviews in this study – saw a broad mobilisation on the issue of RTI. A renewed engagement of journalists and media practitioners was key for the vibrant mobilisation during the last period of the advocacy campaign.

From the RTI campaign's inception, the passive role of media actors is particularly puzzling as the RTI Coalition

Figure 1. Spread of news stories in time following a press statement, measured by days. The plot visualises the publication of RTI related news stories on GhanaWeb.com the 365 days following a press statement by the RTI Coalition. 'Amount' indicates the number of news stories on a given date. Press statements are dated and numbered chronologically. Not all collected news stories appear in the plot as some press statements are far apart, like 15 and 16, and some news stories therefore were published more than a year after the corresponding press statement. Furthermore, press statements 5 and 13 do not have corresponding news stories. (See full description of groups by press statements in Appendix C).



included media interest organisations and professional associations in its Steering Committee. This consisted mostly of media actors that were part of civil society, such as the media associations Ghana Journalist Association, Media Foundation for West Africa and Ghana Independent Broadcasters Association. However, the coalition also included the official news agency, Ghana News Agency (for an overview of key members, see CHRI, 2019). Actors in the media-civil society repeatedly pointed out the need for journalists and media practitioners to 'become more proactive, escaping the backseat role, to laud the RTI as a duty and not only a right' (President of the Ghana Journalist Association, 2007, cited in CHRI, 2019, p. 29). For a long time, however the media merely reported on activities of civil society and Parliament around the draft bill or participated in workshops to build capacity on how to effectively report on RTI.

To situate this case study of RTI advocacy in Ghana, it is necessary to understand the overall political context in which the advocacy unfolded. This initial lack of media engagement is puzzling with regards to both RTI advocacy elsewhere and the relatively open, lively and free plethora of media outlets (Gyimah-Boadi, 2018). Ghana is often described as a 'beacon of democracy' in Africa (Whitfield, 2009). Since the transition to multiparty politics in the 1990s, there has been a vast expansion in the space for citizen participation in political life and public affairs (Gyimah-Boadi, 2018). While Ghana's democracy has been institutionalised through several 'steps in the right direction' (Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah, 2013), this paper views Ghana as a partial democracy.

The political context of partial democracies arguably poses a particularly paradoxical challenge for media and civil society actors advocating to promote and advance democratic rights, because these are 'regimes where civil and political rights are recognised in the constitution, but where the liberties are not fully guaranteed or respected in practice' (van der Borgh and Terwindt, 2014, p. 14). In these regimes, there is in theory some space to influence politics and – as the notion of 'partial' implies – still some missing attributes (Collier and Levitsky, 1996) and thus room for improvement with regards to citizen's rights and freedoms. At the same time, there are no guarantees that there is political will and favourable conditions to advance the democratic system further.

In Ghana, civil society and the media have been key actors in advancing democratic rights and governance processes (Arthur, 2010; Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah, 2013). Importantly, media advocates were central to denouncing and repealing criminal libel and seditious laws, thus opening up the media space in the early 2000s (VonDoepp and Young, 2016). Still, the media face significant challenges to being fully free and independent, such as being party-dominated and highly partisan (Conroy-Krutz, 2020), a lingering culture of suspicion of, and even hostility to, media among many Ghanaian officials and politicians (Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah, 2013), and low levels of professionalism and integrity (Arthur, 2010; Whitfield, 2009). As a criticism on the overall passiveness of the media, Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah (2013) critique Ghanaian journalism for being chronically reactive

and event-driven; according to them, limited attention is paid to particular subjects and media coverage tend to move from issue to issue.

The RTI advocacy in Ghana is such a typical case of civil society advocacy to enhance democratic systems in partial democracies. Despite a fairly open space for civil society and media, largely guaranteed by formal rules, it is nonetheless proving difficult to advance democratic rights in Ghana. Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah (2013, p. 277) notes how efforts at further democratic deepening in general face a reluctant and bipartisan political elite in Ghana – something which the drawn-out process of adopting the RTI law demonstrates. As such, RTI advocacy in Ghana is also a typical African example of advocacy for RTI laws that encounter unwilling or hesitant politicians (Adu, 2018; Darch and Underwood, 2010).

This case study of the RTI Coalition's media strategies and the media's different roles in the RTI advocacy in Ghana provides a fruitful case to explore how civil society actors engage the media in advocacy and can shed light on the paradoxical challenge CSOs and media activists face when seeking to promote democratic rights in partial democracies.

5. The strategy and mechanism of engaging media actors in advocacy

The analysis presented below is focused on the strategy of the CSO actors, and how the RTI Coalition's efforts to engage media actors in the advocacy campaign worked. The entry point of this inquiry is how the RTI Coalition perceived of and approached media actors in their media strategy, and how this in turn was received by the media actors and in what ways this affected their engagement with the advocacy campaign.

