

THE CHALLENGES AND FUTURE OF THE PRESS/MEDIA IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Essentially, the Press/Mass Media has been an un-negligible instrument in the organization and development of the society. It is a tool in the hands of elites and government functionaries with which to influence, reorientate, control and guide the masses, Nigeria as a nation - state is not an exception. However, the complexities associated with the origin, sustenance and administration of the Nigerian state, together with the inherent character of a multiethnic nation have tended to raise many challenges for and threaten the objective operation of the press/mass media in future. Thus, this paper in explaining these myriads of challenges, observed that multiplicity of languages, ownership of the communication industries, ethnicity, lack of technological skills and manpower together with economic crisis among other factors have hindered and determined the fate of information dissemination in Nigeria. If these problems are uncorrected, the Nigerian press/mass media shall degenerate to agencies of mass communication in the future. Thus, overcoming these, poses a challenge to the press/media industry both in the present and the future. Therefrom, this paper made some useful suggestions/communications on how to overcome these challenges and safeguard the future.

Introduction

The press/mass media as observed by Nwosu (1990:iii) in his forward to an edited work perform the following functions in any society:

- i. Servicing the political system by providing information, discussion and debate on public affairs,
- ii. Enlightening the public so as to make it capable of self government,
- iii. Safeguarding the rights of the individual by serving as a watch dog against government,
- iv. Servicing the economic system, primarily by bringing together the buyers and sellers of goods and services through the medium of advertising,
- v. Providing entertainment, and
- vi. Maintaining its own financial self-sufficiency so as to be free from the pressures of special interests, (see also Siebert et al, 1963).

The above roles are at variance with the fundamental goals/roles for which the press/mass media was first established in Nigeria. According to Wogu (2002:2), "the state power holders in Nigeria established different communication industries in the early days of colonialism both as sources of fund, and instrument for propagating the Western ideology and as an instrument to safeguard the status quo". From this, we extrapolate two important phenomena that have tended to reproduce myriads of problems and challenges to the communication systems in Nigeria. First, ownership of the press/media outfits determines and affects their roles and responsibilities in the society (Sobowale, 1977; Almaney, 1972 and Ugboaja, 1971). Thus, in Nigeria, it has been used as a tool in the hands of the proprietors for the pursuit of personal, group and ethnic interests. Secondly, the colonial origin of the Nigerian Press/Mass Media has made it a servant of neo-colonialism who suffers from its consequences such as socio-political and economic crisis, and dependency. The forceful amalgamation of over 250 ethnic nationalities in Nigeria by the colonial power has also created the problem of language barrier and ethnic sentiments in the communication industry.

These have re-directed the press/mass media away from its objective role, deter its objective development and threaten the future of the press/mass media in Nigeria. Consequently, this paper has as its central focus, the expositions of these problems, and inherent challenges with a view to recommend appropriately for positive development of the press/mass media in Nigeria. This shall safeguard, reform and develop the Nigerian media network for the future.

To do this effectively, this paper shall examine the growth of media industries, its roles, the character of Nigeria media industry, problems and challenges and in the end, make a case for the future.

The Development Of The Press/Mass Media In Nigeria

Globally, an overview of the development of the press/mass media reveals three stages of growth, these are the transformation of media institutions into large-scale commercial consensus, the globalization of communication, and the development of electronically mediated forms of communication (Thompson, 1999:76). The real beginning could be traced to the medieval Europe's development of printing in the late fifteenth century (Thompson, 1999:151-2) progressively, other communication networks such as the cable systems, electromagnetic spectrum, satellite and telegraph systems, computer networks etc were invented. Communication organizations, agencies and rules were either developed or formed.

In Nigeria, time and space are constraints to a detailed review of both the origin, and sequence of the establishment of communication industries (Wogu (b) 2002: 6). The fact remain that they were established as a result of political and ideological reasons/forces (Ainslie, 1966:22). The colonial masters established the first ever communication industry in 1932 in Nigeria and monopolized its use for the service of their interests (Ansah, 1985).

The above necessitate the establishment of rival and anti-colonial communication networks such as the Pilot by different nationalist movements and individuals.

This was necessitated by the inability of government owned media to watch its master, and their monopolistic use by the government as instruments of propaganda, deformation, castigation and calumny against opponents. In addition to these, Wogu (2002a;7) observed that post independent socio-political activities that were characterized by non-nationalistic multi-ethnic nationalities, sectionalism, volatile religious fanaticism and the struggle for perpetuation of dominance, increased both the number and dimension of communication outfits established in Nigeria. This change is necessary to reflect changes in operations and structures and t reflect changes in situations.

