

Media and Democracy In Nigeria: A Critique Of Liberal Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Two main theoretical frameworks have been used to explain the relationship between the mass media and the democratic process. The first historically and probably the pervasive and influential is the liberal perspective which draws its main arguments from market theory and pluralist sociology. The other, critical media theory draws a lot from Marxist scholarship and social theory. This article discusses the relevance of the liberal narrative to the functions and structure of the Nigerian mass media. The article attempts to explicate the main principles of this perspective. Drawing from the literature, we discuss the arguments that have been advanced in critique of these principles. It is submitted that recent developments have undermined the credibility of the liberal perspective. Within the Nigerian context, the article posits that as presently constituted, the Nigerian mass media cannot fulfil the mandate of this Western-inspired theory. Though, it remains the over-arching explanation of framework, its inadequacies became more glaring if we consider the socio-historical context of journalism practice in Nigeria.

Key words: Liberal perspective, democracy, fourth estate, journalism and instrumentalisation

INTRODUCTION

There is a general agreement that the development of democracy is closely linked to the development and nature of the system of mass communication. The media are regarded as the voice of the people, the social watchdog. They set agenda and provide the citizens with the frames for understanding social issues which they report on. As the American communication sociologist, Michael Schudson once observed the media as cultural actors are the ‘producers and messengers of meanings, symbols and messages’ (Schudson, 2011, p.17).

The main concern of scholars and the general citizenry about the role of the mass media in the political process is to understand the contributions of information flows and media institutions to the functioning of democracy and its supportive institutions. For ill or for good, the role of the mass media has become pivotal to the democratic process and citizens’ participation in it. Though the complex nature of democracy cannot be reduced to the issues of the mass media, but as Peter Dahlgren once observed, the health of democracy is increasingly being linked to the health of a country’s communication system. According to him, “... the dynamics of democracy are intimately linked to the practices of communication, and societal communication increasingly takes place within the mass media” (Dahlgren: 1995, p.2).

Two main theoretical approaches are available in trying to make sense of the role of the mass media in the society in general. These two approaches are, in the main, derived from two opposing views of the society and its social structure.

The first approach which is dominant in mass communication discourse in Nigeria is derived from the liberal democratic view of the press as a “fourth estate of the realm”. This has its root in a pluralist/functionalist conception of the society with analysis centring on freedom of speech and the press, media autonomy particularly from the state, among others. This neo-liberal model ‘explains the media solely in terms of market theory (Curran, 2005, p.126) Journalism, which easily comes to mind when we talk about the relationship between the mass media and democracy is as Hackett and Zhao have observed “the most important form of public knowledge in contemporary society, it is the leading institution of the public sphere...” (Hackett and Zhao, 1998, p.1).

Derived from pluralist sociology, Curran and Gurevitch summarised the liberalist perspective on the media in its ideal typical form:

The pluralists see society as a complex of competing groups and interests, none of them predominant all of the time. Media organisations are seen as bounded organisational systems, enjoying an important degree of autonomy from the state, political parties and institutionalize pressure groups. Control of the media is said to be in the hands of an autonomous managerial elite who allow a considerable degree of flexibility to media professionals. A basic symmetry is seen to exist between media institutions and their audiences, since in McQuail’s words, the ‘relationship is generally entered into voluntarily and on apparently equal terms’... Audiences are seen as capable of manipulating the media in an infinite

variety of ways according to their prior needs and dispositions and as a consequence of having access to what Halloran (1977) calls “the plural values of society” enabling them to ‘conform, accommodate or reject’ (Curan and Gurevitch: 1977, pp.4-5, quoted in Curran: 2002, p.108).

The liberal argument ascribes a level of autonomy to the media as the “fourth estate” of the realm. They are not expected to be subservient to the state or its political institutions. Within this context, it is expected that competing power centres, groups and individuals will have free access to the media to articulate their views, thus enriching the political process. Ralph Negrine sums up this position: “The pluralist description of the social order with its myriad political institutions, groups, and actors all competing, albeit unequally, for power treats, the media as a set of institutions which may act independently in society but which may also be deployed by powerful groups” (Negrine: 1994, p.12).