Interviews with leading members of the RTI Coalition describe a clear moment of re-strategising after what was referred to as 'the debacle of 2016' (CHRI, 2019) followed by a turning point in the campaign when the media took a more active role in the advocacy. Especially the establishment of the Media Coalition on RTI in 2018 was significant for the changed role of media actors. Contrary to the civil society coalition, the Media Coalition was formed as a loose network of around 500 journalists who joined on an individual basis. It started as a WhatsApp thread with 30 media practitioners, but quickly grew to comprise 230 members in addition to nine regional threads with hundreds of other journalists by the end of 2018 (CHRI, 2019). Overcoming the initial passive role of the media during most of the RTI advocacy, the RTI Coalition reported in 2018 that '[a]fter many years of trying to get the media to play a front-line role in the advocacy, the media finally identified with the campaign' (CHRI, 2019, p. 29).

The analysis is structured to reflect the two roles that media played in the advocacy campaign, first as a platform and then as a partner, and how this relates to the media strategies of the RTI Coalition and approach to media actors. What changed for media actors to take an active part in the

RTI advocacy in Ghana? And what light does this shed on the mechanism of engaging media actors in advocacy?

Using the media as a platform

From the very beginning of the RTI advocacy campaign, the RTI Coalition pursued more conventional media strategies of using the media to communicate and spread the demand for a RTI law. This was part of a broader strategy of awareness-raising, with the conventional logic that increased media attention would increase public attention and therefore political attention. The Coalition therefore sought to use the media as a means both to inform and raise public attention and create the sensation of a 'pressing issue' for politicians to respond to (Interviews K.A.; R.A.; E.A.; U.U. 2019). The Coalition disseminated press releases and statements, invitations to press conferences and RTI related events, and organised trainings and seminars for journalists and other media practitioners.

The organisational inclusion of media organisations and news agencies in the RTI Coalition from its beginning in 2003 was also highlighted by several of the founding members of the Coalition as part of an overall strategy in order to gather a broad coalition of civil society actors and stakeholders in demanding a RTI law (Interviews E.A.; G.H. 2019). Some of the interviewees also pointed out how the membership of the associations Ghana Journalist Association and Ghana Independent Broadcasters Association, as well as Ghana News Agency, would facilitate access to and collaboration with media actors. Through its network of members, the Coalition targeted specific journalists who would keep the issue on the agenda (Interview 1 2012), and broadly mobilised individual members and other experts to partake in and contribute to public debate on RTI (Interview K.A. 2019).

Despite these efforts, however, the advocacy campaign encountered a passive media. Interviews with both the RTI Coalition and media practitioners describe the challenge of lacking reporting on and low journalistic engagement with the issue of RTI in the news media. Two interrelated factors were highlighted to explain this, both in 2012 and 2019, namely a flawed understanding of the RTI issue, and the way media actors saw their own role in demanding and advocating for a RTI law.

The fundamental factor was little awareness and understanding of what a RTI law could mean for both the media and for ordinary citizens. Journalists did not understand how RTI could help with deeper journalistic analysis and investigation (Interview 3 2012). In essence, there was a perception among media practitioners that their business could easily go on without a RTI law (Interview 6 2012). Even more fundamentally, the general perception was that it was not a law of interest to the ordinary Ghanaian citizen, and therefore not something that journalists needed to report on. According to one of the initiators of the Media Coalition on RTI, the journalists struggled to understand what the RTI bill was really about and why it was important. This further affected the media coverage of the advocacy campaign and the RTI bill:

Every time the Coalition used the media, the media just sent the raw information out to the people. The media does not sometimes understand the information, so they just sent out what the [RTI Coalition] are saying to the citizens, and the citizens still cannot relate. So, it feels like no one actually cares about what is happening. It is just another law. (Interview G.B. 2019)

Indeed, the visualisation of the spread of news stories in relation to press statements in Figure 1 shows a pattern of how news stories largely follow a press statement in time. This indicates that coverage was mainly driven by the RTI Coalition's outreach to the media and that there was little journalistic engagement in driving the RTI issue in the news media, at least in the early years of the advocacy campaign.

The second explanation for the media's passiveness is the way media actors saw their own role in demanding and advocating for a RTI law. This is highly intertwined with the misunderstanding of the RTI issue, as it concerns the perception of media's self-interest. Many of the interviewees in both the civil society coalition and the media explained how the RTI was not seen as a 'media issue', and thus, because media practitioners and journalists themselves did not see the RTI as relevant for them, they were consequently less vocal and involved in advocating for the law. This was despite the fact that the first demands for a RTI law in the 1990s also came from Ghanaian journalists (Boadu-Ayebofoh, 1995, cited in CHRI, 2019).

Speaking directly to the relationship between the civil society coalition and media practitioners in advocacy, the media's low interest in RTI was arguably also about 'who owned' the campaign issue. An editor of a newspaper with a history from GJA noted how he and his colleagues were interested, but that the 'civil society was in the lead' and therefore media houses did not publish news stories on the RTI (Interview 4 2012). Another perspective was also that the media already were 'insiders' with regards to information about government business as the press had gotten access to the government on a wider basis after the opening up of the media landscape by the 2001 repeal of the criminal libel laws (Interview 5 2012). In other words, while the Ghanaian media actors are no strangers in taking action to demand rights and acting as advocates, the media did not see the need to engage in the advocacy for RTI.

