

Evolution of the Media in a Capital City: The Case of the Rise of Abuja as a News Centre

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Abstract

This paper investigates the sourcing of news, through the prism of geography. It locates Abuja, the growing capital city of Nigeria as a case, arguing that like most other things, news sources are usually constructed affairs. Rather than being an absolute affair, a news source is a creation of intermixing variables, which grow over time and space; and which can increase or decline in the performance of this role, with changes in circumstances. The paper evaluates the growth of Abuja as a prime news centre from the time it was named as a future capital, up to the time a definite date of relocation was announced, and from when it became the seat of presidential leadership, to present date. While the paper reviews the value of the city as a veritable source of stories for the local and international media, it notes the different tendencies of the news reports. This is in the sense that while many are regular and heartening, various others rightly reflect the perversions in the land. In this case, another kind of balancing in news reporting is implicated: one that focuses on the good and the bad (not just the other side, whether good or bad) even without a deliberate attempt at doing so. The city produces more than enough good, and then a corresponding mess to balance up the former, in a back and forth approach, in what is symptomatic of an unbiased reporting of a news centre.

1. INTRODUCTION

A former Nigerian military leader, Gen. Murtala Ramat Mohammed had in 1975 announced government's intention to relocate the nation's capital from the colonial creation of Lagos, in South-West Nigeria to a more central place in the hinterland. To achieve this, government created a search committee led by Justice Akinola Aguda, to recommend an appropriate place. Oyenuga notes that "General Murtala Mohammed on August 5, 1975 appointed a seven-member panel under the chairman of Justice Akintola Aguda to study and advise the government on how best the question of an ideal federal capital could be talked. Other members of the panel were Dr. Tai Solarin, Col. Monsignor Pedro Martins, Alhaji Mohammed Musa Isma., Chief Owen Fiebai, Dr. Ajato Gandollu and professor D.K. Ogun. Their term of reference was to re-examine the dual role of Lagos as a federal and state capital and advise on the desirability or otherwise of Lagos playing that role.

"In the event of committee recommendation that the federal capital move out of Lagos, to suggest suitable location taking regards to the need for accessibility to and from other parts of the federation. Finally, to examined all other relevant factors which will enable the military government in taking the right decision. Memoranda collated and after five months of careful consideration of all relevant criteria such as; centrality, health, condition, low population density, availability of land for expansion, physical planning conveniences and ethnic accord, the panel, on December 10, 1975 submitted it report with a far reaching recommendation that the nation' capital be moved out of Lagos to a site north of the confluence of Rivers Niger and Benue an area located south of Suleja in Niger state. This area is what is today referred to as Abuja"

Security considerations were key to the need for relocation in the opinion of the opinion of the military government and in the appreciation of the panelists. A nation's capital, they reason ought to be in an hinterland, for it to be able to deal with external belligerence and internal rebellions. The Gen. Murtala Mohammed administration eventually agreed with the submissions of the panel, resolving to work on another capital of about 8,000 square kilometres, adding, that the newly suggested place is not only "central", but "good and tolerable climate. Besides, it has "land availability and use, adequate water supply, low population density, physical planning convenience, security and multi-access possibility. The area is not within control of major ethnic groups, in the country. We believe that the new capital created on such viral as suggested will be for all Nigerians, a symbol of the oneness and unity. The federal capital territory will belong to all Nigerians". In making this move, Gen. Mohammed was regarded as bold, decisive and patriotic, as he gained the reputation of a performer, who prioritizes national interest above other things.

Oyenuga analysis then added: "Two days after the broadcast, on February 5, Decree No 6 of 1975, cited as the federal Capital Territory was promulgated. The degree vested ownership and control of all land in the area on the federal government. The primary intention of general Murtala was to relocate the inhabitant of Abuja wholesomely to places of their choice from within the three states out of which Abuja was carved -Niger Nasarawa and Kogi. The idea was designed to reinforce the status of the dreamland as a land of equal opportunity for all Nigerians".

The idea of relocation had now been pronounced, but it was not until December 15th, 1991 that the actual relocation was done, through the moving of military president Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida from the

hitherto Lagos headquarters, to Abuja, in his famous “One leg in, One leg out”, speech. The movement of President Babangida meant a lot of things to different people, both in the private and public sectors, and in the local and international community. It led to private and public sector readjustments, and had several other dimensions. The media, the focus of this paper, had its fair share.

2. METHODOLOGY

This work is based on qualitative research, through observation. As a media practitioner, I have been a naturally keen follower of the evolution of Abuja. My position as an observer has also been helped by my active involvement in the coverage of the city as a journalist, writer, an agitated essayist, and as a long time media manager. Secondary data has also been added to the above through reviews and examination of relevant literature on the development of the city. The two techniques have helped in providing the data for the assessment, evaluation and in the explanation of how an almost barren land, marginally inhabited by some locals, grew to become a much desired location, eventually turning out to become one of the most important generators of news in the land.