The liberal perspective has its origin in the medieval period in European history. It has progressed with the historical development of European societies both intellectually, economically and politically. Historically, the system of press control in Europe was authoritarian reflecting the basic authoritarian structure of society and government with its economic and religious underpinnings. However, because of changes at different levels of the society, notably economic, intellectual and the struggle for power between the rising class of commercial bourgeoisie and the declining class of landed aristocracy, and the Reformation, the authoritarian social structure gave way to liberal democracy. In the words of the scholars,

Liberalism’s stress on the virtues of freedom, liberty and autonomy directly and irrevocably challenged the repressive political, economic, religious and social order on which medieval society was based (Errington and Miragliotta, 2007, p.2).

According to Siebert by the beginning of the 18th century, authoritarian control of the press was dying to be replaced by libertarian principles “protecting the freedom of speech and of the press” (Siebert et al, 1956, p.44). The underlying intellectual principle of libertarianism as articulated in the writings of John Milton, John Locke, James Mill, Thomas Jefferson and others was that man should be free from outside constraints on his ability to use his reason as a rational being in the pursuit of truth. These writers and advocates of free press argue that a free press was necessary for the individual to achieve enlightenment and knowledge, “a condition that could only be achieved if ideas were able to flow freely within society” (Errington and Miragliotta, op. cit., p.7). Inherent in the argument for press freedom is the fact that since democracy extends political power to the people, there should be a means, uncontrolled by the holders of political power, responsible for disseminating truth and impartial information and knowledge to the people.

The “truth argument” rests on the assumption that man, being rational, needs an unpolluted source of information to arrive at rational decision. The press is regarded as the source of such information. Under the Libertarian concept, the main function of the press is to provide information free from government interference. As Siebert puts it,

Basically, the underlying purpose of the media was to help discover the truth, to assist in the process of solving political and social problems by presenting all manners of evidence and opinion as the basis for decisions. The essential characteristic of this process was its freedom from government controls or domination (Siebert, op. cit. p.51).

Clear in this statement is the view that multiplicity of voices and the clash of contending ideas and opinions are essential ingredients of democracy. It was assumed that everybody is rational enough to choose between falsehood and truth. It was further assumed that there is a ‘self-righting’ mechanism in the market-place of ideas (to be provided by the press) where everybody has equal right of access and power to participate.

Another assumption of the libertarian philosophy is that everybody who has anything to say on any public issue should be allowed to say it without any hindrance. Related to this is also the belief that anybody who has the means to establish a means of public communication should also be allowed to do so. There should be no monopoly of such means of communication. Underpinning this is, of course, the acceptance of free enterprise and private ownership of property and means of production; in other words, the main tenets of capitalism. As Dennis McQuail who has labelled the theory as “free press theory” has pointed out “press freedom has become identified with property rights and the analogy of the ‘free market of ideas’ transferred to the “real free market in which communication is a good to be manufactured and sold... press freedom thus becomes identified with private ownership of the media and freedom from interference in the market.” (McQuail, 1983, pp.88-89).

The advocates of libertarian principles set out three main functions for the media — watchdog role, provision of information and the facilitation of the public sphere, i.e. as platforms for the expression of diverse voices. The mass media thus acquire the character of a public service institution.

The liberal narrative, as James Curran has labelled it, attributes a significant role to the mass media in the process of democratisation, not only of the earlier European monarchical societies but even up till now. The media also serve as an instrument of empowerment. In summary,

... the liberal narrative offers a coherent view of the different ways in which increasingly free media strengthened the democratic process. The media extended the political nation by making information about public affairs more widely available and promoting a culture of democracy. The media also empowered the people by subjecting authority to critical scrutiny and representing public opinion to government. Finally, the media — and in particular public service broadcasting — enhanced the functioning of democracy by encouraging constructive and reciprocal communication between different groups in society (Curran: 2002, p.7).