In sum, interviews with both media interest organisations and media practitioners held the view that there was little awareness of the RTI bill – and therefore little interest and advocacy in the media coverage (Interview 1 2012). The RTI Coalition on its side observed that they needed to do more to counter what they saw as a media 'laxity' on the RTI issue (Interviews 3; 7 2012, K.A. 2019). What needed to change for the media to take an active part in the RTI advocacy in Ghana?

Engaging the media as a partner

In early 2017, key members of the RTI Coalition describe a moment of re-strategising. After the great debacle of 2016,

or the 'last drop' as expressed by one interviewee (Interview B.N. 2019), a fatigue and resignation crept over the Coalition (Interview G.H. 2019). There was a strong feeling that the campaign needed new energy, new voices, and new faces (Interviews K.A.; E.A. 2019). The key objective of their shift in strategies was the need for partners and push in the advocacy campaign, and the media was the obvious missing partner in the campaign so far.

The RTI Coalition changed its media strategy and reinvigorated its efforts to engage the media in the RTI advocacy campaign. While some of the key members of the RTI Coalition felt they radically changed tactics, others emphasised that the overall strategy remained the same. The Coalition continued to invite media practitioners to workshops and training on the issue of RTI, it continued to release press statements, and it continued efforts to use media attention as a pressure tool against politicians. However, the Coalition did change the manner in which they approached, related and communicated to media actors. The Coalition wanted the media to take a more active part in the advocacy for the RTI law.

The overall idea was to give the RTI campaign new faces and new voices, and to more effectively spread and popularise the campaign message to a broader public, as well as to media actors and politicians (Interview G.H.; A.G. 2019). The Coalition therefore renewed the tactic to engage individual media practitioners and approached prominent individuals on the media scene in Ghana, especially popular radio and TV hosts, for them to act as champions for the RTI bill. One such prominent figure was a renowned TV morning host at one of Ghana's largest media houses, Joy FM. This interviewee pointed out how his attitude towards the advocacy on RTI changed drastically when he was approached personally by the RTI Coalition, with the request to be 'the new face' of the advocacy campaign (Interview S.L. 2019).

More generally, the RTI Coalition was now in search for partners (Interview R.A. 2019). This was reflected in how they approached and communicated with media practitioners. The watershed moment for this new approach to media practitioners was when the Media Coalition on the RTI was established at a Press Soiree in September 2018. The meeting was organised by the RTI Coalition to mark the International Day for Universal Access to Information (IDUAI), and the agenda was to discuss how media practitioners could use their platforms to support the RTI advocacy in Ghana (CHRI, 2019). Leading figures in both the RTI Coalition and the Media Coalition on RTI describe how the former threw a challenge to the latter to 'take up the mantle' and 'join the fight'.

The establishment of the Media Coalition on RTI highlights some key factors for why the media actors engaged in the advocacy for RTI, and how this was in response to the changed approach by the RTI Coalition. First, there was a realisation of the powerful role media practitioners could play in advocacy and how they could contribute to pushing for the RTI bill. One of the initiators of the Media Coalition on RTI said: 'You realise that there is so much we can do as media, you know, not just put information out there, but being part of the change' (Interview G.B. 2019). The

discussions at the IDUAI-meeting in 2018 was highlighted as a key moment for setting up a media-run coalition on RTI:

