

# News Commercialization: Implications for Nigeria's Development

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## Abstract

This paper takes a close look at news commercialization and its implication for national development in Nigeria. Many believe that this idea blossomed because of poor funding of government media organizations. The paper is anchored on the social responsibility theory of the press which encourages media outfits to contribute positively to their society. It notes that news commercialization has unpalatable effects on different aspects of society such as national integration, peace building, value system, education, socialization and others. The paper recommends better government funding of public media and higher commitment to continuous and systematic improvement of facilitates, while embracing international best practices. Journalists on their part, must always uphold the ethics of their profession.

## Introduction

Funds are crucial for the establishment and continued survival of any organisation, whether in the public or private sector, a media or non-media outfit. In fact, money is like oxygen for the blood. Without it, nothing can succeed. Indeed, media management is often money-gulping, always giving the managers sleepless nights on how to remain financially solvent without reneging on their commitment to their readers, listeners/viewers. This challenge becomes even more worrisome because returns on media investment are not often very high, as recent media history has shown. In the past decades or thereabout many media houses have had to shut down on g rounds of financial insolvency. Even seemingly financially sound companies were not spared the challenges of mortality, part of the problem arises because investors in the media industry often see the glamour and media power, without adequately appreciating what goes into running an efficient and sustainable media organisation. The result, quite often, is that no sooner do such outfits open shop than they are forced to shut down.

Many media houses, including those with rich financiers have suffered the same fate, although other reasons may be cited for such situations. In the not too-distant past such newspapers as *The Democratic*, *The Diet*, *The Report*, *The Concord*, *The Post and Others* have gone the way of history.

## Definition of Terms

To ensure a measure of understanding, it is important that some of the key words should be defined. They are: news commercialization, ethics and national development.

### 1. News commercialization:

According to Acholonu - Igbozurike and Agwu (2015), the concept of news commercialization "by the media is seen as shying away from the social responsibilities to the public" (p.32). Indeed it is extremely difficult to embrace commercialization without compromising social responsibility to the citizens who, at least on paper, have a right to know. News commercialization would suggest all efforts made to "commodity" news and sell it to the highest bidders. The idea of news in the process, suffers mortality because the traditional and professional idea of news is sacrificed on the altar of financial expediency.

### 2. National Development:

Development would suggest moving up the ladder of achievement in different settings and contexts. Rodney (1972, p.9) perceives development from a holistic view point as "increased skills and capacity, greater freedom, creativity self discipline, responsibility and material well-being". When this is extrapolated in a national context, it suggests that people in a developed country have the above qualities. It also means that any country that genuinely seeks development should aspire to have the above qualities. Without doubt, national development must also include such aspects as economy, politics, education, health and other indices of development.

### 3. Ethics:

Although not explicitly stated on the title of this paper, ethics is an important idea in this work. Daramola (2003, pp92 – 93) defines ethics in general as referring to,

"the value system by which an individual distinguishes what is right from wrong, fair from unfair, or just from unjust: a person's behavior in any situation may be evaluated not only by his conscience but also against some standards that have been predetermined societally, professionally or organizationally".

The issue of concern here is how far is news commercialization ethical as far as professional journalism

goes. Put differently, would news commercialization be considered professionally ethical?

#### **4. Theoretical Anchor:**

This presentation derives its theoretical legitimacy from the social responsibility theory of the press, which states that the media must act in the interest of the society of large. This is based on the well reasoned assumption that the media operate within the context of society and should therefore be sensitive to the needs and aspirations of that society. After all, without a society the media would not operate. For instance, following the near total destruction of Syria, it is unlikely there would be a robust local media practice in that country. The foreign media, notably CNN, Aljazeera, BBC etc. only dash in and out, ferreting information for their global audiences, again, for financial gains. The media, if they have the opportunity i.e. if the political authorities will support them, must be in the forefront of /peace, hence, the current academic and professional attention to peace journalism.