The watchdog role is taken as the most crucial in democratic societies. It is the assumption underlying S.22 of the Nigerian Constitution which stipulates that the media shall monitor governance.

It is assumed that government being the seat and repository of state power, it should be constantly watched and scrutinised in the attempt to check and expose any abuse of that power. The press thus becomes an instrument working on behalf of the people to bring their governors to account for their action or inaction. It is for the press to be able to do this effectively that the liberal tradition put a lot of emphasis on press autonomy and independence from the state. But as many scholars have pointed out, while this argument may contain some truth in years past, the situation has changed so dramatically dictating a revision “in which the media are conceived as being a check on the abuse of all sources of power in both the public and private realm” (Curran: 2005, p.124). As works by critical scholars have shown, the corporatisation of the mass media, commodification of media products, the collapse of the boundaries between the public and the private and the increasing interconnection between political and economic power have shifted the ground on which much of the argument of media autonomy from the state earlier stood. As Silvio Waisbord has correctly argued.

The democratic potential of the news media depends on its capacity as an institution in the public sphere to keep state and market powers at a distance (Waisbord: 2000, p.6).

The watchdog argument has over the years been evacuated of its effectiveness, if there was any, by the political and economic interests which underguard media production and operation. The mass media having been effectively colonised by powerful economic interests, have lost their vitality as an independent watchdog. They may still occasionally bark, but their ability to bite has been seriously curtailed. In the words of Waisbord,

Proximity to specific powers makes the press unlikely to be interested in keeping the same interests at bay. It dims the prospects that news organisations can effectively ... “sustain vigilant scrutiny of government and centres of powers.” Watch dogs do not bite their owners ... nor ... do they chomp neighbours with whom they have amiable relationships (Waisbord, ibid).

For many people, the media provide their main means of knowing of events and activities outside their very limited environment. This becomes more so with government and the political process. Hence the great store placed on the role of the mass media as information source. This second main function as conceived by the liberalists conceives the role of the media more or less as the conveyor belt for public information. Dan Schiller has summarised it this way: “In the classical theory of liberal democracy, the news system occupies a key role as the major source of the information that citizens need to arrive at rational political judgements and choices.” (Schiller: 1986, p.19) In order to discharge this duty, the mass media must have access to the relevant information and facts and they must be able to disseminate such information and facts without any prior restraint. Here professional journalists and the public articulate concepts like objectivity, balance, truth as values which must inform the work of journalists. We may also note that the struggle for a Freedom of Information law by Nigerian journalists is informed by the belief that such a law will facilitate access to public records and consequently the effective discharge of the function of providing ‘accurate truth and relevant’ information to the public. For now, many journalists believe that with the protection offered to the state and its officials by the Official Secrets Act, the effectiveness of the Nigerian news media is greatly hampered in this regard.

While there is no doubt that the news media are increasingly important as providers of public information, the ideals which informed the liberalist position have been greatly “eroded and undermined by the political and economic realities of the environment in which newspapers operate” (Schiller, *ibid*). In the Nigerian context, this includes the ‘over-bloating’ of the institutions and the apparatuses of the state¹ that it has become increasingly difficult for the mass media to offer effective coverage of the activities and policies of the state. What we find is the concentration of resources for reportorial operations in Lagos (which remains the business and commercial nerve centre of the country), Abuja (the political capital as the seat of the Federal Government) and some state capitals, while the parlous state of the economy which has greatly affected media operations and the sophistication in the publicity machinery of the state has increased the capacity of the state for effective news management (see article by Ropo Sekoni, *The Nation*, Aug. 10, 2008). Further, poor and inadequate human and material resources limit the capacity of the news media to independently source for information. Hence, the increasing reliance on packaged offerings in the form of scheduled events and press releases and briefings.