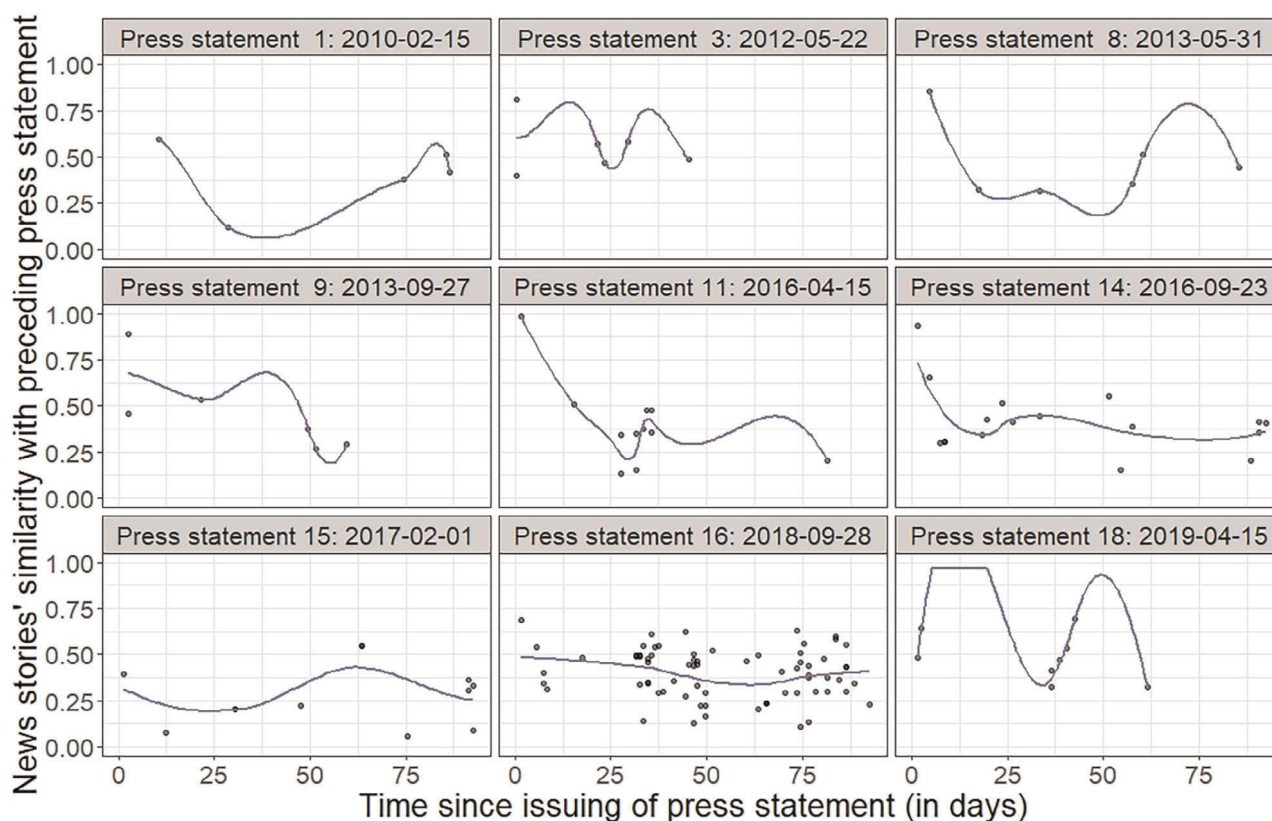
I have reported several times on RTI related stuff, but I have never really took the time to, you know, sit down to think that 'Okay, what can I also do to you know help'. (...) I will put a lot of emphasis on how the message on that day was given to the media. A challenge was thrown to the media, that 'Look, if you guys are actively involved in this campaign, it could change things. And this A and B and C, D, can be achieved.' (...) I think it was an awakening call for the media, at that particular moment, so when the people were awakened, then we took up the challenge that 'Okay, let's rally our colleagues (...) to let them understand that this is what we could achieve with the various platforms that we have, the power that we have as the media. So actually, that was a turning point. (Interview G.B. 2019)

Second, several media actors became more interested in the issue and realised the importance of RTI, both for themselves as media practitioners but also for the general public. It was essential that the journalists in the Media Coalition on RTI developed their own understanding the relevance of the RTI law, both for themselves as media practitioners and for all Ghanaian citizens. As highlighted in the interview quote in the first part of the analysis (see page 12), the campaign message would not communicate well to citizens if the journalist him or herself did not fully understand the issue at hand. By understanding it, the journalists could translate the RTI issue into the 'bread and butter' issues relevant for all citizens, thereby countering the elitist image and narrow relevance of the law (Interview S.L. 2019). One expressed tactic the journalists in the Media Coalition pursued was to always make a link to RTI, no matter what story they were reporting on, explaining how increased access to information could prevent or ease a problem (Interview S.O. 2019).

When the media got involved in the RTI advocacy work, they decided to change the narrative in the news coverage. 'I think the involvement of the media also helped in shaping the information now', concluded the interviewee above his observation (Interview G.B. 2019). This consequently affected the news coverage of the RTI issue, as the journalists did not merely send out the 'raw information', as alluded to above, but sought to shape the content and communicate their own message. This is reflected in the results of the text analysis of news stories in relation to press statements in Figure 2.

Overall, the figure displays the sheer increase in news coverage after the 2018 meeting. Concerning media's substantial engagement on the RTI issue in the news coverage, there is a change in textual reliance on the RTI Coalition's press statements after 2016. Especially for the first plots, for press statements issued in 2010, 2012, 2013 and 2016, the news stories following closely after a press statement have a very high similarity measure. This can be a measurable observation of what the Media Coalition interviewees described as journalists sending the 'raw information' out to citizens, by using text and formulations from the press

Figure 2. Textual similarity of news stories measured to preceding press statement by the RTI Coalition. The measure calculated is cosine similarity, produced by the RNewsflow package (Welbers and van Atteveldt, 2018), and ranges from 0 to 1 where a higher number signifies a higher similarity. The line is a smooth line fitted by the loess method.



