

Journalism in Crisis: Celebrity News Values and the Nigerian Press

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Abstract

Entertainment news has a significant influence on the audience, and the effects of entertainment and celebrity news can both be positive and negative. Likewise, our media landscape has changed dramatically in the past several decades. According to Harcup and O'Neil (2001) celebrity was one of the redefinitions of the "taxonomy of news values for the twenty-first century". While journalists who specialized in celebrity news say they see more demand for their work, others have argued that such stories lack journalistic reasons. Using celebrity case studies from recent publications in the Nigerian *SUN* newspaper and interview with editors, this article seeks to demonstrate that the pervasiveness and volume of coverage of celebrity has risen exponentially over the years. We argue that celebrity and entertainment news values have risen much higher up the hierarchy of news, guaranteeing extensive coverage, if combined with other news values. The adoption and dissemination of a story should be a newsroom decision based on various factors, including news values. But celebrity status often overrides many other important factors, such as bad news and surprise. Hence, the following research questions:

1. Is there a journalistic reason (or reasons) for covering a celebrity story?
2. What is the story's news value?
3. Do tabloids use alternative news values in deciding what news is?

Introduction

In recent times, the role of newspapers has changed considerably from breaking news to complementing social media and 24-hours news broadcast stations as a result of developments in internet technologies.

Breaking news has now become the prerogative of social media and 24-hours news channels. Yet newspapers continue to push beyond boundaries and strive to cope with the challenges of digital technology.

Quality newspapers, like *The Guardian*, *ThisDay*, *Leadership* and *The Nation* among other national upmarket publications focused more on serious issues in Nigerian society at large, while downmarket newspapers like the *Sun* and *Mirror* among others tend to remain relevant with their focus on scandals, sensationalism and celebrity gossip.

Many scholars and journalists have noted that "the tabloids are full of shit" (Moniek, 2008:19). However, it is hard to deny that these downmarket tabloids are entertaining, funny and irreverent, and indeed remain relevant in uncovering scandals in the public interest, though sometimes using unprofessional means (as in the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal in the United Kingdom). Yet they pursue investigative journalism that is the trademark of tabloids, just like their upmarket counterparts. Hence, this study examines journalistic reason(s) for the celebrity story genre, including its news values.

News Production

Journalists, and the organisations they work for, produce news. Essentially, news is both an individual and an organisational product. However, when considering the ways in which news is being constructed, it is imperative to examine the process whereby an excessive amount of events and issues relating to a given day are filtered into a bulletin or newspaper. The processes involved are complex, but "we can distinguish between two sequential stages" in terms of "the selection of events and issues on which to base news stories and subsequent construction of such stories" (Hodkinson, 2011:128-129).

More importantly, why do we study production? We study production because this is the point where encoding happens. Stuart Hall's work on "Encoding/Decoding" (1993) is very important in this area; he not only played a key role in developing theories of cultural and media representation, but also in his theoretical contribution concerning the encoding and decoding of discourses. Drawing on semiology, Hall places emphasis on the encoding of meaning into media discourse by producers. Hall (1993) further argues that 'discussion' in the message plays an important role in communication exchange (Hall, 1993). Being a neo-marxist thinker and also being influenced by Antonio Gramsci, Hall suggests that these encoded meanings "have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them" and are liable to reinforce this prevailing order by reinforcing dominant or hegemonic ideas (Hall, 1993:93). Thus, in recognising the role of media encoders (reporters, sub-editors and editors, etc) in influencing audiences, we are alerted to the possibility of media audiences misinterpreting media messages in the process of decoding the messages.

Research about news production has come from three perspectives. Schudson (2002), from the economic perspective, links news construction to the structure of the state and the economy. Likewise, Herman

and Chomsky (1988) argue that the media create news that supports state interests rather than those of the individuals they are meant to serve. The second approach draws mainly on the sociology of how the television network structure influences news (Epstein, 1974). The third approach focuses on the broad cultural constraints in news work (Chalabi, 1996). Schudson notes that the perspectives are not wholly distinct and some key studies on media organisations have strong cultural and political references as well. Taking into consideration that news scholarship is vast and theoretically eclectic, this study will now consider the McNair and Schudson accounts of the sociology of news production.