Thus between 1960 and 2002, over forty-eight privately owned communication networks ranging from private radio Stations, private satellite stations, private television houses to private cable and satellite systems have been established (Federal Ministry of Information Bulletin, February 2003 referred). These excludes numerous Radio, Television and satellite/cable network systems owned and managed by the 36 states plus the Federal Government of Nigeria. Contemporarily, most of these communication outfits are being computerized and or digitalized such as the NITEL.

It should therefore be observed that the Press/Media passed through the 1st and last stage of global media development. However, none in its real sense is nationalistic -not even the government owned media outfits. They serve their proprietors instead of the nation.

The Character Of Nigerian Media Industry

The press/mass media in Nigeria is fundamentally and originally partisan (Coleman, 1963:170). Both their operations and character of the information disseminated depend on who owns what, the situation/dynamics of the period and the contending interests/issues. Even with the Government owned media outfits, their operations depend on which ethnic group/class controls it.

Thus, with the proliferation of communication industries separately and/or owned by individuals, groups and different levels of government, clash of interests, crises and conflicts became multiplied/enlarged. They are agents and tools of propaganda, war against perceived opponents and veritable instrument for advancing ethnic/tribal course. Thus they exploit and use all tribal variables, such as language phobic culture and organizations, in the pursuit of both personal and assumed tribal agenda.

Consequently, the press/mass media in Nigeria is to a great extent unpatriotic, unconstructive, not development modeled subjective and biased. Through their communications, analyses and editorials, they have tended to precipitate crises of unlimited magnitude. There has been enhanced by the obtainable environment of ethnophobia, ethnicity and historical antecedents (Lippman, 1923:23-25; Schramm and Robert, 1972:392). Thus the press/mass media in Nigeria, has an abiding potential for initiating, inducing or exacerbating conflict in the society.

Basically, the above have enshrined Nigeria's press/media production in inefficiency and professional amateurism. Mediocres are employed in the name of ethnic nationalism while the bureaucratic principles are almost ignored. The best of Nigerian press/media production is seen only when justice is skewed against their proprietors. Outside this, any other thing can be sent out in the name of protecting and advancing the interest of their proprietors. Such pieces of information are characterized by inconsistencies, and ineffectiveness.

The Problems And Challenges Facing The Press/Mass Media In Nigeria

As the influence of media proprietors on the character of information dissemination is inevitable (Almaney, 1972:345), and Nigeria has many of such with differing nationalistic origin and antagonistic interest, objective media/press coverage is both a problem and a challenge. In many countries, of the world, this multi-rooted origin of proprietors obtain, yet the experience is different.

Nwosu (1990:88) identified the inability of many Nigerian communicators to communicate as a serious problem facing the industry. They have not taken time to learn the art and science of communication and much emphasis has not been given to this in schools.

As observed earlier in one of my works, Ansah (1986:17) noted that financial factor is one of the most serious problems confronting and limiting Nigerian media houses. The proprietors of such networks hardly release the needed fund for the acquisition of modern transmission and reception equipment, strengthen administrative management, maintain equipment, recruit and train personnel services. The little that may have been provided are either mismanaged or embezzled. Lack of fund also causes non-payment of salaries and allowances which in turn cripple the operations of such establishment.

The problem of mass illiteracy and the absence of a lingua franca have to a great extent hindered communication services in Nigeria. The illiteracy obstacle and the nature of media ownership in Nigeria have made communication in Nigeria tend towards the urban middle and upper class (Weddell and Pillsworth, 1974). Related to this problem is the phenomenon of multiplicity of languages. Goody (1965) attributed the inefficiency of Nigeria's communication system to this. According to Hachten (1971), we have over 250 languages in Nigeria. This makes it impossible for media information to be received by those who don't hear, speak nor understand English language.

Coupled with the above problems is that of heterophilousity, where both the communicator and the audience came both from a different background and had different orientation/training.

Lack of sufficient media outfits to match the ever growing population of Nigeria is another problem. Newspapers and magazines production fluctuated and even telephone communication has been greatly affected by this paucity of channels of communication. The introduction of the GSM has even worsened the case. Not only that it is an exclusive preserve of the rich it is also not functional in over 65% of Nigerian territory due to absence of the wave system in such areas. Thus, both the GSM and available telephone lines exist only in the cities or townships. Considering the fact that over 80% of Nigerians live in the country side (Nwosu, 1990:92) this, system of communication is both insufficient and segregative. It therefore becomes a serious challenge to the entire communication industry in Nigeria to break this jinx.

