

Impact of News Commercialization on Nigeria Broadcasting Commission Communication Policy

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ABSTRACT

The Mass media in any society are regarded as the purveyors of national cultures which they transmit from generation to generation. One of the means through which this activity is carried out is by the news gathering and dissemination function of the mass media . In a situation where news selection and presentation is based on material gratifications instead of public goals and interest, stands against the ethics of the profession, it is anti-public unity and development. Above all it amounts to a total disregard and breach of the codes of the National Broadcasting Commission. This study aimed at assessing the effects of news commercialization by the mass media in Nigeria and its effects on the credibility of the institutions. This study was a prescriptive survey and used the documentary survey method to generate data for evaluation. The study found out that news commercialization has

become a practice in Nigeria, and this has negatively affected the image of media institutions in the country. Public service broadcasting which was supposed to serve public interest has been turned into a powerful instruments for perpetual colonization of the poor by the rich. The study recommends that relevant regulatory agencies should ensure that enforcement of laws and ethics is rigorously pursued to compel media houses to comply with the ethics of the profession in the interest, unity and development of the country

Keyword: News, Commercialization, Impact, Broadcast Media, Policy.

INTRODUCTION

The mass media are tools for mass communication which have unique responsibilities to keep members of the society informed, educated and entertained, It is through the mass media that the society gets to know what is happening within and around the country and react accordingly. The basic functions of the mass media, according to Lasswell in Peterson, et al (1965) is to act as the society's watchdog, they are expected to mount surveillance over the environment and correlate the components of the society to ensure effective functioning of the system which will assist in the transmission of the social heritage from generation to generation. In carrying out these functions, the mass media make use of several methods of collecting and disseminating information which include straight news reporting, interpretative reporting and investigative reporting. (Bo, et al 2009). In Nigeria, the roles of journalists in the affairs of the nation is constitutionally recognized in section 21, sub section 150 of the 1979 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It states that the press must uphold the aims and objectives of Nigeria as a nation and that the press must ensure that all organs of government (Legislature, Executives and Judiciary,) upholds these aims and objectives and perform the duties imposed on them in furtherance of nation building; the press must hold the Government accountable to the people in the performance of its duties and responsibilities to ensure that the aim and objective of nation building are realized. The above provision recognizes and consequently assigns certain functions to the Nigerian media as partners in progress. In 1992, the Babangida military administration de-regulated the Broadcast industry, so as to usher in more participation and ensure more pluralistic views. The basic aim of this policy thrust was to empower those people who hitherto did not have access to the government owned media, for any reason, so that they will have the opportunity to

express their views and opinions on national and topical issues. There is a general recognition of the fact that journalists have responsibilities toward the public. These responsibilities may include: contractual responsibility in relation to the media and their internal organization; a social responsibility obligations towards public opinion and society as a whole; responsibility or liability deriving from the obligation to comply with the law; and the responsibility towards national and international communities, to ensure acceptable values, (Ugwuanyi :2005). The media perform these functions in furtherance of their responsibilities to the general public. But a situation whereby media practitioners perform their duties based on financial promptings and reward negate the ethic and

objectives of the profession.

WHAT IS NEWS COMMERCIALIZATION?