#### **Literature Review**

Several experts and other stakeholders have devoted substantial space to the subject of news commercialization on account of its relevance, currency and some would say, controversy. According to Oso (1991) the capitalization of the Nigerian Press and its subsequent commercialization is said to have started with the arrival of the *Daily Times* in 1926. As he sees it, because the *Daily Times* was established with hard-nosed businessmen concerned with financial success and profit making, the paper could not afford to be political like its contemporaries. Wilson (2005, p.148) notes that with the commercialization and privatization policy of government, several government run papers and other media organizations, like radio and television, have had their subventions drastically reduced and the organizations directed to make their money through more vigorous commercial activities. For the government, by asking media organizations to go into the 'wilderness', in a manner of speaking, to source for funds, the idea of news as a social product suffered irreparable damage. It led to the commodification of news, where many media managers practically go cap in hand to different organizations.

Similarly, there seems to be a misunderstanding of the role of the mass media in national development i.e. that media provide relevant information for a nation to develop. Perhaps only a public media, funded from the public purse, is better prepared for this role. The world acclaimed British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is believed to function as public service media. Since the BBC is the father of broadcasting in Nigeria one wonders why governments in Nigeria do not follow such an example, especially a country that so desperately needs to develop.

The non-challant attitude of government in funding what should be public service broadcasting stations in Nigeria have led managers of such media to resort to "self help", similar to the legal system which scarcely provides justice to Nigerians, with the result that many resort to "self help" with dire consequences for the country's image and its quest for development. Indeed, no one can justifiably claim that managers of the media houses in Nigeria have no good reasons for resorting to self help. As Dominic has rightly observed, economic pressures are important and may even determine an organization that survives from the one that fails. As he puts it:

Money is a potent influence on media gatekeepers. In commercial media, the loss of revenue can be important consideration in controlling what gets filmed, published or broadcast. Economic controls come in many shapes and forms. Pressures can be brought to bear by advertisers, by the business policy, by the general economic structure of the industry and by consumer groups. (pp 403 – 404).

The relationship between the government and the media has been largely adversarial, especially in the developing countries like Nigeria where governments have been clearly unable to distinguish between government ownership and public ownership of the media of mass communication. According to Dominic (2009, p.60).

The telegraph also set the precedent for the relationship between government and large media companies. In many other countries since the telegraph was used to deliver messages. It seemed an extension of the post office, and the government agency that assumed responsibility for the postal service also administered the telegraph.

However, the model was not followed in the United States. Although, some in government endorsed a take-over of the telegraph system; the prevailing sentiment was in favour of private, commercial development.

However, in Nigeria, government, both at national and state levels, has always supported the ownership of mass media channels to enable them to have control of what goes out to the public. In many cases, the media channels become an avenue for government propaganda where they publish outright falsehood with a view to obliterating the shortcomings of government and make it look better in the public eye. This approach often fails

over time because the claims in the media are often not replicated in the society for the people to see.

Whether it is privately owned or publicly owned, media organizations in Nigeria are often poorly funded, largely because owners want to make a minimum investment but wish to reap bountiful profits. Such a situation often compels media managers to become desperate for financial survival and embrace news commercialization in the process.

In India, media ownership is encouragingly diffuse, making it impossible for any individual or group to dominate the newspaper space. According to Hasan (2014, p.289):

Out of 8512 newspapers, as many as 6686 were owned by individuals, 1122 by Joint Stock Companies, 260 by Societies and Associations, 222 by Trusts and 150 by Firms and Partnerships. 41 newspapers were bought out by the Central and State Governments. Cooperative Societies, Educational Institutions and the like, owned the remaining 31.

The ownership structure in India suggests a truly competitive situation, attracting very important sectors of the economy. Under such a situation, government owned newspapers must compete like other papers, if they wish to survive, unless they receive generous government subventions. Indeed, such a situation represents a free market place of ideas where newspapers prove daily while they must remain on the news-stands.

