Commercialization of News and National Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Over the years, news commercialization has been a subject of concern in media studies. It is a widely discussed topic that receives scholarly attention at several academic forums and platforms. It is against this backdrop that this study examines the implications of news commercialization to national development in Nigeria. Through exploration of secondary sources, the study established that news commercialization is a practice that is not just in vogue within the Nigerian media landscape, but breads other unwholesome media practices that contravene the ethos of the profession. The study argues that commercialization of news has an adverse effects on Nigeria's development as trivial issues are often reported due to their economic value to the media outfits at the expense of pressing development issues. Against this background, the study recommends that media proprietors should not slaughter national development on the altar of economic gratifications, but should negotiate a blend between the two to live up to expectations of the revered profession. This will enable them to make greater impact on the quest for national development that has remained a topmost agenda in the country amidst economic pressures.

Keywords: Commercialization, National, development, News, Nigeria.

Introduction

Media outfits worldwide are direct reflection of the political, economic and social environments within which they operate; suffice it to say that there is a nexus between the political economy of a nation and how its media operate. The veracity of the above claim hinges on the fact that Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1984), three media research "gurus", articulated in their classic four theories of the press that "the press always takes the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operate". Peterson and Schramm (1984) believe that the media reflect the system of social control that adjust the relations of individuals and institutions and that an understanding of these societal mechanics is vital to any systematic understanding of the press. The implication of the above assertion is not far fetch from the fact that the conducts of the mass media are always shaped by the nature of their environment.

In Nigeria, the economic policy orientation during the 1970s left the country ill prepared for the eventual collapse of oil prices in the first half of the 1980s (Obadan, 2000). The above challenge according to Stephen, Omokhudu and Anthony, (2016) resulted to the initiation of the Structural Adjustment Program which did kick start in 1986 when the International Monetary Fund (IMF) insisted that one of the conditions the foreign loans requested by the then Shagari's Administration can be granted was to divest ownership in the management and control of some public enterprises *(the media industry inclusive)* (Adeyemo & Adeleke, 2008). This finally resulted to the announcement of intention by the then General Babangida government to divest its holdings in certain key sectors of the economy and subsequently

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promulgated the Privatization and Commercialization Act No. 25 of 1988. The above development birthed what is known as "news commercialization" today. Therefore, suffice it to say that news commercialization is not the media creation but rather a national economic policy anchored on the IMF economic reforms of the 1980s that led to privatization of the entire economic sector in line with IMF recommendations.

Stephen, Omokhudu and Anthony (2016) opined that the commercialization policy is a good policy measure; hence it is supposed to be pursued with vigour, truth, sincerity and transparency. Notwithstanding, Omoleke and Adesopo (2005) observed that the commercialization policy has over the years been abused. For instance, in the name of commercialization, news has become commercial product where important developments, especially in the rural areas, are pushed aside by unimportant or even trivial news items concerning urban events and the activities of personalities (Omenugha and Oji 2008).

Over the years, 'news commercialization' which is a situation whereby media stations raise revenue by charging fees for news reports they should normally carry free has been extensively discussed in different academic researches (Una, 2014). Several reasons trail this increasing research attention at the global level. For instance, Sean McBride's Commission which was set up in 1980 by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) states that in most third world countries, news has become commercial product where important developments, especially in the rural areas, are pushed aside by unimportant or even trivial news items concerning urban events and the activities of personalities (Omenugha and Oji, 2008). This implies there is an on-going alteration in journalism practice that is at variant with the application of the traditional core news values.

In an ideal ambience, journalists are supposed to be objective, balance and accurate in their reportage and also to be guided by the traditional core news values which include but not limited to timeliness, human interest, oddity, novelty etc. Notwithstanding the economic reality on ground serves as catalyst that encouraged news commercialization thereby making its practice ubiquitous in most media outfits in Nigeria. It is unarguable that news commercialization now makes "money" a news determinant whereby the amount of money received from a news source determines the newsworthiness of a story. Based on the above view, Nwodu (2012) corroborates that the traditional criteria for judging or determining newsworthy events, ideas, places and personalities are fast giving way to "cash and carry journalism."

Despite the fact that media managers in most cases try to justify the notion behind news commercialization, conversely, communication scholars still perceive it as an issue that need to be addressed (Nwanne, 2018). It is against this backdrop that this study interrogates the implications of news commercialization on national development in Nigeria.