Source: News stories from GhanaWeb.com and collected press statements from the RTI Coalition.

statements. While news stories later in time re-use and copy less text from the press statements, there is often between 0.25 and 0.50 measured similarity with the preceding press statement. After 2016, however, there are fewer examples of news stories with a very high (i.e. over 0.50) similarity with the press statements, which could support the narrative of journalists engaging more substantially with the RTI issue in their reporting. Figure 2 therefore indicates that the increased news coverage was also more diversified and media-produced content than previously.

5.3. Ownership, agency and 'letting go'

So far, the analysis shows how increased awareness and understanding of the RTI issue and of the role the media could play in the advocacy were important factors influencing the media actors to take a more active role in the advocacy campaign. This was in large part due to how the RTI Coalition approached the media practitioners it met and engaged with, challenging them to become partners in the advocacy work and using the power they have as journalists. Key for these factors is the underlying factor that media practitioners' ownership to the demand of a RTI law increases, both with regards to the RTI issue and to the advocacy work.

Beyond the issue of RTI, it is also significant that media actors took more ownership in their own agency and started to act as independent agents in the RTI advocacy work. And it was indeed the independence of the Media Coalition that was emphasised by its coordinators. While retaining a close partnership and coordination with the RTI Coalition, it was important for the Media Coalition to 'keep the fact that this was a media-run, media-led, media-focused' initiative (Interview S.O. 2019). It was therefore agreed from the very beginning that the Media Coalition was going to work as a distinct entity from the RTI coalition (Interview R.A. 2019). Not only was this independence an advantage as the media scene requires faster decisions and an easy and non-hierarchical information flow from coordinators to the journalist members (Interview G.B. 2019), this need for independence was also partly fuelled by previous experiences of how the RTI Coalition used to approach media actors in their conventional media strategies. The journalists present at the 20 18-meeting pointed to this experience, as recounted by the coordinator of the Media Coalition:

So, we thought: 'Okay, how could we be more in the front row?' And [the journalists present] suggested that, look, maybe what has happened in the past is

that the Coalition sees the media as a 'Okay, come, come and report the event, use your platforms to talk about it', and the media was almost never heavily included at the level of planning strategy and all of that. So, can media be moved from the megaphone to an integral part of it? So, we said: 'Okay, let's form a media coalition.' (Interview S.O. 2019)

This underscores the importance of the relation between civil society and media in advocacy strategies. This paper posits how CSO actors perceive of and approach media as a potential partner in their strategies, and subsequently how media actors receive this invitation, matters for what role the media can play in relation to CSOs in advocacy work. Another central mechanism appears when examining the ownership and agency actors have in their advocacy, namely how it was necessary for the RTI Coalition to not only engage media actors but also give room for their engagement to take the form that they wanted it to.

Indeed, when explaining how the RTI Coalition was in search for partners, leading figures in the Coalition described how they wanted – and needed – the media to take more ownership of the cause. There was a realisation that the Coalition could not do it all on their own (Interview R.A. 2019). The feeling – especially after the 2016 disappointment – was that the continued advocacy work was at a 'make it or break it point'. If the bill would not get passed within a year, it would never happen, and the more actors and voices, the better (Interview B.N. 2019). This was an important shift in how the key members in the RTI Coalition saw – and released some of – their own ownership of the RTI campaign. Some of the leading figures in the campaign had worked and advocated for the RTI bill for nearly 20 years. Key members of the Media Coalition noted how it was hard for some of the leading figures in the RTI Coalition to release control of the advocacy, but that it was necessary for the media to act as they saw fit, without control of the RTI Coalition. Some of the RTI Coalition members noted how, while it was hard to 'let go' and relinquish control, it was also important for the RTI advocacy to take new forms. As a consequence of the Coalition's successful efforts to engage the media in the RTI advocacy, the civil society actors also needed to take a step to the side and allow space for the more dynamic, and more unruly, advocacy of around 500 individual journalists. In the end, as expressed by one of them, a matter of 'letting go at the right time'.

Conclusions

This paper sought to examine how civil society actors engage media actors in advocacy campaigns, and what factors shape the different roles that media actors have in these campaigns. The paper posits that media actors have mainly two modalities in relation to CSO actors, as platforms and as partners, exploring this in the case of the RTI advocacy in Ghana.

The analysis above shows how the RTI Coalition pursued various media strategies throughout the nearly 20-year long advocacy process. Initially, their advocacy campaign

encountered a passive media and low journalistic engagement in the RTI issue. As the advocacy campaign met several hurdles, the RTI Coalition changed their approach to media actors because they wanted the media to take a more active role in the advocacy – and more ownership of the RTI demand. In other words, the Coalition sought to change the role of the media from being a passive platform for their campaign message, to becoming active partners and agents in the advocacy for RTI in Ghana.