News selection and gatekeeping

Concerning news production, it is imperative to consider the gatekeeping theory and its relevance to the mass communication process, in that it concerns the selection or rejection of potential stories for publication in newspapers. The concept of gatekeeping originated from the work of Kurt Lewin (1947) when he noted the flow of information from a specific channel, with controls in place whereby decisions on whether a story could pass through a particular channel were based on predetermined rules by designated individuals who acted as gatekeepers in the news process (Windahi and McQuail, 1993). The concept is based on the assumptions that: 1. Media organisations as well as key media professionals act as gates to the flood of information coming in from the larger society. 2. The gate can either be opened - to let some kinds of information through for processing and publication, or shut, to deny other kinds of information through. 3. Gate selection is governed either by impartial rules or by gatekeepers, with the power to make decisions or to transfer the power, while the “power is interdependent on other channel regions and ranges of impartial rules” (Windahi and McQuail, 1993:166). This concept deals with the processes and factors which influence the decisions of media organisations, including newspapers, to select or reject potential newsworthy items for publication.

However, the literature on gatekeeping (White, 1950; Gieber, 1964) suggests that factors that determine if these gates will be opened or closed include the following: organisation policy; audience needs and preferences; the personal disposition of the communication professional involved; competition; legal restrictions; the characteristics of information sources; the nature of the media, and, lastly, professional ethics.

The gatekeeping model has been criticised by many scholars, including Windahi and McQuail (1993) as too simplistic, though it has served for many years as the basis for research into the news selection process (Windahi and McQuail, 1993:167). The act by journalists of selecting events to cover and those to exclude on a daily basis is challenging, but such decisions have to be made in order to construct the news stories covered by journalists on their various beats. Yet the term “gatekeeper” remains relevant in journalism studies as helps our understanding of the relationship between a news organisation and the news product itself. In essence, the information provided or gathered remains untouched or slanted, thereby limiting the complexity of news production, which in turn fuels to the notion that news is not just selected but constructed according to certain journalistic rules.

Clearly, there is a huge amount of potential material that has to be filtered by means of selecting stories to publish; in the case of newspapers, decisions must be made about prioritising them (front page, third page, etc), on the amount of space they merit, the angle that should be stressed, and so on. For Hall (1981), journalists have oversimplified news by painting a picture which suggests that events select themselves, when journalists actually select the events they focus on. Again, out of many events which occur daily, only very few emerge as news (Hall 1981). Hence, in the act of making tough decisions on what picture of the world to present, news organisations act as gatekeepers. This effects strongly our ways of thinking, our discussions and what we care about. Balnaves et al (2009) suggest that the “media play a role in ‘setting the agenda’ for the issues of the day, making some issues important and relegating others to a lower ranking” (Balnaves, Donald and Shoemith, 2009:65). In the current study, the power of news media to shape the awareness of members of the public and focus their attention on few key issues is referred to as agenda-setting. It should be noted also that the emphasis placed on particular information by the news media helps in determining the level of importance placed on such information by the mass media and their audiences.

Back in 1922, Walter Lippmann was concerned about the power of the media when presenting images to the public. Based on the revelations of diffusion research which were later extended to the media, particularly the process involved in determining news, McCombs and Shaw (1968) in their research into the American presidential campaign concluded that “the increased salience of a topic or issues in the mass media corresponded with an increased salience of that topic or issue among undecided voters” (McCombs and Shaw, 1972, in Balnaves, Donald and Shoemith, 2009:66). Their findings no doubt provide empirical evidence for the assumption that “news gatekeeping has a strong influence on what people know about and what they think is important” (Hodkinson, 2011:129). However, the cause and effect relationship is ambivalent, as news organisations claim that the stories they include in their publications “reflect existing public priorities rather than [them] shaping them” (ibid, 2011).