As previously stated, economic controls and pressures are real and cannot be dismissed with a wave of the hand for any business that wishes to survive. Advertisers who provide advertising revenue to the media organisations are always in a hurry to assert themselves and protect their interests. They realize that media cannot survive for long without advertising revenue. So whenever their interests are threatened or about to be threatened through unfavourable publication, they go for the publication's or station's jugular, "kill the story or risk losing our advertising revenue" is usually the threat. The media often soften up whenever they are in such a dilemma, giving credibility to the common saying that discretion is the better part of valour.

### **News Commercialization and National Development**

As previously noted, development is a multi-faceted activity which aims at improving human conditions. This suggests that nations must continuously work hard to develop their countries. For instance, most of the advanced countries of the world did not just attain development without the sweat and blood of the citizens. The question then is "what is the role of news or its commercialization in national development efforts". In assessing this theme, it is necessary to isolate aspects of development and see how news or its commercialization has had an influence on them.

**i. National Integration:** Nation building is often a difficult and time consuming activity, requiring the cooperation of a great majority of the people. This is particularly so about countries in Africa with different ethnic nationalities, each pursuing different agenda that may not be in line with national aspiration. Some pursue their religious affiliations while others pursue the acquisition and sustenance of political power to the disadvantage of other ethnic groups.

The result of all these is crisis of monumental proportions. In Nigeria, the country lost control and went into a civil war between (1967 -1970). The scars of that war remain poignantly staring everyone in the face with the political authorities unable or unwilling to realistically address the issue. Again, the failure of national integration was brutally brought to the fore in the Rwanda genocide of 1994. Ethnic hatred held sway and millions of lives were lost between the Hutus and Tutsis. Such a situation must be avoided at all costs by any country seeking integration and development. As Blake (1979) has argued convincingly and cited by Ndolo (2006, p229).

If nation – building is going to be successful, particularly in African States, National political integration is a must. Because of the existence of several ethnic groups occupying an entity called Nigeria. For Nigeria, the need to communicate to these groups becomes very important for national political integration. Communicating with these ethnic groups is a phenomenal task – the financial responsibilities are overwhelming and a government owned media stands in a better position to better tackle it.

Indeed, government (more appropriately public) media, are in a better position to provide information through news and other programmes. A well heeled media organization, adequately funded from tax payers fund, is in a position to be part of the integration effort. However, because of neglect of its responsibility, many governments in Africa have been unable to exploit the enormous goodwill that a credible medium confers, even on the government. But will out of ignorance or panic, many governments starve their media organizations of funds and turn them into "orphans" who go cap in hand. This leads to news commercialization which largely erodes media credibility and compromises their ability to enhance national integration.

iii. **Peace Building:** Peace is a very important “commodity” which has remained elusive in many countries of Africa, Asia and other under developed areas of the world. In fact, it must be noted that peace is a necessary condition for any modicum of development to take place in any environment. The absence of peace suggests the depletion and waste of resources, which is what underdevelopment is all about. Ndolo (2006, p211) sees peace as national integration which holds out to mean:

- Honest, dynamic, responsible, collective and democratic leadership
- Equal access to natural resources with deserved compensation for areas of derivation
- Inter – ethnic cultural appreciation and religious tolerance
- Equitable distribution of national resources e.g. employment, education, political offices, etc.
- Maximization and utilization of Nigeria talent, irrespective of ethnic origin
- Improved national consciousness
- Greater acceptance of the national government and finally
- A state of no war

Ndolo’s comprehensive and realistic explication of the concept of peace and its various ramifications is relevant to our understanding of peace and how to attain and maintain it. In a situation where the media are credible, they are in a position to provide nationalistic and relevant news on the various aspects of peace building. For instance, the press is in a position to draw attention to a situation where distribution of national resources has not been equitable and in the process encourage the nation to achieve something more equitable. Also, the nature and acceptability of a government are aspects of peace. A government that enjoys high approval rating through its actions and inactions promotes peace which the media can highlight. On the other hand, when the government is not living up to expectations, the media are supposed to hold it accountable to the people. But that is when governments of Africa come into the picture. They usually do not accept criticisms, hence any news item that does not paint them in glowing colours is frowned at. And at the slightest opportunity, media chiefs are removed from the office, such a situation makes media managers to be diffident and often unprofessional in a bid to impress political authorities. Part of the desperation leads to news commercialization to the detriment of peace building, so sorely needed in a country like Nigeria.