Interested in media strategies of CSO actors, this paper focused on *what made it work* and the mechanisms of engaging media actors as partners and advocates in a civil society-led advocacy campaign. The paper posits that mainly two factors contributed to the media taking a more active role in the RTI advocacy in Ghana; the CSO changed their approach and how they communicated and related to media actors, and media actors developed more awareness and understanding of the RTI issue. Two important main mechanisms are uncovered in this study. First, it matters how the RTI Coalition perceive of and approach media actors in their media strategy, and how this in turn is received by the media actors. This will affect their engagement with and ownership of the advocacy campaign and the RTI demand. Second, when CSOs seek to engage media as partners, it is necessary to also give room for their engagement and advocacy as independent partners.

The paper offers some concrete insights and contributions to both theory and practice on media's role in advocacy campaigns. First, it contributes to increased understanding on the relation between civil society and media in advocacy. Civil society is often regarded the impetus of advocacy work and strategies. While this is also the departure of this paper, in examining how CSOs can engage media actors, it nonetheless shows how – for media to be a powerful partner in advocacy work – there needs to be agency on both sides of the equation. As long as the focus lies solely on the strategy of civil society actors, this cannot inform about how it affects the target of the strategy, namely the media practitioners, and neither how it actually leads to heightened media attention and advocacy. This study of the Ghanaian RTI campaign highlights the importance of understanding how media strategies work from the perspectives of the media actors as well as the civil society actors.

Advocacy strategies to 'use the media' should be better developed to include this agency on behalf of journalists. This study proposes that CSOs should leverage on journalist activism. CSO strategies should see activist journalists and other influential figures in news content creation as potential partners and seek to harness the agency of journalists in their media strategies rather than merely using the media as a megaphone for their message, especially in contexts where the space for democratic rights and freedoms are not yet fully guaranteed, like partial democracies.

Moreover, CSO advocates seeking to engage media actors in advocacy should apply a holistic approach in their strategies. Early writings on the strategy of 'media advocacy' (Wallack, 1994) emphasised that the successful use of media in advocacy is linked to how well the advocacy, and the

demand, is rooted in the communities concerned. In the case of the RTI Coalition in Ghana, engaging the media was only one of several strategic fronts, in order to raise public awareness. However, the RTI issue is particular in the respect that media actors are also considered as stakeholders in demanding a RTI law. In approaching the media, the Coalition therefore emphasised both the relevance of RTI for them as citizens and as media practitioners. However, in recounting why they engaged in the RTI advocacy, journalists mostly referred to the benefits for RTI for all citizens. As Wallack (1994) argued, the journalists' engagement was driven by a legal and civic responsibility to their communities.

Second, the paper recommends a more actor-centric approach to the media in CSO's media strategies. Journalists and media practitioners interviewed in this study explain how the change in CSO actors' approach to them, and especially how the CSO actors 'threw a challenge', was important not just for their realisation of the importance of RTI, but just as much for realising the role they could play in the RTI advocacy. Media advocacy is essentially a strategy to empower people (Wallack, 1994). As such, this study highlights how training and communication to media practitioners should not solely focus on the campaign issue, but also on probing awareness of journalists and media practitioners' power in shaping media attention. This realisation of the role media actors could play was highlighted as crucial in gaining agency and ownership in the RTI advocacy.

Lastly, the paper contributes to our understanding of the space for civil society and media actors in doing advocacy work. In light of recent scholarly work on the space for civil society advocacy (van der Borgh and Terwindt, 2014; Toepler et al., 2020), and which the special issue this paper forms part of contributes to, we know that CSOs and media actors can experience different kinds of space for engaging in advocacy. While this space can vary across campaign issue and types of actors, and even within types of actors, this study also show how actors can influence and shape each other's space. In the case of RTI advocacy in Ghana, while the media's initial passiveness constituted a challenge for the civil society advocacy, the civil society strong ownership to the RTI campaign was described as one reason for the media's passiveness. When the media was engaged and assumed agency and ownership to the RTI issue by setting up their own media-run coalition, it was important that CSO actors ceded some control over the advocacy the campaign, and 'allowed' the Media Coalition to unfold their engagement.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Notes

1. See 'About GhanaWeb' here: <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/aboutus.php>. See Madrid-Morales (2020) for more on web scraping African news outlets, and Appendix C or GitHub repository for more on the textual data.

2. The raw data and script for creating and pre-processing the textual corpus and conducting the analysis are available in the GitHub repository 'Ghana_RTI_media_advocacy'.

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Appendix A

List of interviewees

Table A1. Overview of both primary and secondary interview material.