The literature (Schudson, 1996; Meikle, 2009) suggests that not all events qualify as news; the capacity

to make an event into news is in the hands of news organisations, through naming an event as news. The salient question remains, what factors will influence or determine whether or not an event will become news? It is pertinent to consider the criteria used by journalists in evaluation of newsworthiness, as these criteria will help understanding of the priorities of the news media and the realities they present to their audience. News values are thus central to the process of selection and exclusion, which many scholars have labelled as controversial (Schudson, 1996; Meikle, 2009).

Shared news values

Discussions on the analysis and processes involved in selection of news stories have often centred on the ways in which certain stories are presented by newspapers or news organisations. According to Niblock (2005), “these values are not as easily accounted for in theoretical analysis of news since they relate closely to journalists’ experience of the process of selection rather than a study of the final products” (Niblock, 2005:79). This judging process, O’Neill and Harcup argue, “is guided by an understanding of news values” which is “somewhat mythical” (O’Neill and Harcup, 2009:161).

One of the main contributions to the study of news values was Galtung and Ruge’s (1965) essay which focused on foreign news coverage, leading to identification of factors which can influence an event’s chances of being published as news. For example, journalists may predict something will happen and this will form “a mental pre-image of an event which tends to increase its chances of becoming news” (Harcup, 2009:39). According to the Irish writer, George Bernard Shaw, “newspapers are unable, seemingly, to discriminate between a bicycle accident and the collapse of civilization” (cited in Franklin et al, 2005:163). This remark implies that one event may be much more ‘newsworthy’ than another (whatever about the individual victim of the bicycle accident); if this is the case, it is challenging for journalists to decide on what to base their judgement in deciding what is news and what is not worthy of inclusion in a newspaper. News is defined by Charnley as “the timely report of facts or opinions that hold interest or importance, or both for a considerable number of people” (cited in Ogunsi 1989:23). For the purpose of the current study, there are many definitions of news; news in a relative sense depends on the circumstances and the situation of the person defining it, based on the person’s sense of news judgement. Hence in this study, news is anything that has just happened which attracts the interest and attention of many people.

In essence, what makes a story newsworthy? We need to understand that there are differences of priority and emphasis between news providers in terms of the stories they cover daily, yet analysis suggests that they share a number of core criteria or news values that determine story selection. The most credible attempt to outline shared news values is provided by Galtung and Ruge (1973, cited in Hodkinson, 2011), who identified “eight criteria which they present as universal and a further four that are deemed more specific to developed and capitalist countries” (Hodkinson, 2011:130).

News is interesting as it is unusual, important, unpredictable and sudden. Again, news is about people, places and events, and, given the perishable nature of news, what is news now may not be news in the next hour. Therefore news must meet or satisfy certain criteria to qualify as news. Such criteria include:

FREQUENCY – News is what is new and interesting. “News is highly perishable commodity and therefore every medium tries to give the latest available to score a point over the other” (Shrivastava, 1991:15).

SIGNIFICANCE – The impact of the occurrence on people, and the number of people and places involved will affect the extent of appeal and the importance and the effect such story will have on readers. “The more causalities in an accident, then the greater the impact on the perception of those responsible for news selection” (Harcup, 2009:39).

PROXIMITY – The nearness of an occurrence is not limited to geographical nearness, but also to interest, which is sometimes referred to as effect. For instance, when one sees a familiar place on the pages of a newspaper, one tends to read the report as quickly as possible.

PROMINENCE – When important people act, people tend to consider it newsworthy, ranging from their official life to private life. Note, for instance, the attention given to Prince Williams and Princess Kate in the UK. According to Rolnicki et al (2007), “news is about persons, places, things and situations known to the public by reason of wealth, social position, achievement or negative publicity” (Rolnicki, 2007:12). Hence, news is said to be personality-biased.

UNAMBIGUITY – One of the major characteristics of news reporting is simplicity. Since news is meant for the consumption of a mass audience, it must be concise and clear, without multiple meanings, in order to carry along the readers. “The story should be clearly understood” (Harcup, 2009:39).