News Commercialization: A Conceptual Discussion

News commercialization is 'any action intended to boost profit that interferes with a journalist's or news organization's best effort to maximize public understanding of those issues and events that shape the community they claim to serve' (McManus, 2009). Also, Onoja (2009) sees news commercialization as "a situation whereby stations begin to raise revenue by charging fees for news reports they should normally carry free". In his view, Nwodu (2006) defines news commercialization as the deliberate presentation of sponsored information to unsuspecting media audience who perceive these information as conventional public interest-oriented news.

In his point of view, Adaba (2000) establishes a succinct distinction between the legitimate sales of airtime for paid messages adjacent to or within breaks in the news and charging news sources for the privilege of covering and relaying their pre-paid views or messages as news. According to him;

> In the first case, what the sponsors are buying is the credibility of the newscast and newscasters to confer status by association on their company's logo, message or product" while in the latter: What the broadcast station is doing is selling cheaply the integrity of its newscast and newscasters by attesting to the "truth" of the claims of the so called "sponsor". By also charging and receiving fees by whatever name called, to cover 'news' of company annual conference meetings, weddings, funerals, chieftaincy installations, town festivals, workshops and seminars, even events organized by charity organizations, the stations are not only prostituting the integrity of news, but equally insulting their audience and breaching the National Broadcasting Code (p.10)

From the foregoing, it is apt to infer that the abuse the commercialization policy via news commercialization is an unethical practice that has the potency to retard development as trivial issues could be reported at the detriment of development related beats. Hence, there is the need for a paradigm shift, in other words journalists need to "go back to the drawing board" by adhering to the traditional core news values which include but not limited to novelty, proximity, prominence, human interest, oddity, and timelines.

Literature Review

There are reasonable number of previous studies carried out by scholars on news commercialization and its implication on journalism profession and national development. One of these studies is the one conducted by Melka (2019), who studied the perception of Journalists on trend of Commercialization in the case of Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC) Documentary Programs and Business News. Fifty five participants (from EBC and four ministries) were selected by using multistage sampling. They were asked to check level of their experience, department, and journalistic professionalism and ethics. Findings of revealed that media commercialization has a negative relationship with the commercialized TV productions credibility, social responsibility and journalistic professionalism values, and journalist's instrumentalist approach has a negative relationship with commercialized TV productions credibility.

The study also found that the absence of fixed budget from government forced EBC to be financially dependent on sponsors and this situation challenges the station's journalistic ethics and professional values. Furthermore, sponsored programs were more of promotional and violate the station's editorial policy, and journalists' independence on content development. Clients primarily sponsor EBC documentary programs and news to promote their service and products and build a positive image of their organizations. The study, therefore recommended that EBC should give a critical emphasis on journalistic ethics and professional values and government should fund the station to rescue the station from falling for the interests of its clients.

In a similar study, Oberiri (2016) examined the perception of news commercialization by journalists in Nigeria and the implications on news credibility with special reference to Journalists in Jalingo Metropolis. The quantitative survey design was used with survey as instrument of data collection. Findings of the study revealed that news commercialization affects objectivity and balance in reporting. The study further revealed that poor remuneration, personal greed and corruption are some of the reasons why news commercialization strives. The study recommended among other things that media professional bodies should be serious in maintaining ethics in the media industry by sanctioning defaulting journalists to ensure that they adhere to laid-down codes of practice; sound education and professional training of journalists should be provided this will serve as a good antidote for solving the problem of news commercialization abuse.

Ezeah and Aladi (2019) analysed the views of audience of Minna metropolis on the Influence of news commercialization on credibility of broadcast news content. The survey design was used, with Social Responsibility as the theoretical framework for the study. Findings of the study revealed that news commercialization crumbles credibility of news since only the views of the rich and powerful are carried. This shows that the audience strongly agrees that only the views of the rich and powerful are carried in the news. The study recommended that the broadcast media can, through news bulletins, commentaries, current affairs etc., bring news to the door step of the common man on the streets to regain their confidence and trust once again.