It may also be observed that media attention is focused more on the coverage of the state and its institutions while the activities of private business interests are confined to the specialised pages which more or less admit only the experts and the interested few. Most of what is published on these business pages are PR materials. With the neo-liberal economic policy adopted by the Nigerian government since the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in the 1980s, the capacity of the private sector to influence public policy has greatly been enlarged. Hence the lack of effective and critical coverage of business creates a blind spot in media’s role as information source on which the citizen could rely on to form informed judgement on public issues.

The point we must recognise is that the ability of the state and big business not only to influence media coverage and the type of information they provide but to actually set the evaluative and interpretative framework for such information has greatly increased and deepened in the last few years due to the increase in the power and resources of both business and political interests. It is ironic to observe that the Nigerian media have not benefited from the expansion in the Nigerian economy. While sectors like banking, IT, construction among others are declaring huge profits and expanding, the media have actually witnessed reduction in available resources, poor staff welfare, poor sales and advertising revenue. As already noted, all these have affected their capacity. For instance, in the circulation war, different formulas are being tried; sensationalism, infotainment, use of colour and display types, just to attract readership/audience.

The role of the media as a public space either for the critical scrutiny of powerful interests or as information providers is vitiated by a number of factors thrown up by the prevailing environment within which the mass media operate. The liberalists lose sight of this crucial point in the sense that they abstract the media from the socio-historical context which necessarily underpin their operations.

The commercialisation of the mass media has increasingly vitiated their function as the facilitator of the public sphere, the third role liberalists assign to media in the democratic process. According to this argument, the mass media should guarantee the public space for the exchange of view; a public forum for dialogue among the citizens. The idea of media as public sphere is borrowed from the German theorist, Jünger Habermas. According to Peter Dahlgren,

Habermas conceptualizes the public sphere as that realm of social life where the exchange of information and views on questions of common concern can take place so that public opinion can be formed. The public sphere ‘takes place’ when citizens, exercising the rights of assembly and association, gather as public bodies to discuss issues of the day, specifically those of political concern. Since the scale of political society does not allow more than relatively small number of citizens to be physically co-present, the mass media have become the chief institutions of the public sphere (Dahlgren: 1995, pp.7-8).

It is the belief that the public opinion generated through the discourse in the public sphere would influence and shape public policy.

By the way it is constituted, the public sphere is protected from the state and other vested interests. In principle, it is open to all while participation is on equal power. Its main concern was not private interest but the public good. As an ideal, the public sphere as theorised by Habermas is universalistic (Garnham, 1986).

¹ Apart from the Federal Government, Nigeria has 36 states and Local Governments.

Even long before now, through the process which Habermas himself recognised as ‘refeudalisation’, the public sphere has been corrupted and evacuated of its potential by economic interests. That trend has become intensified with the increasing penetration of market principles and profitability logic in media operations. The mass media through ownership, advertising etc. have been integrated not only into the economic nexus but more specifically into big business. Through advertising (which has been the main source of revenue to the media) and public relations, the state and private capital have increased their capacity to influence the flow and shape of public information made available through the media.

One other crucial point that limits the ability of the Nigerian media as organs of the public sphere is access. First majority of Nigerians cannot effectively participate in public discourse because of linguistic barrier. Public discourse in the country is mainly conducted in the English Language. Most Nigerians are incompetent in this regard, hence they are shut-out from such discourse. Two, the socio-geographical structure of the mass media makes them mainly an urban affairs catering mainly to the interests of the elite.

THE LIBERAL PERSPECTIVE AND THE NIGERIAN MEDIA

The question to ask is how applicable is the argument of this perspective to the Nigerian media? In answering this question, we need to understand that the Nigerian media system was part of the colonial heritage the country inherited from Britain.

Right from the colonial period, media operators have used the main tenets of the liberalist perspective to agitate against repressive government policies. Such media owners and journalists appropriated the writing of the John Miltons and others in their protestations against attempts by the colonial authorities to muzzle the press (Omu: 1978, p.171). The early newspapers saw themselves as instruments of public enlightenment and mobilisation for independence. They championed the cause of the colonised and passed judgement on the colonial government as the watchdog of the society. They provided the platform for debate and discussion. In the post-colonial period, the media have carried out these functions (Nwosu: 1996).