CONSONANCE – This refers to the build-up to an expected event. For example, a journalist may predict something will happen based on their experience in following similar situations. Consonance tends to increase the chances of an event making it as news (Harcup, 2009).

CONTINUITY – “A big story will remain in the news for days or weeks” (Niblock, 2005:76). For instance, a newspaper reader is not likely to be interested in reading yesterday’s news as it has become stale; however, the hotter the news, the more readers will want a new angle for the event. *HUMAN INTEREST* – This is an element of news that adds colour and vitality to a news story. Most reporters endeavour to find a dramatic

background and action in an event based on the understanding that human beings are always attracted by drama. Though, it is taken that the more dramatic a story, the more it appeals to the audience. Yet, considering that the operations of tabloid newspapers differ – partly because of their audience focus which distinguishes them from broadsheet or “quality” newspapers – the question is, do tabloids use alternative news values in deciding what is news?

News routines

News routines are “repeated practices and forms that make it easier for journalists to accomplish tasks in an uncertain world while working within production constraints” (Donsbach, 2008, online). Again, Bell (1991) views journalists as “professional storytellers of our age”, while referring to routine selection of events on the basis of their story potential and the series of decisions about how to turn them into stories, in terms of arrangements of headlines, images, text and illustration, among other practices (Bell, 1991: 147). These routines, as explained by Shoemaker and Reese, are created in order for journalists to manage their work in the face of the vast amount of incoming information, which in turn are made into news in a factory-like process. In particular, the routines are shaped by the available technology and time (Reese, 2001 in Becker and Vlad, 2009). Drawing from writings on the sociology of work, Tuchman (1972), who is credited with being the first to discuss routines within the context of journalism, argued that a key part of news creation is a reliance on routine procedures for managing the flow of incoming information by journalists (Tuchman, 1972 in Becker and Vlad, 2009).

Again, Tuchman (1973) elaborates on this theme by arguing that organisations rely greatly on routines in order to manage their ever-increasing workload (Tuchman, 1973 in Becker and Vlad, 2009). In Tuchman’s view, journalists like workers in other industry need to look into ways of managing their work-flow and in most cases their work involves giving an account of various events, including disasters, which are covered on a routine basis. She argues further that news work becomes prominent when the unexpected happens as more people tend to focus their attention on such events (Becker and Vlad, 2009). Tuchman (1973) compared the classification of news based on a scheme commonly used by news workers with a scheme she created based on the sociology of work. Journalists mainly classify news as hard or soft, among other classifications, but Tuchman contends that it is logical to classify news as scheduled or unscheduled regardless of any urgency in the dissemination of such news and whether journalists make decisions in advance about future coverage of the event or not.

A review of literature on celebrity news and reporting revealed that many studies have emanated from the field of cultural studies by attempting to deconstruct celebrity factor in news reporting and indeed in explaining the peculiar attraction of celebrities by the public (Turner, 1999, Cashmore, 2006). Again, journalism studies and media studies have assessed the impact of tabloidization on news in the United Kingdom and concluded that the boundaries between upmarket and downmarket newspapers have been blurring in the sense that the so called British “quality or elite” press has taken on board tabloid news values (Franklin, 1997). According to Bell (2004), the culture of celebrity has “colonised” the news pages, both tabloid and broadsheet (in Allan, 2004:193). This study will further examine the issue of colonisation of the press as a unique selling point in view of dwindling readership in newspaper audience and emerging treat new media posed to newspaper readership, since it is envisaged that most straightforward news are now consumed online.

Methodology

Taking into consideration that if all newspapers insist on publishing scandal and celebrity driven downmarket news articles, then our serious news consumption choices are limited. Hence, this study examines published front page celebrity/entertainment news stories in the *SUN* newspaper in the week commencing Sunday 20th of October to Saturday 26th of October.

This study will employ framing in analysing the content of the two newspapers, as used in Van den Bulck and Broos (2011). According to Bulck and Broos (2011), the demands of the characteristics of news texts, as required in “news values” which actually influence events through prioritising of coverage by journalists in the news-gathering process, are also responsible for the misrepresentation of ethnic minorities in the news media. The scholars argue that “news values, form conventions and medium restrictions may be important in explaining the representation and framing of ethnic minorities” (Van den Bulck and Broos, 2011:198).