Lwanga (2002) carried out a research in Uganda to investigate the level to which commercialization in the face of liberalization and commercialization of media services has affected Radio Uganda's programming. He employed qualitative and quantitative methods of investigation. Findings revealed that although Radio Uganda still has certain public service principles and values, but programming policy has increasingly been changed by commercial considerations, which is evident from the present rise of commercialized programmes and a decline in education and development programmes. The study revealed some of the causes of this problem to be limitations of finance and other resources which have jeopardized the roles and character of public service radio programming. Further, findings revealed that radio stations in Uganda are established for profit making rather than serve interest of the public. The study recommended that license fee be developed as a source of revenue for Radio Uganda., government should inject more funding into public service broadcasting institution to supplement other sources of income, before granting them autonomy. The study noted that while advertising and sponsoring bring in considerable amount of revenue, it should not take place in such a manner as to that undermine the listener's interest in Radio programming.

Udomisor and Kenneth (2013) carried out a research to ascertain the impact of news commercialization on Nigeria broadcasting commission communication policy and revealed that "news commercialization is a practice that has unfortunately come to stay with the Nigeria society as a result of economic and psychological considerations. The study noted that 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. It further warned that 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 in time. They suggested that if the media organizations must 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 with current practices and perform their basic roles in the society. Thirdly, media owners should not sacrifice public affairs and issue on thealtar of profit. They should realize that the electromagnetic waves they are using are a public property which they are holding in trust.

This review gives insights into understanding the nature of news commercialization and its effect on national development especially in a developing nation like Nigeria. The reviewed studies present perspectives on news commercialization in the media industry and the issues that have continued to stimulate and nurture debates on the practice.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Media Ownership theory. The media Ownership Theory was developed in 1984 by Altschul (Maheshwari, 2015). According to the theorist Altschul (1984, p.254) the "content of the press is directly correlated with the interest of those who finance the press". Altschul argues that where a media organization is commercially owned, the contents will reflect the point of view of the news organization's owners or advertisers. In an attempt to redefine the media ownership theory, Shoemaker and Reese (1991) found that news organizations funded primarily by commercial sources are far likely to use objectivity and newsworthiness as their principal standard in making news judgment. This implies that advertisers have the potency to becloud a media organization's judgment of news. Maheshwari, (2015) summarized the core tenets of the media ownership theory thus:

> The content of the news is built into the economic objective of the company. Though in some rare cases, the owner may choose to make profits secondary to an ideological goal, such as promoting a particular agenda, the organization can't indefinitely ignore the economic goal. Especially when media firms are owned by stockholders, public service is usually sacrificed for the sake of profitability (p.3).

From the foregoing, suffice it to say that the nature of the economic ambience within which the media operate has the potency to affect the objectivity of its modus operandi. The above claim is in tandem with Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1984), assertion that “the press always takes the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operate”. Simply put, a media outfit that operate in an ambience where it primarily depends on commercial sources for fund is likely to be influenced by advertisers which may likely hamper with its effectiveness in promoting development issues.

From the foregoing, suffice it to say that the media ownership theory has a nexus with the current study because once advertisers or people with other special interests paid certain amount of money to media outfits to air or publish their stories, such media outfits project the interest and ideologies of the advertisers thereby relegating other salient developmental issues to the background. Simply put, the adage that “he who pays the piper, dictates the tune” comes to play.

News Commercialization and National Development

The media of mass communication more especially the broadcast media are in a strategic position to accelerate development within the ambience they operate. According to Chiaakan, Shammah and Yarius (2015, p.1), “both developed and developing nations fix their hope on the media in order to persevere in cultivating development track.” The veracity of the above assertion is that the broadcast media’s core functions of preservation of cultural norms and values, educating the populace on salient issues and boosting economies of nations via adverts and other marketing communication strategies for development purposes.

In Nigeria, the defining moment for the broadcast media came in 1992, when a new broadcast media regulatory authority, the National Broadcasting Commission, (NBC), was established. This was in response to plurality of the broadcast media as practised in the liberal democracies of the world. In line with the Act establishing the NBC, Idachaba (2015), Ihechu and Okugo (2013), aver that NBC regulatory functions are in line with the implementation of the National Mass Communication policy, which covers national motivation, mobilisation and the attainment of national or public interests. This implies that broadcasting in Nigeria should influence societal values positively; and in so doing improve and strengthen the social, cultural, economic, political and technological values of the nation and set agenda for public good (NBC, 2010).