These libertarian principles continue to inform public discourse on the role of the press, press freedom and official media policy. In public discourse, there is general acceptance of private media ownership. With an equally general acceptance of the media as the fourth estate of the realm, Nigerians are wont to argue that the government has no business in media ownership. It is argued that government owned media are not free. A mass communication scholar, Ikechukwu Nwosu who has commended the press for holding to the tenet of the social responsibility of the press, however observed that:

... whatever successes recorded in the performance of the watchdog function by the Nigerian press cannot be shared by the government-owned newspapers, radio and television houses which were more or less government lap-dogs and megaphones ... (Nwosu: 1996, p.26).

It is this type of view and perception plus the reigning neo-liberal orthodoxy which informed the liberalisation and commercialisation of broadcasting in the country and the predominance of privately owned newspapers. Though broadcasting is still predominantly owned by the government, the liberal ethos inform the discourse about their roles in the democratic process.

The constitution provides an over-arching anchor for this liberal discourse. During the debates which took place during the drafting of the 1979 constitution, there was a widespread acceptance of the need for a constitutional provision for freedom of the press in line with the American First Amendment. It was more or less settled then that Nigeria should abandon the British Westminster parliamentary model for the American President System with all its legal and institutional trappings. Though the framers of that constitution and others that followed refused to provide for such a specific provision guarantying the freedom of the Press as in the American constitution, they nonetheless acknowledged the role of the mass media. In a section which has now become a constant feature of subsequent constitutions (now in Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution), it is expressly stated that:

The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this Chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people.

The debate for the need or otherwise of a constitutional guarantee for freedom of the press has been on for many years and reached its peak during the debate for the 1979 constitution. The advocates having failed to get a specific constitutional provision to that effect went for a Freedom of Information Law. A coalition of civil society organisations, the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), Newspapers Proprietors Association and others, presented a bill

for that purpose to the National Assembly. The Bill after a very tortuous journey within the Chambers of the two arms of the Assembly, the House of Representatives and the Senate was passed into law almost ten years after it was first sent to the Assembly. The main argument of its proponents is that without such a law, the mass media cannot effectively discharge their constitutional obligation of upholding the fundamental objectives spelt in Chapter II of the Constitution and monitoring governance and holding the government accountable.

Certain characteristics of the mass media system in Nigeria also give the impression of a high pluralistic media system. First is the fact that the country has the most extensive media industry on the African continent with 82 television stations, 121 radio stations about 30 newspapers and weekly news magazines. The liberalisation of the broadcasting sector has added to this diversity of ownership. Second, is the high political profile of the press in particular. Right from inception, during the colonial period, the Nigerian press has carved out a niche for itself as a highly “political press” (Omu, 1978, p.11) and a protest press. Even the military failed to muzzle the press. This has led many commentators to the belief that Nigeria has the freest press in Africa (Jose: 1975). Nigeria has a highly voluble press.

While nobody can deny the plurality of the Nigerian media, the question to ask is how this has translated to diversity in media coverage of issues and the representations offered to the public. Plurality does not mean diversity. If there is any trace of diversity in media presentations, it is due more to the ethnic character of the country’s politics rather than ideological differences within the ruling class. A one time Minister of Information and political scientist, Prof. Sam Oyovbaire has argued that:

... the radicalism of the (Nigerian) media as an anti-colonial and pro-independence vehicle, as an anti-bad governance vehicle, as an anti-military rule and pro-democracy institution is really no more than being only radicalism of the right or enter ideology. It is indeed a capitalist press (Oyovbaire: The Guardian, Aug. 29, 2001).