**Value System:** The value system is the engine room of any society. Decades ago, the Nigerian society was known for honesty, fairness, hard work, justice and humility. Hard work was encouraged and admired, while laziness was looked askance at. Justice and honesty were encouraged, but now it would seem that our value system has deteriorated deeply. People obtain money through criminal and fraudulent means and are celebrated. Until such a time when people are asked to prove the source of their wealth, the current deification of wealth which erodes the moral foundation of a society, would continue unabated. This situation encourages cheating and promotes mediocrity. National development cannot be anchored on a corrupt and shaky foundation. As Nwanne (2006, p.53) has observed, ‘in contemporary Nigeria, many do not seem of uphold the maxim of dignity of labour. There is a tendency to prefer the shortcut, with the result that due diligence is sacrificed’. This also presents its peculiar problems: news is supposed to be a ‘raw material’ for national development. However, news commercialization tends to compromise the sacredness of information to the nation. Such a situation gives undue privilege to the ‘monied and propertied’ class to dictate and frame news from their point of view. Due to the power of money, which news commercialization promotes, news is tainted and even obliterated, to the eternal disadvantage of the people and the impairment of national development efforts.

**Press Freedom and National Development:** Many persons have different ideas about press freedom. It is likely that environment affects the concept of press freedom and how it is exercised. Ndolo (2005, p.221) sees the concept of press freedom to mean:

- The right of the mass media to communicate ideas, opinions, information
- The right to criticize the political, economic and social institutions of the country
- The right to help in the enlightenment of every Nigerian by providing him/her with the days intelligence in an open market place of ideas without any obvert or overt systematic means of applying censorship pressures or any form of inhibition on the part of the federal and state Government institutions, organizations and individuals within the country; within the laws of libel, defamation and obscenity.

Sambe and Ikoni (2004, p.11) see the concept of press freedom as “the unrestrained liberty to write or publish information for the consumption of the public”. The authors insist that press freedom specifically addresses the following issues

- i. No prior or subsequent restraint
- ii. Freedom to gather information
- iii. The right not to be compelled to disclose the source of information
- iv. Freedom to impart
- iv. The right to receive information

v. Freedom from unreasonable punishment for what is published.

The idea of press freedom has been well explicated by the above authors. It is also necessary to see it a societally approved freedom to present the news of the day without hindrance, irrespective of whether a news item is in favour of powerful people or not. It would seem that there is a link between national development and press freedom. For instance, there is relatively a free press in the more advanced countries of Western Europe and America than the struggling countries of Africa, Asia, etc. This perhaps explains the high level of press freedom and even personal freedom enjoyed in the United States of America and other advanced countries. The idea of a free press was institutionalized in the United States of America with the first amendment to its constitution which states unequivocally, inter alia that “Congress shall make no laws abridging the freedom of the press”. This amendment positions the U.S. as a free country, determined to succeed phenomenally. In this context, Nwanne (2016, p.138) has advised that “Political Authorities in any given environment must have the sagacity and maturity to appreciate that a free and unfettered press is more likely to pursue the goals of national integration and development than a docile one”. News commercialization, on the other hand, is a dampener of press freedom as it compromises the professional ethics of the journalist, who is constitutionally required and empowered to gather and present the news of the day to a news hungry world.

