

Mass Media in Nigeria: An Exploratory Analysis

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Abstract

Mass media in Nigeria predates Nigeria as a geo-political entity, dating back to 1859 when Reverend Henry Townsend published the first newspaper, *Iwe Irohin*. Since then, the Nigerian mass media, especially the print media, have been growing with the rapidity of a meteor. Despite the many voices of the mass media in Nigeria, however, their vocality seems to be highly limited by the antagonistic stance of the government as expressed in multifarious legal and extra-legal instruments of control. Although the media have constitutional obligation to uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people, this obligation is stifled by governmental interference even in the face of the freedom of information Act, and a high degree of media pluralism. Despite of these obvious challenges, the mass media in Nigeria, like the proverbial beetle, have refused to be crushed as they inch, day-by-day towards the arena of global media practice.

1. Introduction

In 1859, the geo-political entity that is today known as Nigeria experienced a communication revolution. That year, Reverend Henry Townsend, an Anglican missionary, published the first newspaper, the *Iwe Irohin* (Daramola, 2006, pp. 11-12). The full name of the paper was *Iwe Irohin fun Awon Egba ati Yoruba* which translated literally means “Newspaper for the Egba-speaking people and Yorubas” (Tador, 1996, p. 40).

The establishment of *Iwe Irohin* marked the beginning of the mass media of communication in Nigeria. However, it is pertinent to note that the foundation which made possible the mass production of the printed word was laid in 1846 when the Presbyterian mission installed a printing press at Calabar. Also, it is instructive to note that the main purpose of setting up the printing press was to enable the local people to acquire knowledge and information through reading.

By 1854, Reverend Townsend had moved to Abeokuta in what is today known as Ogun State, where he set up a school of printing and “trained apprentices in the art of printing” (Daramola, 2006). Initially, *Iwe Irohin* appeared as a Yoruba language fortnightly “but became bilingual when an English language supplement was added from 8 March, 1860” (Omu, 1978, p. 7). Although the paper was used by Townsend as a weapon “in his ambitious political propaganda and shrewd manoeuvring for power in Egbaland” (Omu, 1978, p. 8), the awareness and political consciousness generated among the people helped a great deal in sowing and nurturing “the mustard seed that eventually grew into the gigantic tree of nationalistic fervour” (Okoro, 1998:13). The paper folded up in 1867 as a result of political and cultural crises between the people of Egbaland and the European settlers. Prior to its demise however, the paper achieved a circulation feat of about 3,000 (Daramola, 2006).

In 1863, the *Anglo-African*, a weekly newspaper, made its appearance on the newsstand. This paper, which is regarded by media historians as the first English language newspaper in Nigeria, was published by a British – Jamaican trader, printer and teacher, Robert Campbell, who was at the same time its proprietor and editor. The paper was used in promoting the interest and welfare of Lagos and its people (Tador, 1996, p. 41). Although the paper was said to be “favourably disposed to the colonial government of Lagos” (Tador, 1996), it died in 1865 due to limited resources

The 1880s witnessed a phenomenal surge in the number of newspapers. These included the *Lagos Times and Gold Coast Advertiser* (1880), the *Lagos Observer* (1882), the *Eagle and Lagos Critic* (1883), the *Mirror* (1887), the *Lagos Weekly Record* (1894), the *Lagos Echo* (1894), and the *Lagos Standard* (1894). These newspapers “severally and collectively attacked what they deemed obnoxious in then British Colonial Administration” (Tador, 1996).

In 1914, a major political development occurred: Lord Lugard unified the Northern and Southern protectorates into one entity. With this amalgamation, Nigeria, as a country, came into being. “Geographically, Nigeria is located on the extreme corner of the West African coast, between latitudes 4 and 14 North and longitudes 3 and 14 East” (Ikpe, 1996, p. 19). Nigeria is about 924,000 square kilometers large and extends from the Gulf of Guinea on the south to the borders of the Sahara desert in the North. “It is bounded to the north by the republics of Niger and Chad, to the east by Cameroun, to the west by the Republic of Benin and to the south by the Gulf of

Guinea, an arm of the south Atlantic” (Ikpe, 1996). A 20th century creation, Nigeria is today the most populous country in Africa with a population size of 140,431,790 people (NPC, 2006) with a population growth rate of 2.37 percent. A British creation, Nigeria, with a conservative estimate of about 400 languages (Elugbe in Agbedo, 1998, p. 71) was forged out of over 250 ethnic nationalities.

Historical evidence as well as archaeological discoveries suggest that “the present-day Nigeria has been a socio-economic and political space since the Paleolithic or Early Stone Age” (Ikpe, 1996). It is this space, no doubt, that supplied the necessary dialectics to the development of a vibrant media system both before and after political independence from the British overlords.