The radical or rather voluble and quarrelsome character of the Nigerian press stems largely, from the cantankerous nature of the Nigerian politicians and the ethnic cleavages within the system. The Nigerian press is seen as sectional in orientation and coverage of political issues. Adigun Agbaje has argued that “the Nigerian press is a captive of sectional, sectarian and other particularistic constituencies in civil society.” He elaborates further:

The press in fact remains largely a captive of jingoistic claims of ethnicity, petty rivalries, personal ambitions, regionalism and partisan politics as outlined by groups in civil and political society. These groups have continued over the years to dictate the parameters for the operation of newspapers (Agbaje: 1993).

The pluralism of the Nigerian media system is the outcome of the division within the powerful interest in the country’s political society. At crucial times in the nation’s history, the media, particularly the newspapers, have forged alliances with these interests against one another. The plurality of these interests and the subsequent lack of consensus among them have been a guarantee of the relative autonomy enjoyed by the mass media. In such cases, the civil society had often risen in support of the ‘opposition’ press. We see evidence of these tendency during the Abacha regime and during the Third Term Debate when an attempt was made to amend the constitution so as to allow the then incumbent President, General Olusegun Obasanjo to extend his tenure beyond the two terms allowed by the 1999 Constitution.

The press reflects this plurality, both in character, ownership and structure. It has been able to deploy them against one another so as to remain relevant in the political process.

The point needs to be emphasised that if the Nigerian press is free and active in the political process, this is more of a function of the country’s political structure and elite composition rather than any internally generated ideology or principles as enunciated in the liberal perspective.

Though the influence of ethnicity and other parochial/primordial interests still remain strong in Nigerian politics, recent changes in the political economy of the media may demand a reassessment of this argument. While Lagos and the South-West still account for a greater number of media organisation in the country, the ownership of most of these establishments has shifted to the minorities from the oil-rich Niger Delta geo-political zone.

Beyond this however, the argument of the pluralists is compromised by more important structural issues. First, only the rich and powerful could establish media organisations. The cost of entry is so high. The newspapers that were recently established are owned by politicians, mostly state governors.

Newspapers	Owner	Office held
<i>Daily Independent</i>	James Ibori	Former Governor of Delta State.
<i>Sun</i>	Orji Uzor Kalu	Former Governor of Abia State.
<i>The Nation</i>	Bola Tinubu	Former Governor of Lagos State.
<i>The Westerner, and Compass</i>	Gbenga Daniel	Governor of Ogun State.

Some of the privately owned broadcasting organisations are also affiliated to some powerful politicians. In addition to this is the fact that the Nigerian mass media industry has effectively become integrated with capital. Up till the 1970s with the exception of the *Daily Times*, most of the newspaper organisations were single entities run more for their political importance than as industrial concerns. But now most of the newspapers and private broadcasting stations are not only owned by wealthy businessmen-cum-politicians but are part of corporate organisations often having roots in all sectors of the economy. This makes these newspapers to see themselves first as commercial organisations like others in the corporate networks before anything else.

The second source of problem with the liberal-pluralist argument is the fact that the mass media of today have changed so much from what obtained when the argument were first formulated. In what they described as ‘Crisis of Public Communication’, Blumler and Gurevitch explain the institutional sources of this change:

.... Tactics of political campaigning appear even less savoury. The watchdog role of journalism is often shunted into channels of personalisation, dramatisation, witchhunting, soap-operatics and sundry trivialities. It is difficult for unconventional opinions to break into the established ‘market place of ideas’ and political arguments are often reduced to slogans and taunts. Suspicion of manipulation is rife, and cynicism is growing. The public interest in constructive civil communication has been short-changed (Blumler and Gurevitch: 1995, p.1).

We may identify two main roots of this change — the industrialisation of the mass media and the public relationisation of political communication strategy.

The industrialisation of the mass media has led to a situation where commercial considerations have become a major deciding factor in media operation. With the increase in economic constraints, many media organisations are adopting cost-cutting and profit maximising strategies to stay afloat. One way is to reduce cost of operation — reduction in personnel cost, reduction in the cost of news gathering, particularly in areas such as investigative journalism. In Nigerian journalism, opinion writing is now valued more than news reporting.