ID	Interviewee	Representing organisation
Interviews conducted July and August of 2012		
2012-1		Lawyer/Ind. member of RTI Coalition
2012-2		Officer, media advocacy NGO
2012-3		Officer, media advocacy NGO
2012-4		Editor, major daily newspaper
2012-5		Media specialist, University of Legon
2012-6		Head, governance NGO
2012-7		Former officer, media advocacy NGO
2012-8		Officer, media advocacy NGO
Interviews conducted August–November 2019		
2019	K.A.	CDD-Ghana, Director of Advocacy & Policy Engagement
2019	R.A.	CDD-Ghana, Program Officer
2019	R.O.	CDD-Ghana, Corruption Watch
2019	J.O.	POS Foundation
2019	J.S.	PenplusBbtes, Programmes Director
2019	A.A.	Eanfoworld for Sustainable Development
2019	B.N.	Ghana Anti-Corruption Coalition (GACC), Executive Secretary
2019	G.H.	Ghana Independent Broadcasters Association (GIBA), Executive Secretary
2019	S.L.	Joy 99.7 FM/Lawyer
2019	A.G.	Ghana Integrity Initiative (GII), Project Coordinator ADISS
2019	E.A.	Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), Access to Information
2019	S.A.	Ind. member of RTI Coalition, Former Chairman
2019	S.B.	Media Foundation West Africa
2019	K.K.	Ind. member of RTI Coalition, Former Chairman/Media Foundation West Africa, Former General Secretary
2019	S.O.	Parliamentary Network Africa/Head of the Media Coalition on RTI
2019	M.O.	LeadAfrique Int. and SIG-Ghana
2019	A.A.	Lawyer/Member of Occupy Ghana

Table A1. (continued)

ID	Interviewee	Representing organisation
2019	S.S.	Trade Union Congress (TUC)
2019	U.U.	Ghana CSOs Platform on SDGs, Former Coordinator
2019	D.N.	Legal Resources Center
2019	G.B.	Parliamentary Network Africa/Media Coalition on RTI
2019	A.M.	Ghana Journalist Association (GJA), President
2019	K.G.	National Media Commission (NMC)
2019	A.A.	Lawyer/Ind. member of RTI Coalition

Note: The interview notes from the other researcher are anonymised, while the interviewees interviewed by the author consented to information about them to be published in a way that they can be recognised.

Appendix B

RTI coalition's press statements

Table A2. Overview of the RTI Coalition's press statements collected for this study

No	ID	Date	Title
1	1	2010-02-15	Press statement by the Ghana national coalition on the right to information on the introduction of the RTI Bill into parliament
2	2	2012-05-10	Commonwealth human rights initiative calls on government to make the passage of the right of information bill a priority
3	3	2012-05-22	Press Statement by Right to Information (RTI) Coalition on the State of the RTI Bill in Parliament of Ghana
4	4	2012-07-19	Press statement from the coalition on the rightRight to Information (RTI) Ghana on the status of the RTI bill
5		2012-07-20	Press statement from the coalition on the rightRight to Information (RTI) Ghana on the status of the RTI bill
6	5	2012-10-22	Press release: parliament, good people of Ghana, what kind of right to Information (RTI) law will we get?
7	6	2013-02-06	The Coalition on the Right to Information, Ghana would like to congratulate Hon. Nana Oye Lithur on her appointment as Minister for Gender, Children and Social Protection
8	7	2013-04-30	Press release on May Day celebrations rensions: It is yourright and responsibility
9	8	2013-05-31	Press statement: RTI Coalition calls on Presodent Mahama to act on the RTI bill
10		2013	Africa Freedom of Information Centre and Ghana Coalition joint sdtatement on Ghana's Right to Information Bill
11	9	2013-09-27	Ghanaiaians have a right to know: the Commonwealth human rights initiative calls on government and parliament to walk RTI bill the talk
12	10	2015-09-28	Press statement to mark the right to know day ask it: It's your right to know
13	11	2016-04-15	Press statement: the relevance of the Right to Information law in the wake of the bus branding judgement by the Human RIGHTSIghts Court
14	12	2016-07-28	Press statement: accounting to the people: a real commitment or another political rheoteric
15	13	2016-08-18	Press statement: coalition on the rightRight to Information, Ghana petitions His Excellence President John Mahama
16	14	2016-09-23	Press statement President Mahama to deliver a key note address at a UNESCO event to mark the right to know day – really!!!
17	15	2017-02-01	Press release: the coalition on the rightRight to Information, Ghana congratulated Hon. Gloria Akuffo on her appointment as the att. . .
18	16	2018-09-28	'Rights to Know Day' – Ghana is Still Waiting for a Credible RTI Law
19	17	2019-03-27	Congratulations to parliament on the passage of Right to Information Bill
20	18	2019-04-15	Press statement on the Right to Information Bill passed by parliament

Notes: The 20 press statements collected range from February 2010 to April 2019. This is likely not a complete count, however, as there are some gaps in the coverage. Note that statement number 4 and 5 are the same text published two days in a row, and that statement number 10 is missing an exact date. Of the 20 press statements collected, therefore, only 18 are included in the analysis.