3. THE MAKING OF A CAPITAL CITY AND THE COMING OF THE INSTITUTIONS

First, Abuja is analyzed as “a planned city, which was built mainly in the 1980s. It officially became Nigeria's capital on 12 December 1991, replacing Lagos, though the latter remains the country's most populous city. Abuja's geography is defined by Aso Rock, a 400-metre monolith left by water erosion. The Presidential Complex, National Assembly, Supreme Court and much of the city extend to the south of the rock. Zuma Rock, a 792-metre monolith, lies just north of the city on the road to Kaduna State.

“At the 2006 census, the city of Abuja had a population of 776,298, making it one of the ten most populous cities in Nigeria. According to the United Nations, Abuja grew at the rate of 139.7% between 2000 and 2010, making it the fastest growing city in the world. As of 2015, the city is still experiencing an annual growth of at least 35%, still retaining its position as the fastest growing city on the African continent and one of the fastest in the world. Abuja has witnessed a huge influx of people into the city; the growth has led to the emergence of satellite towns such as Karu Urban Area, Suleja, Gwagwalada, Lugbe, Kuje and smaller settlements to which the planned city is sprawling. The unofficial metropolitan area of Abuja has a population of well over three million and comprises the fourth largest metropolitan area in Nigeria, surpassed only by Lagos, Kano and Ibadan. Significant sights include the Nigerian National Mosque and the Nigerian National Christian Centre. The city is served by the Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport. Abuja is known for being one of the few purpose-built capital cities in Africa as well as being one of the wealthiest” (Wikipedia, Online: Accessed 23/08/2016).

Years later and in demonstration of the expansion of Abuja in all spheres, I had argued elsewhere through particular traffic and facilities that “Today, traffic congestion in Abuja compares with, and is in some ways worse than that of Lagos. For instance, the 10 minute trip from the city centre to Karu-Nyanya-Mararaba can take about two hours after close of work on some days. Coming the other way, it can take two hours or more for commuters to reach the city centre from any of these locations. To beat traffic, some workers leave home as early as 4am, or wait until the rush hour and saunter in to their offices at 11am.

I stressed further: “While the number of vehicles on Abuja’s road has multiplied and an effective public transport system is still lacking, the major deficiency is the lack of traffic management scheme. And the minister does not need to go too far: It only takes 1 hour to fly to Lagos from Abuja for the minister to see what the Lagos State Traffic Management Authority (LASTMA) has done in managing the legendary traffic snarls of Lagos and bringing sanity to the roads. The tragedy of Abuja is that nearly eight years after former FCT minister Nasir El-Rufai left office, his achievements still sets the benchmark in terms of development of the territory’s master plan and forward-thinking projects” (Suleiman, 2014)

With the movement of President Babangida in 1991, many private and public institutions began adjusting as well, as earlier said. Attention began shifting to Abuja. For the media under review, most of them had had their head offices in Lagos. Now however, they have to do some movement, which they started with the relocation, first of their state house correspondents/reporters. Public media organisations like the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA), *The Daily Times*, *The New Nigerian*, and the many state newspapers had had some presence in Abuja beforehand.

With the movement however, those presences were bound to be beefed up. Bureaus were quickly created by many, and they were being manned by heads, while two, three, four, five, or six reporters could work with the head of the place. For the private media houses, quite a lot did not pay attention to the coverage of the city until the movement. Now regardless, they had to do it. Transfers from their Dodan Barracks (the Lagos Seat of government) base had to begin in earnest. Many of them including *The Guardian*, *National Concord*, *The Mail*, *Nigerian Tribune*, *Vanguard*, *Sketch*, and state newspaper representative had to be dispatched to Abuja. In Lagos, state house reports used to be signed off as being from *Dodan Barracks, Lagos*. In Abuja, the signing off

line became *Aso Rock, Abuja*.

While media movement to Abuja became pronounced, local Abuja newspapers started sprawling as well. The thinking was to report the new seat of government very well. The plan was to give appropriate coverage to the city. In Lagos, there were papers like *Lagos Weekend*, *Lagos Horizon*, and *Lagos Life*, amongst others. These ones were somewhat being modeled after prominent publications like the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Philadelphia Herald*, and similar others. The philosophy behind these papers was the complete generation of news stories from the length and breadth of a city, or as a celebration of a city's importance, or to maximally cover a city for the readers and audience outside the city. Abuja city newspapers which came up included the *Abuja Newswatch*, *The Abuja Times*, *Abuja Today*, *Abuja Inquirer*, and *Abuja Mirror*, amongst others. Some newspapers like National Concord had dedicated *Pull-Outs* for the city. It was called *Abuja Concord*.