2. Press War for Independence

The early 1900s up to the mid-point saw the advent of more radical newspapers which fought on all fronts to uproot British raj in Nigeria. These papers include the *Nigerian Chronicle* (1908), the *Nigerian Times* (1910), *The Pioneer* (1914), the *African Messenger* (1921), the *Nigerian Spectator* (1923), the *Nigerian Advocate* (1923), the *Lagos Daily News* (1925), the *Nigerian Daily Times* (1926), the *Nigerian Evening Times* (1929), the *African Sunday Digest* – the first Sunday newspaper in Nigeria – (1931), the *Daily Service* (1933), the *Comet* (1933), the *Nigerian Eastern Mail* (1935), the *West African Pilot* (1937), the *Gaskiya Ta fi Kwabo* (1939), the *Eastern Nigeria Guardian* (1940), the *Nigerian Spokesman* (1943), the *Southern Nigeria Defender* (1943), the *Sunday Times* (1953), the *Nigerian Tribune* (1949), the *Sunday Times* (1953), the *Evening Times* (1957), the *Sunday Express* (1958), and the *Daily Telegraph* (1959).

The 1960s heralded a new phase in media practice because it marked the beginning of government participation in the newspaper industry (Tador, 1996, p. 47). This period also marked the involvement of partisan political parties in newspapering as a strategy of communicating party manifestoes to the electorate. For instance, in 1960, the Government of the Eastern Region turned the weekly *Eastern outlook* into a daily newspaper and rechristened it the *Nigerian Outlook* (this paper metamorphosed later into the *Biafran Sun*, during the Nigerian Civil War, and then later into the *Renaissance* after the war and eventually into the *Daily Star*).

In 1961, the Federal Government incorporated the Nigerian National Press Limited, printers and publishers of the *Morning Post* and the *Sunday Post* (Tador, 1996). In 1964, the Government of the Western Region launched the *Daily Sketch* in Lagos and later moved it to Ibadan. In 1966, the Government of the Northern Region reacted to this “government newfound love” by establishing the *New Nigerian* in Kaduna. Writing on this government – party interest in newspapering, Tador (1996) notes *inter alia*:

At independence, most newspapers in the country were local in outlook and owned by political parties. Each of the three regions in Nigeria had a dominant party with a loyal newspaper or newspapers... The Northern Region came under the jurisdiction of the Northern People’s Congress (NPC). The *Nigerian Citizen* was its official party organ. In the Western Region, the *Nigerian Tribune* was the official party paper of the Action Group (AG) while the party had substantial holdings in the *Daily Service*... In the Eastern Region, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe’s Chain of newspapers projected the image of their party, NCNC. The party also had the *Nigerian Outlook*. As a result of their party interests, most of these newspapers were unable to promote National goals.

The post-independence government and politics produced a more vibrant press which moved from the turf of pugnacious journalism to assume a fourth estate position in order to accomplish the watchdog goal. This era has seen not only the emergence of more state newspapers but also private initiatives in newspapering. At the moment, there are about 150 dailies published in Nigeria, with a preponderance of them mushrooming as community newspapers. What is today known in the country as “Nigeria’s Top Ten” (*The Guardian, Punch, The Nation, Sun, Vanguard, ThisDay, Trust, Tribune, Champion* and *Compass*) account for over 95% of daily circulation, according to a field survey conducted, March-April, 2009, for the Association of Advertising Agencies of Nigeria (AAAN). The Top Ten not only set the pace in African journalism but also represent the turning point in critical journalism. Today, it is like “it is morning yet” in journalistic excellence and innovations with the entry of these papers, coupled with the development of the magazine market.

3. The Emergence of the Magazines

Magazine journalism in Nigeria started on a very quiet note in the 1950s with the publication of the *Drum* by the *Daily Times Press*. Others like the *Spear* and *Woman's World* were to join in the 1960s (Daramola, 2006, p. 108). The 1970s witnessed further attempts at strengthening the magazine market with the introduction by the Daily Times Limited, of new titles such as *Home Studies*, *Business Times*, *Poise* and *Times International*. However, even with all these introductions, the magazine market in Nigeria did not become visible until the arrival of the newsmagazines signified by Okolie's *Newbreed* and Ogunsanwo's *Nation* and orchestrated by the *Newswatch* (see Daramola, 2006). Prior to *Newswatch* however, the *African Concord* was dictating the tune. Several other magazines soon joined the queue. These included *Tell*, *Citizen*, *The News*, *Times Week*, along with human interest magazines such as *Quality*, *Classique*, *Fame*, *Today's Choice* and *Hints*. As news and information source, the magazines – newsmagazines, human interest, specialised or professional – constitute a vital entrepreneurial environment for innovative experiments and investments in journalistic enterprise in Nigeria, considering the readership profile.