There has also been an increase in the space allocated to the coverage of areas which can generate either advertisement or high circulation. In the first category are special areas like banking and finance, telecommunication, industry and manufacturing while for the latter we have sports and entertainment. Though there is still a lot of stories on politics, the bulk of such stories are covered from a sensational angle to attract the reader’s attention. Most of the Nigerian newspapers adopt the tabloid format and formulae of news presentation.

The point is that the commercial pressure to stay in the market has led to the adoption of an entertainment style in the presentation of the news, i.e. infotainment. The entertainment values in an event take precedence over the information or education content in order to appeal to the mass audience.

We may also note the practice where organisers of events are made to pay for news coverage. It is called let them pay (LTP) among broadcasters. Though this is very common with broadcasting organisations, the newspapers also, through supplements and special reports, do tailor their reporting to attract advertisements from corporate sponsors. In broadcasting, certain segments of the news are sponsored by corporate organisations. There is also the practice of reporters sourcing for sponsors to pay for their trips to cover important events, especially outside the country. Special correspondents assigned to specialised beats like Telecom, Aviation, Banking and Finance are obliged to source for adverts to support their pages.

The other issue is that access to the media space has more or less slipped from the professional consideration of the journalist. Political campaign and advocacy has become professionalised with the increasing importance of the mass media as the main channels of political communication and sources of social reality. It has become more and more controlled by PR strategies — media management, image management and spin doctoring. As politicians become reconciled to the logic of the news making process, they increasingly adopt these PR strategies to influence the process of political communication to their own individual and/or group advantage. And because of economic constraints which limit the budget for news gathering, the mass media becomes more dependent on the packaged offerings by the politicians. Thus rhetoric, oratory, image suited for the television camera, form rather than substance become the main staple of the media.

The important thing to note however is that only the powerful and materially well-endowed can afford the services of the PR professionals and other parajournalists as Michael Schudson calls them (Schudson, 2011) who help in packaging these offerings for the media. The poor and the less privileged in general are at a disadvantage. The public sphere becomes narrower in the range of available discourses. Such discourses are also deradicalised and depoliticised as what Blumler and Gurevitch called “unconventional opinions” are unwittingly excluded due to the twin process of commercialisation and public relationisation. At the level of professional values which underpin the practice of journalism, the Nigerian journalist faces a dilemma. In a Third World country, ‘unconventional opinions’ may come from groups opposed to national developmental objectives as defined by state officials. Allowing such views in the media creates a lot of dilemma for African journalists because they are operating with two models of journalism practice.

The adherence to liberal values in journalism practice in Nigeria is compromised by the conflicts that often arise from the practitioners and public subscription to an opposing normative principle; development journalism. Development journalism, a variance of development media theory, (McQuail, 1983) advocates the purposive use of the media to achieve economic development and other goals of the state, hence some level of subservient to the state. This is opposed to the liberalist’s position on journalistic objectivity, professional autonomy and detachment. Peter Golding has addressed this problem when he observed that:

The tension between the idea of news as information deliberately selected and shaped to serve defined social purposes, and news as an objective and randomly selected capture of reality, disinterestedly distributed, often proved difficult for African journalists caught between two currents of thought ... Thus a natural inclination to see journalism as socially purposive is given a guilt complex by training in the creed and practice of objective reporting as preached and conducted in European and American media (Golding, 1977, pp.302-303).

The tension so generated is often resolved through recourse to self-censorship. As the title of the book written by the man, Babatunde Jose, acclaimed to be father of modern Nigerian journalism says, Nigerian journalists walk on a tight rope.

While the degree media-political parallelism (Halhin and Mancini, 2004, Seymour-Ure, 1974) has greatly been reduced one can still find evidences of media owners and journalists who are more or less active functionaries and foot soldiers of the main political parties. Some journalists in their writings act as publicists for these parties and individuals. We can also have some evidences of external control, however covert and surreptitious of media control. Politicians and political parties use the media intervene in the political process e.g. to mobilize support and/or advance some political causes. The point is that there is still some element of instrumentalisation in the relationship between journalism and the state/political structure in Nigeria.