Appendix C

Overview of text material for analysis

Table A3. Overview of the textual material included for analysis

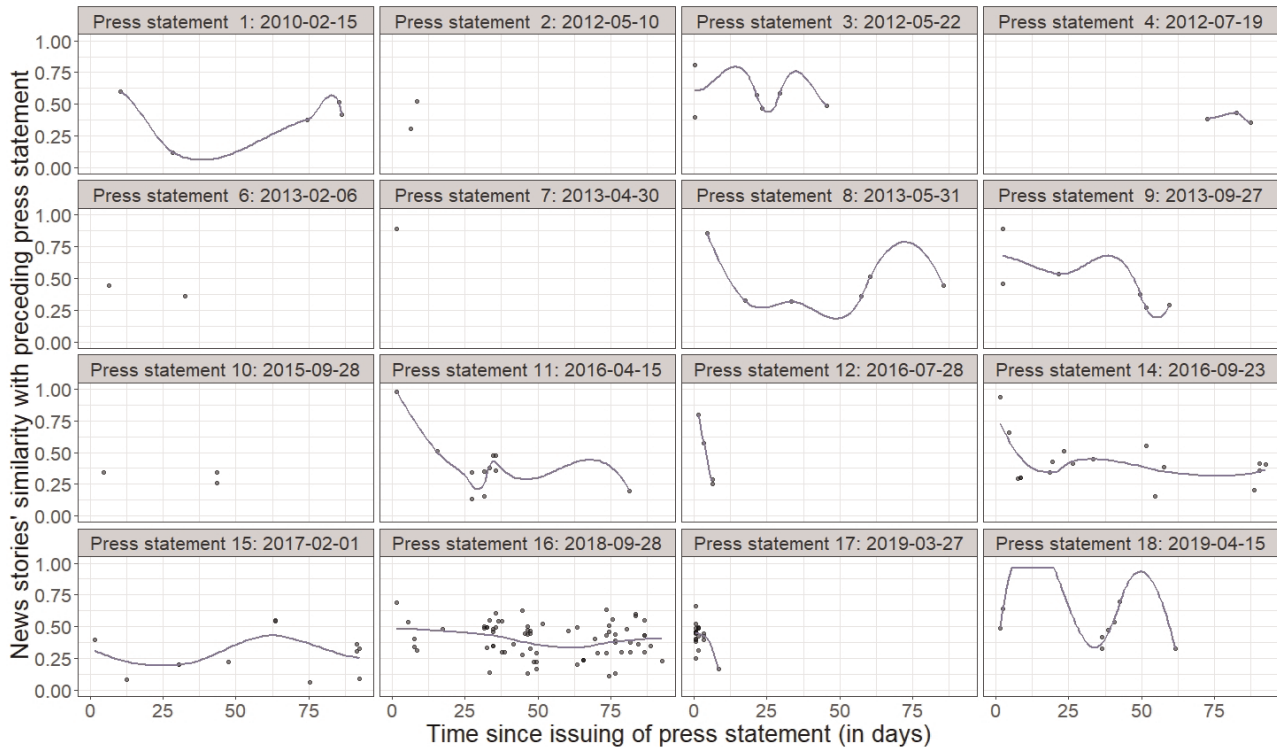
Press statements ID	News stories by press statement				News stories by year	
	Date	Number (N)	Range (days)	Last date	Year	Number (N)
1	2010-02-15	16	10.5–806.5	2012-05-01	2010 2011	9 6
2	2012-05-10	2	6.5–8.5	2012-05-18	2012	12
3	2012-05-22	6	0.5–45.5	2012-07-06		
4	2012-07-20	3	72.5–87.5	2012-10-14		
5	2012-10-22	0	–	–		
6	2013-02-06	2	6.5–32.5	2013-03-10	2013	15
7	2013-04-30	1	1.5–	2013-05-01		
8	2013-05-31	6	4.5–85.5	2013-08-24		
9	2013-09-27	28	2.5–701.5	2015-08-29		
					2014	19
10	2015-09-28	6	4.5–174.5	2016-03-20	2015	6
11	2016-04-15	13	1.5–94.5	2016-07-18	2016	40
12	2016-07-28	4	1.5–6.5	2016-08-03		
13	2016-08-18	0	–	–		
14	2016-09-23	23	1.5–107.5	2017-01-08		
15	2017-02-01	102	1.5–454.5	2018-07-31	2017	26
16	2018-09-28	97	1.5–178.5	2019-03-25	2018	150
17	2019-03-27	20	0.5–8.5	2019-04-04	2019	65
18	2019-04-15	19	1.5–256.5	2019-12-27		
					Total	348

Notes: The RTI Coalition's press statements are ranging from February 2010 to April 2019. The news stories were collected from GhanaWeb.com and are organised in relation to the 18 press statements with an exact date and by year. After identifying 544 relevant news stories on the RTI bill published between 2008 and 2020, only 373 news texts were available for web scraping from the site. Finally, only news stories between 15 February 2010 and 31 December 2019 were included in the analysis, with the total count of 348 texts. 'Range' is an expression of how many days the first and last news stories are from the preceding press statement.

Appendix D

Full results from media analysis

Figure A1. Full plotting of the results of the similarity analysis, on which Figure 2 is based. Press statements with ID 5 and 13 are not included, as these did not have any following news stories.



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