**Education:** There is no doubt that education is a major index of development. This is globally recognized and appreciated. Indeed, good education is often seen as coterminous to development of any country. This explains the strenuous effort made by many advanced countries in continually improving their educational systems, reflected in improved facilities in schools, colleges and universities, and emphasis on research and development. It takes a great deal of educational effort for a country to achieve a high level of technology to the extent that they have sent men to the moon. As Ndolo (2005, p.13) has observed.

Communication plays a central role in our lives. We are surrounded by others trying to understand them and hoping that they understand us: friends, family, spouses, students, teachers, co-workers, strangers and enemies. We speak, listen, read and write so much because we know that communication fulfills several very important functions for us.

No doubt, one of the functions of the mass media is the education of the citizenry to attain a measure of mental, social and physical improvement. The mass media, through their various offerings, such as news, features, columns, etc. are able to pass across to the citizens, very important information and survival tips in such a way that could move the country forward. The place of education in national development is secure and non-controversial. For instance, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO), a specialized agency of the United Nations (UN), has shown great interest in the education of member nations. In fact, the agency has recommended that funds allocated for education should be substantial – 24% of national budget in order to achieve a high level of performance in the sector. In Nigerian, this has been one of the perennial issues precipitating crisis between the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN). The former has always complained that the latter has not been able to meet the UNESCO benchmark, therefore, accusing it of not placing high Premium on education.

As far as media efforts go, it is conceivable that they probably have a long way to go in achieving democratization of education for the citizenry. This, critics have observed, has been promoted by news commercialization in which some persons or groups are given the chance by media houses, desirous of making money, to distort the news of the day. This is not promotive of national development efforts, neither does it enhance education in any way.

**Socialization:** Dominic (2009, p.33) describes socialization as “the ways an individual comes to adopt the behaviours and values of a group... By watching, listening and reading, we learn how people are supposed to act and what values are important”. Essentially, it has to do with the process of being effective members of a society. In this process, they are taught the value system of their society, the dos and don'ts and how to be socially acceptable. In the traditional society, this was done orally by elders of the family and the larger community. However, modernity has shifted part of this responsibility to the media.

According to Ndolo, (2005) leaning on McQuail (1987), there are several features which though not unique to the media, give the mass media institution its distinctive character and peculiar significance in society” They are as follows:

1. It is concerned with producing and distributing “knowledge” in the form of information, ideas and culture in response to societal needs.
2. It provides channels of relating certain people to other people: senders to receivers, audience members to other audience members, every one to their society and its constituent “institutions”.
3. The media operate almost exclusively in the public sphere: as an open institution in which all can participate as receivers and under certain condition, as senders.
4. Participation in the institution as audience members is essentially, voluntary, without compulsion or

- social obligation.
5. The institution is linked with industry and the market, through its dependence on paid work, technology and the need for finance.
  6. The institution has no power of its own but it is invariably linked with state power through some customary uses and through legal mechanisms which vary from nation to nation.

The media, along with family and friends, schools and the larger community are involved in the socialization of a child. This explains why a child will exhibit the traits/activities of his or her immediate environment. A Yoruba child easily prostrates in greeting an elder even though this is not common in other parts of Nigeria who have different gestures of bowing the head for males, and kneeling down for girls. It must be admitted that none of these methods of showing respect is superior to other approaches because they all have cultural basis and are socially acceptable.

**Health:** It is often said that health is wealth. By extension, a healthy citizenry is better positioned than an unhealthy one, in achieving national development inspirations and objectives. The provision of health care is a major feature of developed countries and therefore a prerequisite for those countries seeking to develop in any meaningful way. Herein lies a major problem with developing countries where health care services remain abysmally poor, promoting the high incidence of medical tourism in Nigeria where the rich and powerful often travel abroad to access the medical facilities in better organized countries. For instance, the President of Nigeria was in the United Kingdom in 2016 for medical attention regarding an ear problem. On January 2017. The President returned to the United Kingdom, this time for an undisclosed medical condition.