Framing is “what the text says and how it is said that are the key initiating questions” (Deacon et al, 2010). Framing could therefore be seen as sense making or picture they give to issue. Framing will be complimented with interview with journalists working for the *SUN* and *The Guardian* newspapers for in-depth analysis.

Framing as methodology

Framing is “what the text says and how it is said that are the key initiating questions” (Deacon et al, 2010). Framing could therefore be seen as sense making or picture they give to issue. McCombs (2014) align with

Deacon et al, (2010) by suggesting that framing relate to selection “of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text” (McCombs, 2014:61). This is executed in such a way that tends to highlight a particular problem definition, interpretation, evaluation and recommend solution to identified issue. Framing will be complimented with interview with journalists for in-depth analysis.

The comparison of the coverage of the screening of the two ministerial nominees, Rotimi Amaechi a celebrity politician and Mrs Amina Mohamed a development expert in public and private sector. The two were chosen as a case study because of the controversies surrounding their nomination by President Muhammad Buhari. Amaechi’s petition was read on the floor of the Senate during plenary. It was submitted by Integrity Group. Similarly, the one against Mohammed was written by a Kaduna-based lawyer and was submitted to the Senate by Senator Danjuma La’ah (Kaduna South).

The petitions against confirmation of the two ministerial nominees were received wider national coverage as major news stories, reflecting many of Harcup and O’Neill’s news values (2001) of surprise and prominence, but most of all Celebrity and entertainment in Amaechi’s case. The two nominees appeared before a senate panel and this study examine how the SUN newspaper cover the events between Monday 12th of October and Friday 16th October, 2015.

The measurement used in recording the volume of print coverage was column inches of print (photographs were excluded) on the news pages. The total number of column inches of text on the news pages and the number of column inches of text devoted to each nominee was recorded and then the amount of coverage was calculated as a percentage of total news coverage, providing an indication of amount of coverage given to the celebrity politician over her non celebrity counterpart.

Calculating the percentage of column inches of news devoted to each nominee would also provide an indication of whether celebrity reporting was driving out relevant reporting of other nominee.

Findings

The figures below exclude all pictures, and only deal with text on the domestic news pages. (percentages are rounded up or down to the nearest whole figure).

Date	Rotimi Amaechi	Amina Mohamed
12/10/15	4%	2%
13/10/15	1%	3%
14/10/15	2%	1%
15/10/15	3%	1%
16/10/15	2%	1%

Discussion of findings

Politician as a celebrity

Celebrities and politics have evolved into everyday element in recent time, from Barak Obama in United States to Rotimi Amaechi in Nigeria. Taking that this paper is interested in celebrity and entertainment articles and by extension what attracts Nigerian Tabloids in making Rotimi Amaechi such an Iconic figure in the Nigerian politics and society today. Amaechi has always been a controversial figure in politics and as such has transcended the celebrity status. Though, humans by nature are intrigued by the lives of others and this opened up opportunities for tabloids to tap into the lifestyle of those they have chosen.

In the *SUN* edition of Monday 12th of October, 2015. The political page of the tabloid reads “Amaechi’s withdrawal from Reserve Fund approved by lawmakers”, says Lloyd

”. Though, Amaechi’s nomination was said to have been opposed by some interest groups, who alleged that he was involved in corruption during his tenure as governor of Rivers state.

In the story, the former majority leader of Rivers State House of Assembly, Mr. Chidi Lloyd, yesterday rose in defence of former governor of the state, Mr. Rotimi Amaechi, when he disclosed how lawmakers approved the withdrawal of N49 billion from the state’s Reserve Fund. Amaechi had been accused of looting N53 billion from the coffers of the state.

The former leader absolved Amaechi of any wrong-doing stating that “Sometime in 2013, funds accruing to state governments in the country from the Federation Account began to dwindle. Thus, the Rivers State Government, like other states of the federation, began to experience grave challenges in fulfilling its capital and re-current expenditure demands. After exhausting all available sources of funds, the state government was constrained to resort to the Reserve Fund.