In 1980, Sean McBride commission, set up by UNESCO in its final report clearly stated that news had become commercialized, that important news in the country are put aside as un-important while trivial news items concerning urban events and the activities of highly placed personalities are given prominence and regularity by the nations' mass media. Many years ago, the UNESCO's assertion stated above has become the cardinal practice of the Nigerian media scene as news items have to be paid for by those who want to be heard. Onoja (2009) defines news commercialization as a situation whereby stations begin to raise revenue by charging fees for news reports they should normally carry free. Nnorom (1994) cited in Ekwo (1996:63) defines news commercialization as "a phenomenon whereby the electronic media report as news or news analysis a commercial message by an unidentifiable sponsor, giving the audience the impression that news is fair, objective and socially responsible. Omenugha, et al (2008) notes that news commercialization operates at two levels in Nigeria; at the institutional level, where charges are officially placed for sponsored news programmes. For example, Omenugha et. al. (2008) states that the Delta Broadcasting Service, Warri, charges N20,000 for religious programme, N36,000 for corporate coverage and N 25,000 for social event, while Radio Nigeria Enugu charges for commercial news N47,000, news commentary and political news N52,000, special news commentary N60,000, (Ogbuoshi, 2005). This commercialization at the institutional level is thriving because editors, publishers and owners of the broadcast stations see the organizations and their investment as a profit making venture that should yield the required financial return. Increasingly, commercial oriented news stories are taking the place of hard news monetary demands to cover an event. Idowu (1996:198) citing Bamigbetan (1991) recounts a story that buttresses this fact. The Right Rev. Abiodun Aditoye former Anglican Bishop of Nigeria was sited at the Murtala International Airport, Lagos, Journalists who saw him crowded him asking for interview on issues of national important. The man of God spoke at length. His views were newsworthy but the journalists felt that they needed something more to write the news. They asked for transport money. The man of God declined, resulting in a blackout

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory adopted for this study is the social responsibility theory. The principles of the theory are consistent with demands that the news media should strive to maintain certain journalistic standards. As summed up in McQuail (2000:150), among others, the media have an obligation to the wider society and media ownership is a public trust; news media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant and the media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct. By this treatise, media ownership is a form of stewardship and never an unlimited private franchise. That is to say, the media are set up to serve the intent of the public rather than personal interest. Also, Ugwuanyi (2005) in Davis (1991:7) notes that "social responsibility for the journalist means the ability to write news without threatening the social fabrics of the society". He added also that the media as a whole should be pluralistic and reflect the diversity of the society, giving access to various points of view and rights of reply.

CODES OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

Okunna (1993:27), states that the purpose of journalistic ethic is to stipulate rules, guidelines, norms and principles that would guide the journalist in making moral decisions. As a follow up to the deregulation of the broadcast industry in Nigeria, the Federal Government in 1992 set up through parliament, the National Broadcasting Commission. This commission is responsible for ensuring that, among other things national communication policies and principles are carried out. According to the NBC, 2006 code, section S.1.3, "news is sacred, therefore, sponsorship of news cast, commentaries, analysis, current affairs programmes and editorials detract from the integrity and predisposes a bias in favour of the sponsor. News programmes shall not be sponsored in any manner including the use of back drops". It also states that news shall be factual, and presented in a correct and fair manner without distortions, exaggerations or misrepresentations; materials omissions; or summarizations, (sect. S: 1:2, NBC 2006 code). If news is co-modified, it not only distorts the information, but it is also an insult to the intelligence of the audience. This point was corroborated by Onoja (2009) citing Adaba, (1998) when he said that charging and receiving fees by whatever name called to cover news events, company annual general meetings, weddings, funerals, workshops, seminars, events organized by charity organizations, stations are not only prostituting the integrity of news, but they are also insulting the audience and breaching the broadcasting code. In Nigeria, most people rely on the electronic media for most of their news need. This may not be unconnected with the high illiteracy rate, especially among the rural dwellers, and high cost of other news

media sources. If the broadcast stations charge people before they air their views, the indications are that they will marginalize majority of people who can not afford to pay the price, it will deny other contending parties a level playing ground, short charges the electorates, offends the principle of social justice and it will become a threat to the democratic process. An editorial in the Observer Newspaper of September 16,1996, states that commercializing coverage of political news is unacceptable, because the practice is capable of bringing back some of those ugly things which nurtured and fertilized politics of bitterness and rancour in the past Republic. Allowing moneybags to indiscriminately monopolize the air time to the detriment of other parties will lead to fragmentation of the society. It is not only the electronic media that is involved in this practice. In the newspapers, the so-called specialized pages of the property, IT and computer business and finance pages are prime examples of commercialized spaces. There is no attempt made to let the readers know that these spaces are paid for and they end up holding them as sacred as they would news. But the effects of broadcast messages are far reaching considering its peculiarities and characteristics. Onoja (2009) citing Gana (2001) points out that part of a station's responsibilities consist of upholding the highest standards of ethical practices, most easily expressed through the traditional journalistic values of honesty, fairness and objectivity, accuracy, completeness and cultural relevance among others. According to him, public service broadcasting upholds the principles of free speech and expression as well as free access to information. He went on to say that people know straightaways when the stuff they are being fed by national broadcasting stations are rubbish and given more choice they would switch off.