4. Electronic Media in Nigeria

Electronic media have “a similar tortuous history in Nigeria as the print media” (Braithmoh, 1996). Radio was introduced into Nigeria in 1932 “when the colonial masters brought BBC to Lagos, and later in 1935, rediffusion was introduced (McKay, 1969), while television made its debut in 1959 (Oduko, 1987)” (see Sobowale, 2006, p. 134). Following the Turner-Byron Report, the Federal Government “converted its rediffusion stations located at Lagos, Ibadan, Enugu, Calabar, Port-Harcourt, Kano, Kaduna, Jos and Zaria to full radio stations” (Braithmoh, 1996). By 1952, all the former relay stations had formed the Nigeria Broadcasting Service. This gave birth to the Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation in 1957 “as an arm of the Ministry of Information” (Braithmoh, 1996). Although the idea of establishing the corporation was informed by the need to provide a virile broadcasting outfit that would enable people “in all parts of the country to listen to news, entertainments and talks”, government interference made many people to see the outfit as a “mouth-piece of the colonial government which lacked a Nigerian orientation” (Tador, 1996, p. 54).

The Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation was set up by an Act of Parliament No 39 of 1956. The Corporation commenced operations as a statutory corporation on 1st April, 1957. The NBC functioned until 1978, when it was supplanted with the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) through the instrumentality of Decree No 8 of 1979, with retrospective effect from 1st April, 1978. FRCN operates through its national network at Abuja, national stations at Enugu, Kaduna, Ibadan, Abuja and Lagos and FM stations set up in all the states of the federation and the federal capital. The Corporation operates on short wave, medium wave and frequency modulation (FM) bands.

It is pertinent to note that before the establishment of television in Nigeria, the radio had monopolised the airwaves for 27 years. In 1959, the government of Western Nigeria broke this monopoly when it set up the first television station in Africa – the Western Nigerian Television (WNTV). In 1960, the Eastern Nigeria government established the Eastern Nigeria Television (ENTV) and in 1962, the Broadcasting Company of Northern Nigeria (BCNN) set up the Radio Kaduna Television (RKTV). WNTV later became NTA Ibadan, ENTV metamorphosed into NTA, Enugu, while RKTV later split to form NTA Kaduna and Radio Nigeria Kaduna.

In 1977, the then Federal Military Government had promulgated Decree 24 which gave birth to the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA). By virtue of this Decree, which took effect retrospectively from April, 1976, all the existing stations at the time were brought under the control of the Federal Government of Nigeria. By virtue of this Decree also, the NTA became the only empowered body to operate television broadcasting in the country. However, this exclusive right was eventually removed by the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1979, which extended rights of ownership to state governments, organizations and individuals that may be authorized by the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to operate television stations. It is this constitutional provision that led to the establishment of the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) in 1992, and subsequently resulted in the issuance of radio, television and cable broadcasting licences to private operators, for the first time in the annals of broadcasting in Nigeria on June 10, 1993. In spite of NTA's power-shedding, however, its broadcast presence is felt in all the states of the Federation via its empowered network and state stations.

Apart from Federal Government-owned broadcasting stations, state-owned radio and television stations, along with private broadcasting satellite stations, have become a potent broadcasting force in the business of journalism and communication merchandising.

By 1996 count, Nigeria had 54 television stations (nine of them privately owned), 37 radio stations (one of them privately owned) and 14 satellite redistribution stations (Momoh, 1996). Going by recent report on subject matter, FRCN parades one national network, five national stations and 37 FM stations. NTA has one national network and 97 stations scattered all over the federation. There are 40 state-owned radio stations, 32 state-owned television stations, 17 private radio stations, 14 private television stations, three direct to home (DTH) television stations, 35 cable stations (using microwave multipoint distribution system – MMDS –) and two direct satellite television (DBS) (*see: This is NBC*). The Federal Government owns about 37 percent of the radio broadcast sector, the states have 37 percent, while 26 percent of ownership is held by private operators (Pate, 2006, p. 25).

One big picture, which emerges from the profiles of the print and electronic media in Nigeria, is the availability of the media for practice across time. Within this spectrum of media availability, however, the crucial matter at issue is whether the mass media of communication in Nigeria have lived up to their public and private expectations. The critical question in this regard is: what are these expectations?