However, Akinreti (2017, p.5) observes that recently, lopsided reportage by different broadcast media outfits most especially government owned media “fuelled criticism among public analysts, scholars and stakeholders that broadcast media licence is being used for political patronage and profit making instead of developmental purposes.’

From the foregoing, it is apt to infer that some broadcast media outfits in Nigeria have derailed from their core developmental functions as enshrined in the Code of the NBC. In other words, despite avalanche of efforts by the NBC to effectively regulate the broadcast industry in Nigeria, some broadcast stations and journalists have, on different occasions, indulged in diverse unethical conducts that are against the codes of the Commission.

News commercialization which is one of the factors that retard development is not a novel subject matter in the Nigerian news industry. Tracing its origin, Omenugha and Oji (2008), narrate that 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. SAP which was an economic policy aimed at encouraging self-reliance and reduction of over dependence on government business made most social institutions to think of shoddy tricks including commercialization of the news as an alternative survival strategy to make up for the removed government subvention. It is imperative to note that the commercialization policy itself is not the core concern of this paper but how the policy has been abused over the years. Commenting on how commercialization has been abused in the Nigerian media ambience, Asogwa and Asemah (2012) captured it thus:

> There is an increasing commercialization of the media in Nigeria, the situation that has brought the integrity of the mass media enterprise to question. The social responsibility theory holds that while the press functions as a free enterprise, as guaranteed by the libertarian theory, it must be responsible to a society in which it operates. Based on this theory, the mass media are able to raise issues of public importance. Our mass media today do not seem to perform this social duty as issues that set agenda for national development are compromised for "naira and kobo". This abuse at practice has received the attention of mass communication scholars and other stakeholders who now advocate for a reinvention of our media contents to make the media realize their potentials as tools for national development (p.13).

The above view implies that the abuse of the commercialization policy has avalanche of hazardous effects on both journalism profession and national development. The above assertion is associated with the fact that news commercialization has the potency to make journalists ignore news events that are geared towards fostering development and go for stories that fetch them "food on their tables."

One of the core implications of news commercialization on national development is the fact that it encourages perpetuity in the voicing of the opinion of the super-rich while suppressing that of the numerous poor who may have newsworthy information to share but lack the financial muscle to pay for the airing or publishing of the news (Acholonu, and Pepple 2018). This means that the voices of the downtrodden in rural areas who need good healthcare, electricity, good roads would not be heard thereby leading to an increase in mortality rate, diseases, illiteracy etc. which are all enemies of development.

In the same vein, news commercialization also erodes the credibility of the news medium. Today, some mass media audience members in Nigeria hardly believe the information they receive from the local media because of this credibility problem. This insinuates that the "deceitful presentation" of news stories by media outfits may temper with the credibility of these outfits which has the potency of making audience members to render developmental subject matters unserious and incredible. Finally, since the news items are paid for, it becomes problematic for editor to edit news item based on known professional standards or principles. The stories become so sacrosanct to the extent that editors are constrained to edit the purported news items on the basis of what might interest the sponsors, as against public interest. In this case, money becomes the news determinant.

Concluding Remarks

Evidences from the studies reviewed unravelled that news commercialization is not the creation of the media as erroneously claimed by some literature in corpuses but rather a national policy recommended by the IMF in the 1980s. Therefore, the stance of the paper is that commercialization itself is not unethical, bad or dishonourable as perceived by many rather what makes it bad is its abuse by greedy media owners and practitioners. Against this backdrop, this paper recommends that there is the need for transparency and objectivity in the area of commercialization. To achieve the above, Ogbimi suggest that the suitability of a program for a nation can be explored through an examination of historical data and an examination of the logic. From the foregoing, it is apposite for journalists to align themselves with the core objectives of the commercialization policy which are: to restructure and diversify the productive base of the economy; achieve fiscal stability and positive balance of payments; set the basis for a sustained non-inflationary or minimal inflationary growth, and reduce the dominance of unproductive investments in the public sector.

In order to achieve the objective of the commercialization policy in the media industry, media proprietors should not slaughter national development on the altar of economic gratifications, but should negotiate a blend between the two to live up to expectations of the revered profession. This will enable them to make greater impact on the quest for national development that has remained a topmost agenda in the country amidst economic pressures.

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