“Accordingly, and in strict compliance with extant laws, Amaechi made two requests in writing to the House of Assembly for a resolution to access the fund. The house, after extensive deliberations approved the withdrawal of the first tranche of N30,000,000,000 in February 2014 and another N19,000,000,000 in October 2014.

For Amina Mohamed, a technocrat with 30 years experience as a development practitioner in the

public and private sectors, as well as civil society. She is currently the CEO/Founder of the Center for Development Policy Solutions, a newly established think tank to address the policy and knowledge gaps within the Government, Parliament and private sector in development and civil society for robust advocacy materials. Ms. Mohammed is also Adjunct Professor of the Master's Programme for Development Practice at Columbia University, New York.

Prior to that, Amina served as the Senior Special Assistant to the President of Nigeria on the Millennium Development Goals after serving three Presidents over a period of six years. In 2005 she was charged with the coordination of the debt relief funds (\$1 billion per annum) towards the achievement of Millennium Development Goals in Nigeria.

Her mandate included designing a Virtual Poverty Fund with innovative approaches to poverty reduction, budget coordination and monitoring, as well as providing advice on pertinent issues regarding poverty, public sector reform and sustainable development. From 2002-2005, Ms. Mohammed served as coordinator of the Task Force on Gender and Education for the United Nations Millennium Project. Prior to this, she served as Founder and Executive Director of Afri-Projects Consortium, a multidisciplinary firm of Engineers and Quantity Surveyors (1991-2001) and worked with the architectural engineering firm of Archcon Nigeria in association with Norman and Dawbarn UK (1981-1991).

Interestingly, Rotimi Amaechi enjoys more significant coverage over the same period in the *SUN* newspaper than Amina Mohamed. The high amount of coverage given to Amaechi is related to his long standing relationship with the Nigerian society as a politician and in recent time as a celebrity. Over the five days period of analysis, Amina enjoyed more coverage than Amaechi once.

It can be argued from these results that Celebrity and Entertainment have ascended the hierarchy of news and appear to guarantee coverage, particularly if combined with other news values and indeed such stories concerning celebrity are not just given prominence, but also saturation coverage at the detriment of other equally important personalities who lack the celebrity status.

How can we explain why Amachi received wider and extensive coverage than Amina over the same period when they were both facing allegations as ministerial nominee? It may be worth that Amechi's allegation bothers on corruption while Amina's is related to controversies as to her state of origin. Again, Amina's nomination as a minister was confirmed on 14th, while that of Amachi drags on.

Interview with Journalists

An interview with journalists suggests mixed feelings, one of the editors of the tabloid *SUN* defended his preference for celebrity politician based on the assumption that his name would sell his newspaper than the technocrat nominee, according to him, "Amaechi has large followership and as a result many people are interested with issues concerning Amaechi than issues relating to Amina Muhammed". Another editor with a quality newspaper "*guardian*" agreed with his position. However, with regard to tabloid and quality newspaper like the *guardian*, the editor notes that tabloid readership is quite different from quality newspaper audiences as quality newspapers' audience are serious minded people, while tabloids audience are common man who are only interested in the news and has nothing to take away from the news. Hence, there is journalistic reason for covering celebrity story, and the main news value in the coverage of Amechi's nomination is Prominence.

Again, he castigated some unprofessional practices of tabloid newspaper such as sensationalism and falsehood. This claim by one of the guardian editors was rejected by the *SUN* journalist claiming that sensationalism was a way of attracting readers, while rejecting the claim of reporting false stories. The study did not find the use of alternative news values in deciding 'what is news' by journalists at the *SUN newspaper*.

In all, tabloidization has increased emphasis on an individual in terms of scandal or their private life. Though, over the 5 days period of analysis, the *SUN* used simpler and sensational language. The language used in the headline tend to be more tabloid like, though, the headlines avoid the puns traditionally associated with tabloids rather it uses formal language.

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