Technological factor is another problem facing the press/media industry in Nigeria. The use of obsolete technology, the inability to acquire new ones, lack of maintenance, lack of technical skill and computer systems have also limited the smooth functioning of the media industry. These have contributed to incessant breakdown of transmissions and poor system of information dissemination.

In addition to the above, other miscellaneous factors such as perennial power instability, vandalization of NEPA and communication equipment/materials, lack of maintenance, lack of spare parts and ethno-partisan politics have fundamentally influenced the operations of media industries in Nigeria. The politicization and tribalisation of media industries are also strong impediments to their operations. Unless, and until countless myriads of problems are solved, the future of the press/mass media in Nigeria, remains bleak.

A Case For True Future: Recommendations

Mokwugo Okoye noted that if certain socio-political trends of present-day life in the country, such

as religious fanaticism and ethnic particularism, should persist, there might be no Nigeria or its press in the future. However, to make a case for the press/media in the future, the traditional role of the press should be recalled here. They should "exercise surveillance over the environment and correlate members of a society to that environment, illuminate the social, economic and political fabric of the nation and stimulate public opinion on the key issues" (Okoye, 1990).

The Nigerian press/mass media should dedicate itself to the cause of truth and human freedom rather than dance the music of its proprietors. Hidden acts detrimental to public interest should be revealed. The first duty of the press which is to obtain the earliest and most correct intelligence of the events of the time and instantly disclosing them, should apply. The press/media lives to disclose.

As many schools of journalism have been established in Nigeria, serious training with regard to news writing, broadcasting, features of and correct languages, style together with a deep knowledge of the theory, techniques, and practices of communication, should be given.

If the future of the press/mass media in Nigeria is to be improved, a complete re-orientation and restructuring of both our economic system and planning are needed. This shall aid greater and a more positive economic growth. In effect, advances in technology, purchase of communication equipment and spare parts together with the recruitment and training of personnel, shall be made easy and possible. New wave stations and communication systems shall be established and maintained even in the remotest part of the country side.

As an antidote to the tribal/partisan character of the Nigeria's communication industry, a central appraisal/evaluation committee should be established. This committee should be made up of nominees from the three tiers of government, ethnic/tribal bodies, and the academic. The committee shall be invested with constitutional powers to confiscate operational licenses of any who fails the annual or Bi-annual evaluation test. However, to abdicate bias and victimization, the constitution should equally specify the modalities for the condition for such evaluation. Anti-tribal/partisan laws should be passed by respective legislatures in respect of media operations.

As language is a great obstacle to communication in Nigeria, and a war is to be waged against ethnicity, Nigeria has to develop a lingua franca and re-orientate its citizens towards nationalistic spirit.

Summary And Conclusion

After introducing the paper, we embarked on a review of the sequence of media development. Globally, it passed through three stages of growth namely: transformation into larger scale business concern, globalization of communication and the invention of electronically mediated form of communication. In Nigeria, it grew from being a colonial instrument of oppression to instrument of liberalization and then an apparatus of class/ethnic antagonism. However, it added business concerns to its political concern after colonialism, this particularly in the 20th century and 21st century.

This paper observed with dismay that the above structured and sustained the partisan and antagonistic feature of the Nigerian media. These, regardless of myriads of media outfits springing up in Nigeria have tended to reproduce itself in ethnicity, inefficiency unpatriotism and conflicts.

This paper also observed that in addition to the above, many problems/factors have cooperatively worked to hinder the operations of the press/mass media in Nigeria. These problems include among others lack of objectivity, finance, lack well trained professionals, illiteracy and absence of lingua franca, technology, insufficient media outfits, incessant power failure and vandalization of NEPA and communication equipments.

Consequently, the paper opined that if the above problems and/or challenges are not overcome, there may not exist journalism, the press/mass media in the future. Therefrom, economic restructuring and growth was identified as the first and fundamental issue to be embarked upon. This, when achieved shall lead to the implementation of other recommendations given by this paper. We equally recommend for the establishment of a central appraisal committee and a legislation banning/removing ethnophobia and ethnicity in the operations of the pres/mass media in Nigeria. We are also of the opinion that the earlier a lingua franca is founded for Nigeria, the better and hope for the press/mass media in Nigeria. Without these, journalism, the press/mass media have no future in Nigeria.

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