5. The Expectations

As a social enterprise, mass communication in a polity functions within the context of “the total sum of all organizations and systems that make up the mass media of any given society”. The mass media of communication, therefore, are “expected to perform (as earlier stated) the three cardinal functions of informing, educating, and entertaining” the mass media audience (Okoro, 1998, p. 13). According to Okoro, “The press is expected to be investigative and objective in the collection and dissemination of information; comprehensive in the coverage and reportage of events and issues; and educative in the process of mobilization” (Okoro, p. 13). Unfortunately, the mass media of communication in Nigeria, in a ‘Sommerladian’ sense, have been “walking on a razor’s edge” in their attempt to live up to their expectations/obligation of “upholding the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people” (see section 22 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria). These great expectations fall flat in the face of obvious problems/obstacles, which the mass media of communication have continued to face since colonial times. These obvious problems to a great extent are manifests of legal and extra-legal controls by the government.

6. The Obvious Problems and their Genesis

Government’s distrust of and hatred for the press are rooted in the tendency of the press to always “nose” into the activities of government. The government usually does not like this “nosey business” and this is the genesis of the cat and mouse relationship between the government and the press. In Nigeria, “the growing hostility of the local press” symbolized by the “excoriating comments” of Herbert Macaulay in 1908 (which were said to have “caused violent demonstrations in Lagos”) precipitated the enactment of the 1909 Seditious Offences Ordinances (Braithmoh, 1996, p. 137). Section 3 of the ordinance states as follows:

whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by signs or by visible representations or otherwise, brings or attempts to bring into hatred or contempt or excites or tries to excite disaffection, disloyalty or feelings of enmity towards His Majesty or the government established by law... shall be punished with imprisonment which may extend to two years or a fine or with both.

The Criminal Code Ordinance of 1916 and the Newspaper Ordinance of 1917 came in quick succession to tighten the bolt of government control. With these legal checks in place, two major obstacles were erected on the path to a free and vibrant press: (a) “prior swearing to an affidavit and paying a deposit of two hundred and fifty pounds sterling or providing two sureties in addition to entering into a bond before (one) could register a newspaper”, (b) registration of the names and addresses of the proprietor, publisher, editor and printer” of such newspaper (see Braithmoh, 1996). Any violation of these provisions attracted debilitating penalties.

7. Other Legal Thickets

Apart from these ordinances, there were also a battery of other legal restrictions, all aimed at creating an inclement environment to clip the wings of the press. For instance, the Seditious Offences Ordinance in Nigeria has its roots in Herbert Macaulay’s pamphlet titled “Governor Ergerton and the Railway”, published in September, 1908 ((Daramola, 1999, p. 11). The pamphlet, which “levelled serious charges of maladministration against the Governor” drew attention to the “Governor’s disregard” of serious allegations of scandal in the Railway, his

'personification of prejudice', his permission of minor considerations to take precedence over what Macaulay described as momentous issues, his neglect to direct that criminal prosecutions be commenced against an alleged friend of his (the Governor) who was involved in the scandal" (Daramola, 1999, p. 11).

Macaulay's pamphlet was labelled "seditious libel from the first paragraph to the last", while Macaulay himself was described as "a man noted for notoriety in terms of his letters and articles which were always antagonistic of the governor and the government generally" (Daramola, 1999, p. 11). Finally, the Seditious Offences Bill was passed in September, 1909. Specifically, the Ordinance notes that: "Whoever... promotes or attempts to promote feelings of enmity or hatred between different classes of the population of southern Nigeria shall be punished" (Section 4). Also, "Whoever makes, publishes, or circulates any statement, rumour or report (a) with intent to cause, or which is likely to cause any officer of the Government of Southern Nigeria or any person otherwise in the service of His Majesty to disregard or fail in his duty as such officer or servant of His majesty (b) with intent to cause or which is likely to cause fear or alarm to the public or to any section of the public whereby any person may be induced to commit an offence against the state or against the public tranquility or (c) with intent to incite or which is likely to incite, any class or community of persons to commit any offence against any other class or community shall be punished".