In Nigeria, medical facilities have remained poor and the personnel poorly motivated, with the result of many unnecessary deaths. Patients and their relatives are required to pay huge sums of money before patients are admitted and treated in many hospitals. Quite often many are in no position to make such deposits, with obvious consequences for the patients and their relatives. Under these circumstances, some media outfits make their spaces and airtime available to unqualified persons who claim to be medical personnel to make spurious, and often dangerous, claims to a hapless and often desperate populace who seek medical alternatives for survival. News commercialization, therefore, provides an avenue for fraudulent 'medical' personnel to make unverifiable claims which, the gullible populace accepts, resulting in incapacitation or even death of many Nigerians who fall prey to their unprofessional schemes. National development is therefore impaired.

#### **News Commercialization and the Question of ethics:**

From a professional point of view, news commercialization is unacceptable because it interferes with professional news judgment. According to the Code of Ethics for Nigerian Journalists (1998) which was endorsed by Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN), Nigeria Press Council (NPC) "Decision concerning the content of news should be the responsibility of a professional journalists" News commercialization repudiates the above ethical pillar of journalism which states that the job of determining the content of news should not be handed over to anyone, except the professional journalist. It is likely that if news is handled from the outside on the consideration of financial benefit the ingredients of news will disappear while the outside interest is the beneficiary at the detriment of national development effort.

#### **Summary and Conclusion**

In an effort to survive financially, many media outfits have often abandoned the professional practice of gathering and presenting the news of the day, unfettered, to a news – hungry world. Rather, they have entered into an unprofessional alliance with business persons and other interests to "rig" the news and, therefore, make it less worthy especially for the teeming populace who depend on genuine and relevant news to steer them in the right direction of national development. In the process many disguise advertising as news, a disservice to news consumers (Dominic, 2009). Such surreptitious marketing is aimed at benefiting the sponsor who gains legitimacy with the cover of the media. The presentation relies on the social responsibility theory of the press, which presupposes that the media must act in the overall interest of the society in which they operate.

In Nigeria, media ownership revolves around government and private investors. But in India, media ownership is encouragingly diffuse, making it impossible for any individual or group to dominate the newspaper space.

While appreciating that the media operates under different economic and financial pressures, it must be noted that they should not compromise or sacrifice societal progress for their selfish pecuniary interests. The paper sees a negative relationship between news commercialization and development efforts. It identifies some specific aspects where news commercialization is a dampener to national development to include national integration, peace building, value system, press freedom, socialization, education and health. Importantly too, news commercialization is a flagrant violation of the professional journalistic ethic which insists that only professional journalists should determine news content and its treatment. It is unlikely that an unethical practice could contribute positively to national development efforts of any country.

## Recommendations

From the fore going, the following recommendations have been put forward for all concerned.

- i. Since many media houses are owned and controlled by governments at the federal and state levels, there is need for adequate funding of these organizations to enable them to perform optimally and abandon the stealthy marketing strategy of commercializing their news content. This will make them more professional and confident in carrying out their constitution responsibility of news gathering and dissemination in pursuit of national development goals.
- ii. The journalist and management of the various media organizations must, at all times, uphold the ethics of their profession which states that it is the responsibility of the professional journalist to determine the content of news and its treatment. Such a situation enhances the prestige of the professional journalist, while de-emphasizing or even totally eliminating the practice of news commercialization.
- iii. There is need for government to embrace international best practices in all it does, after all no country is an island unto itself. In fact, it is difficult, if not impossible, for any country to practice economic autarky in which it will totally depend on itself for survival. For instance, UNESCO has advised that national budgets of countries should be at least 24 percent. Nigeria has never attained this, suggesting that the country is operating below international standards. Something urgent should be done about this.
- iv. Nigeria must commit itself to the continuous and systematic improvement of facilities because achieving it in one fell swoop would be unrealistic and impossible. This can be done with the political will and the blockages of the leakages in the system which official corruption has engendered over the decades.
- v. The government must devise credible and workable means of reducing official corruption to the barest minimum.

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