The Aso Rock presidential villa was initially the right focal point. Stories and reports centered on the activities of the military president. Gradually though, this started shifting, as stories and reports began involving other spheres as they concerned the new seat of government. This development was reflected in the further transfers and recruitment of specialised beat reporters to the city. The reporters were hitherto in the head offices of the media organisations. With the focus of top government activities now shifting to Abuja, they had to move alongside the state house correspondents to Abuja as well. Some of the beats that got early attention in terms of manpower deployment include Defence, Transport and Aviation, Energy, Sports, Economics, Politics, Education, Health, Judiciary, Environment, and Agriculture. Following much later were Entertainment, Business, Religious Affairs, Arts, Culture, Society, and Foreign Affairs/Diplomatic.

As this was happening, the coverage of Abuja became a core priority for new media organisations. Attention was being given to the recruitment of experienced reporters, with the creative acumen to report the city. The focus was to report it as well as other cities like Lagos, Kaduna, Enugu, Port-Harcourt, and Kano. While Lagos for instance, hosted a long list of newspaper headquarters, Kaduna had its share with vibrant Newspapers like the *New Nigerian*, *The Democrat*, and *The Reporter*. Kano was popular with *Triumph* Newspapers; Port-Harcourt had *Chronicle*, Owerri *The Statesman*, Ilorin *The Herald*, *The Sketch* and the *Nigerian Tribune*, Ibadan. Lagos, of course led the pack with *The Guardian*, *National Concord*, *The Mail*, *Newswatch* Newsmagazine, *Vanguard*, and a host of other society publications domiciled therein. Lagos had led because of its erstwhile status as a capital city. The new subtle challenge was now to graduate Abuja, consciously or unconsciously to that level, as a snowballing capital city.

The graduation began manifesting with the latter day coming of newspapers that made the city its headquarters. These newspapers notably included the *Daily Trust* Newspapers, *People's Daily*, *Blueprint*, and *Leadership*. *Thisday* Newspapers had a prominent presence in the city, through the location of a printing section, but retained Lagos as its operational base. So did *The Nation* Newspapers, *The National Mirror* and *The Sun*. Many of these papers can hardly downplay any of Lagos or Abuja in terms of operational relevance. While Lagos remain the old capital city, with its commercial importance still intact, Abuja emerged as a new news centre, through the growing influence of government, its diplomatic significance, and the developing presence of company's corporate headquarters. I shall now take a look at specific cases of news generating lines in Abuja.

4. A CAPITAL AND A NEWS SOURCE: THE CASE OF ABUJA

The Aso Rock presidential Villa, of course, remains a prime place for news generation. The president of the country lives there with his family. He carries out all official duties therein. State meetings, like Federal Executive Council (FEC) meetings, National Economic Council (NEC), and the National Council of State (NCS) consultations are held there, whenever. So also are diplomatic consultations, interactions with the business community, the civil society, and the hosting of local and international personalities, including fellow heads of states and governments. The volume of news emanating from this beat can only therefore be imagined, especially with the busy office of the vice president also nearby. It is probably the reason why correspondents attached to the place are now closing up to an estimated one hundred. It is also the reason why newspapers will hardly go to bed, without clearing from their Aso Villa correspondent, just in case.

The country's political processes began heating up again from the time former military president Ibrahim Babangida declared a transition to civil rule programme in the late eighties. Abuja, though then initially noted as a capital-designate, was a place for quiet political meetings, consultations and planning, especially with the coming of Five Star hotels like the Nicon Noga Hilton Hotel (Now Transcorp Hilton Hotel), The Sheraton Hotel and Towers, and the Agura Hotel. This trend of making the city the hub of political news grew from the 1999 when democracy finally dawned, as former Head of State, Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar handed over to Chief Olusegun Obasanjo. Beyond political stories arising from the official running of state affairs, Abuja swiftly became the source of reports around partisan political processes, the formation and reformation of political parties, political alignments and realignments, births and deaths of political parties, and the creation of individual political greats, and comical characters.

Many of them soon found it important to have homes in the city. And gradually they began acquiring them. While the homes in Lagos, Kaduna, Enugu, and Port Harcourt were still kept, the new Abuja home became another centre of activity. This inclination also expanded with the coming of democratic institutions like the National Assembly, and its relatively huge volume of politician-occupants. They were complemented by political party leaders, political wheelers and dealers, different shades of activists, besides ministers, political heads of agencies and departments, and numerous other political appointees. Other than this were state governors, commissioners and state political office holders, who made the capital city another hub for the achievement of political ends. Many of the governors were often said to have made Abuja their operational headquarters, while only seldomly visiting their state capitals. Abuja had therefore become the city for power brokers and power broking, and significantly the city were great political stories emanated from.