Other restrictive laws which were enacted to whip the press into line are contempt of court law and official secrets act. The era of the military in Nigeria marked a more difficult period for the press. According to Richard Akintola, as at 1995, the military had put in place 21 press-gag decrees. He listed some of them thus;

1. Circulation of Newspapers Decree No. 2 of 1966.
2. The Defamatory and Offensive Publications Decree No. 44 of 1966.
3. Newspaper Promotion from Circulation, Decree No. 17 of 1967.
4. The *Sunday Star* and *Imole Owuro* (Prohibitio) Edict No. 17 1968.
5. The Printers and Publishers of the Sunday Star and Imole Owuro (Declaration as Unlawful Society) Edict No. 19 1968.
6. Public Officers (protection against false accusation) Decree No. 11 of 1976.
7. Daily Times of Nigeria (transfer of certain shares) Decree No. 1 of 1979.
8. Newspaper Prohibition from circulation (validation) Decree No. 12 of 1978.
9. Public Officers (protection against false accusation) Decree No. 4 of 1984.
10. *Newswatch* (proscription and prohibition from circulation) Decree 1993.
11. Newspapers etc. (Proscription and Prohibition from Circulation) Decree 48 of 1993 proscribing *Concord*, *Punch*, *Sketch*, and *Observer* Groups of Newspapers.
12. The Concord newspapers and African Concord weekly magazine (proscription from circulation) Decree No. 7 of 1994.
13. The Guardian newspaper and Guardian weekly magazine (proscription and prohibition from circulation) Decree No. 9 of 1994.
14. Concord newspapers and African Concord magazine (proscription and prohibition from circulation), (extension of fine) order 1994.
15. The Punch newspaper (proscription and prohibition from circulation) (extension of fine) order 1994.
16. The Guardian newspaper and Africa Guardian weekly magazine (proscription and prohibition from circulation) (extension of fine) order 1995.

From the above, it is clear that the relationship between government and press in Nigeria has been that of cat and mouse. However, this ought not to be, considering the fact that both parties are supposed to be partners in the arduous task of nation building.

8. Press after Independence

Ironically, when the national government emerged after independence, the repressive colonial legacies continued in various ways and under various guises. The Nigerian constitutions of 1960, 1963, 1979 and 1999 spoke from both sides of the mouth as far as press freedom and freedom of expression are concerned. With such double-speak, the adversarial, cat-and- mouse relationship between the government and the media of mass communication has continued to deepen.

Outside the legal thickets, the government, across time, has seen it as "a matter of duty" to impede effective media performance. This is exemplified in widespread intimidation, harassment, assaults, arrest, detention and

killing of journalists. Today, the question: “Who killed Dele Giwa?”(the founding editor of *Newswatch* magazine) is still standing tall on the terrain of media-government clashes. In recent times, the government’s double-face posture played out, loud and clear, in its manifest foot-dragging concerning the passage of the Freedom of Information Bill (FOIB) into law at the National Assembly. Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, when he was in the saddle as the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria could not sign the Bill because he “did not like the title”. Unfortunately, he was unable to suggest an appropriate title! Suffice it to say that Obasanjo’s subterfuge is a neat epitome of government’s disdain for freedom of expression and the press as well as a methodical system of checking the excesses of the media which have been characterised as “irresponsible, irrelevant, bold, reckless, adventurous (and) audacious” (Ikiebe, 1996, p. 108). The good news today is that FOIB was eventually signed by the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, as Freedom of Information Act, 2011, on the 28th day of May, 2011.

From the foregoing, it is very clear that the greatest problem bedeviling the mass media of communication in Nigeria is the inability of government to create and sustain a conducive environment for effective media performance. This constitutes the greatest challenge

9. Summary/Conclusion

Going by Nigeria’s media profile, it is not in any way an overstatement to say that Nigeria has fared very well in media development. “Historically, Nigeria has had the most developed diverse mass media in West Africa and arguably in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa” (see *Children and Women’s Right in Nigeria: A Wake-up call – Situation Assessment and Analysis*, 2001).

The reason for the rapid development of the mass media in Nigeria is rooted in the fact that the country has a modest degree of media independence, coupled with a high degree of media pluralism. This is the picture that emerges when one takes a critical look at what obtains in most African countries. However, the dictatorial period of Abacha’s regime (1993-1998) has been tagged Nigerian media’s darkest hour, when “journalists who dared cross the line of the politically permissible were thrown into jail and even charged with coup-plotting, and newspaper houses were raided and shut down” (see *Children’s Women’s Right in Nigeria: A wake-up call – Situation Assessment and Analysis*, 2001). Paradoxically, as the analysis shows, “the flame of independent journalism was never completely extinguished” because “the Abacha years also saw the licensing of private radio and television stations for the first time (in 1994), ending what had been a state monopoly of the electronic media”.

It is instructive to note that apart from the electronic and print media, there has been a steady development of other media such as music and dance, and drama. Also, the development of audio and video cassettes has added a new dimension to Nigeria’s media profile. Also emerging on the Nigeria’s media scene are internet-based media although these are largely urban-centred for now as a result of high cost of telecommunications systems and power irregularities. In spite of this limited access, however, there is hope about the widest possibilities in the country’s media advancement.

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