WHY DOES NEWS COMMERCIALIZATION THRIVE IN NIGERIA.

Commercialization of news began in Nigerian media houses as a result of the structural adjustment programme (SAP) introduced in 1986 and the eventual withdrawal of subsidies from government owned media houses (see Ekwo 1996, Ogbuoshi 2005, Onoja 2009). With the increasing rise in production cost and dwindling circulation, the media houses resort to all kinds of tricks including commercialization of the news to make money. This situation is what has led to a lot of compromise, with sensationalization of news stories and half truths reaching alarming stages. Arguing in favour of this practice, broadcasting organization of Nigeria (BON), an umbrella body for state owned stations said that they need the revenue to remain in business. However, Nwokoh (1996) states that the argument that auctioning of news will improve their revenue base does not hold water. He questioned: "Are they telling the public that they are in the throes of death and the elixir is the said auctioning? They should look at other things to sell. Politics is too sensitive a subject to be sold to the highest bidder". Just as the organization is subjected to economic pressure and tries all means not to sink, so too are individual journalists. Due to poverty and meagre salary, with greater demands on the journalists to perform, they resort to all forms of unethical practices. It goes with the following names: brown envelop, African kola, transport money, assistance egunje etc. The proponents of news commercialization are arguing that news commercialization helps to generate income for the media houses, helping them to work smoothly; It also helps to generate income for the individual journalists who otherwise might slump under the weight of the harsh economic realities. It has a psychological benefit for these journalists. They develop a sense of being appreciated by those in authority, who are even ready to offer payment. It helps to impose a form of forced taxation on the rich, as those who often pay for the "service" are the well to do in the society. It acts as a form of informal redistribution of income from the rich to the poor. It helps to create cordial working relationships between the media and the media users, especially the political class (Onyisi 1996:86). All these assertions centre on financial gains and poverty. No matter how genuine and plausible these reasons might look, they are unacceptable and dysfunctional. As have been stated earlier, it violates the ethics and code of conduct of journalists; affect information flow, leads to distortion of news, loss of focus on investigative journalism, delivering the majority of unsuspecting viewers to advertising barons.

CONCLUSION

News commercialization is a practice that has unfortunately come to stay with the Nigeria society as a result of economic and psychological considerations. Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) is supposed to serve the interest of the public. Serve as a purveyor of information through which both the rich and poor can express themselves freely. The media operators should know that by charging money, they are reducing their credibility in the eyes of the public. Instead of them to be controller of news, it is now the advert companies that determine the pace and flow of news, and what constitutes news at any point time

RECOMMENDATION

If the media houses should regain their glory and rightful place in the minds of the public, the practitioners should be adequately paid. It is only when they are well paid that they can disabuse their mind from sharp practices. Secondly, regular training and re-training should be organized for journalists to enable them continue to keep abreast and perform their basic roles to the society. Thirdly, media owners should not sacrifice public affairs and issue at alter of profit. They should realize that the electromagnetic waves they are using is a public property which they are holding in trust. Fourthly instead of selling news, the stations can think of other sources of revenue like investments if it is private stations and increased funding in the case of government stations. Finally, the relevant regulatory agencies should add more bite to their operations. They should go beyond publishing and re-publishing of codes by ensuring that the media houses are compelled to comply with the ethic of the profession in the interest, unity and development of the country.

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