Some examples will suffice. Many of the former National Republican Convention (NRC) and Social Democratic Party (SDP) conventions took place in Abuja under the Babangida regime. So were the consultations of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), and that of the All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP), The Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), and the All People's Congress (APC), which came in the wake of the Abdulsalami Abubakar transition programme, and the democratic dispensation that emerged afterwards.

The powerful Ministries of Defence, Petroleum Resources, and Transport are also voluminous news generating outfits. While the Ministry of Defence got busier with the insurgency in the North East, the Petroleum Resources Ministry has always been very busy with oil remaining the mainstay of the nations' economy. Besides, the Petroleum ministry takes charge of the imposing headquarters of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), and deals with endless issues arising from fluctuations in oil revenue, allocation and revocations of oil blocs, matters concerning NNPC and its joint-venture partners including Mobil, Shell Petroleum, Chevron, Addax, and the other concerns, both in the off stream and downstream sectors of the industry. The equally engaging transport ministry reveals its share in the origination of news through stories on the airports, railways, genuine and fake transport schemes, amongst others. Many other ministries, agencies and departments that relocated to the capital over the years are also prominent in the supply of news for the reporters, but the few above have only been used as samples.

Core to the news sources is the property market, which came as a result of the city's growth. Houses, Estates, Boulevards, Apartments have all been sprawling up the city. They have generated debates around its cost, ownership and prospects. The outcome for journalism has been the enriching of property and environment pages in the newspapers, and the setting up of dedicated property oriented newspapers, with Abuja remaining a focal point. As it turned out to be, only Lagos, Port-Harcourt, Enugu, Kaduna and Kano could compare with Abuja in terms of property prosperity, at the early stages. The city in present times seems to have overtaken all of them, except perhaps Lagos in terms of property prospecting and valuation. This growth has invariably dovetailed into the dominance of Abuja in the property news reporting in the land. Against this background therefore, what more do we expect in the city, especially with the advent of the social media, the continuing development of the city, as helped by the inflow of foreign capital, and the consolidation of its space as a notable capital in the International affairs? I shall discuss this next.

5. WHAT IS TO COME?

CONCLUSION

The city of Abuja has been described as a purpose built capital. The effect of this is partly the phased evolution of the city sections, the new constructions, the other emerging constructions in most places, apart from the relative absence of shanties as you would find in Lagos, Kaduna or Enugu. The planned highway, streets, avenues, closes, and crescents are also another epitome of its newness. With official structures still developing, through the growth of several headquarters of government departments, it is also anticipated that more media enterprises would purposely have permanent and consequential structures in the city. For now, *Daily Trust* leads the group of organisations with expansive structures in the form of corporate headquarters, or permanent Bureau office. *Thisday Newspapers*, *The Guardian*, *The Sun*, *The Telegraph*, and *Channels Television* are some private concerns with strong structural presence in the city. Expectations are high that many will join in the future, in what might eventually make the capital city look like the old cities of Lagos, Ibadan, and Kaduna-cities that had housed multiple newspaper headquarters in the past.

Projections are also rife that in the future, stories emanating from the city might graduate from a preponderance of official news to news around personalities, and the private sector like Lagos, Kaduna and Kano have always been. Many prominent, news making citizens live and work in these older cities. They do their businesses in these places, while also playing their politics therein, in situations where they are politicians. Abuja to them is often seen as a work, or official place, where they come to for business, meetings, consultations, and after which they will retire to these older cities. Many have hardly made the proverbial real home out of Abuja, even if a lot of them boast of private residences and even investments in the place. Some of the times, good stories originating from interviews with these personalities are conducted in the older cities, where the men and

women are more relaxed, and composed to engage the press. The likelihood of Abuja assuming this role is evident, as situations manifest, making the personalities to become used to the place.

More than this is the possibility of the emergence of society, and lifestyle newspapers. Most of this genre of journalism is presently based in Lagos. Some few examples are *City People*, *Ovation*, and *Encomium*. Reason for this is because of the age of the city, its cosmopolitan nature, the presence of fun lovers, and the multiplicity of entertainment centres. Abuja is beginning to get its fair share of this, which increases the prospect of future society, lifestyle or people-centric publications.

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An alumnus of Georgetown University's prestigious Georgetown Leadership Seminar, Suleiman was executive editor of the online news platform, NigeriaIntel from 2011 to 2015 and is on the editorial board of the online forum, Nigeria Village Square. He was also a director at the Civic Media Institute of Nigeria, an organisation dedicated to promoting citizen journalism. A widely published columnist with Peoples' Daily, NEXT and Blueprint newspapers, Dr Suleiman teaches at Baze University, Abuja, and has research interests in public information management, new media and e-governance.