The instrumentalisation of the Nigerian Press has also been aided at another level. Borrowing from Blumler and Gurevitch, this could be described as “the degree of political affinity and socio-cultural proximity that obtains between media personnel and the political elite” (1995, p.66).

For instance, early Nigerian journalists shared a lot with the political elite. They were all socialised into the Lagos colonial society and had a common antipathy towards colonialism. In fact, the two spheres were more or less fused — journalism was politics, politics was journalism. Some journalists like Lateef Jakande, Bisi Onabanjo, and M.C.K. Ajuluchukwu became prominent politicians while some like the late Bola Ige maintained newspaper columns and had a network of young journalists as friends. Some journalists are now occupying prominent political positions as parliamentarians, governors and party apparatchik. Media owners and other powerful interests also penetrate and influence news making and editorial decision making process through the recruitment of loyalists and/or those who share certain interests (ethnic, world view etc.) with them.

In the last few years, many journalists have also gained appointments as press secretaries, media advisers and political consultants to governments and prominent politicians and members of governing boards of government agencies. Many state governments maintain media consultants made up of prominent journalists who meet regularly to advise them on their publicity and public communication activities. Such individuals act as a form of informal channel of influence flow to media organisations.

Another factor in this informal relationship is corruption and bribery. This has been a major ethical issue in the practice of journalism in Nigeria. During the Babangida regime (1983 – 1993), what is now known as 'settlement' syndrome became very prominent. The regime was able to draw many newspaper proprietors and journalists into a close relationship as friends of Babangida himself or sympathisers of the government through various means — state appointments, bribery, contract awards etc. In response to an allegation that some journalists were bribed by the Babangida government, the then Secretary-General of the Newspaper Proprietors' Association and Managing Director of the Daily Times, Dr. Yemi Ogunbiyi said:

... if you talk of a measure of closeness, I agree. Two reasons account for that: some of those in government today are about the same age as those in the media, and they were friends before those in power took over. General Babangida and Sam Amuka, publisher of Vanguard, were the best of friends when Babangida was a young Colonel.... Same thing applies to a man like the publisher of Concord, Chief Abiola, Alex Ibru, of The Guardian and the president are good friends (National Concord: Nov. 26, 1990, p.33).

Through such 'friendship' and other corporatist strategies, Babangida was able to gain a lot of support and legitimacy in the media. Following the debacle that followed the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential elections, many journalists became the foot soldiers of the pro-democracy groups. During the current dispensation, many state correspondents and political journalists are on the pay roll of state governors and/or prominent politicians. The politicians give them gifts of lands, cars and sponsor them on pilgrimages to Mecca and Jerusalem, among other inducements. Nigerians journalists can easily be assimilated by this type of inducements and of course by the articulation of cultural and primordial sentiments and symbols.

CONCLUSION

The Nigerian media, particularly the newspaper sector remain as highly political as ever. However, this political profile is not directly inherent in the professionalism of the journalists as such but on outcome of the country's political structure and ethnic configuration. The Nigerian media is more or less a captive instrument of power constituencies in the country in their grim struggle for power and privileges.

While the main arguments and principles of the liberal narrative on the mass media are still influential and continue to hold sway, there is no doubt they have become inadequate and short through with many holes.

Recent technological, economic and political developments have dealt severe blows on the edifice on which the liberalist account of the media is erected. As commercial pressures increase, so will journalism lose its public service character and tends more towards the ethos of the market. As politics and politicians become more image and promotion conscious so will the attempts to adopt PR and advertising principles in penetrating the newsrooms and manage the journalistic and news making processes in line with their interests which may not necessarily coincide with the public good. ICTs are redefining the practice of journalism thus calling into question the hitherto institutional status of the profession as the main organ of the public sphere.

The Nigerian situation may be worse given the fact that the country lacks the strong institutional support for the democratic process, the weakness of civil society whose elements could easily be compromised and incorporated by the ruling elite and even the fragility of the Nigerian state.

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