

# When Ownership and Geographical Considerations Get To The Front Burner In Media Coverage Of Political Crisis: A Critical Review

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## Abstract

One fundamental principle of media business is the fact that media people must always put public interest first in all their dealings. This they are expected to do irrespective of their geographic or ownership leanings. While one recognises the fact that these factors remain contentious in the media circle and sometimes difficult to do away with in media business, the social responsibility principle should always be allowed to govern all media engagements. While some observers argue that this principle rules only in developed world and not in the third world, others argue otherwise. This review looks at whether or not geographical and ownership considerations influence media people in their coverage of political crisis around the world. After a review of some empirical studies, it is concluded that geographical location and ownership play significant role in media coverage of political crisis.

## Introduction

In reporting daily occurrences, including the outbreak of political crisis, the media, in spite of the ownership patterns, geographical locations and ethnic backgrounds, are generally expected to display a real sense of objectivity by accurately reporting such occurrences. This implies that the media must ensure balance and fairness in their reports. Their reports must be free from any form of bias. To ensure accuracy, objectivity and balance, all parties involved must be given equal attention. Coverage must not be one sided and facts must be separated from opinions.

In the world over, virtually all media codes of conduct and journalism ethics emphasize objectivity and frowns vehemently at ownership/geographical influence that often encourage bias in media reports. For instance, Code 3.3.3 of the Nigerian Broadcasting Code states that:

*All sides to any issue of public interest shall be equitably presented to ensure fairness.*

Also, code 2 (i) of the ethics for Nigerian journalists affirmed the above when it stated that:

The public has a right to know. Factual, accurate, balanced and fair reporting is the ultimate objective of good journalism and the basis of earning public trust and confidence.

Code 2 (ii) of Code of Ethics for Nigerian journalists further warned that journalists should refrain from publishing inaccurate and misleading information.

This means that the mass media have the sacred responsibility of appropriately reporting events without any influence from ownership, geographic and ethnic affiliations and backgrounds. Journalists must be guided by the relevant laws and ethics of the profession.

## Methodology

To find out whether geographical location and ownership influence media coverage of political crisis, qualitative meta-analysis research approach was used. Meta-analysis according to Gibbon (1985, p.1) is a method of synthesizing research results. Neill (2006, para.2) explains that meta-analysis is a “statistical technique for amalgamating, summarizing, and reviewing previous research”. This method helped us to examine the findings and conclusions of studies on whether geographical location and ownership influence media coverage of political crisis.

## The Issue at stake

As established earlier, the media have a duty to report events, including political crisis accurately. However, the effective discharge of this duty in the midst of ownership, geographic/ethnic influences is a

cardinal issue that requires adequate attention. In reporting political crisis and other events, scholars have argued that the duo (ownership and geographic/ethnic influences) are amongst the greatest factors that influence/affect the way the media report developments. Udoduo and Bassey (2011, p.4) assert that:

The issue of fairness as one of the qualities of a good reporter has been a subject of debate in many quarters. Whatever opinion an individual holds on the matter is often justified with reasons. One of such reasons is the ownership interest of the press. Such argument is based on the fact that the press tries to be fair as far as the interest of the owner is not in conflict with the report.

One factor which came to play in the Gowon era in Nigeria, and which has consistently been relevant, is the personal interest of either the proprietor or the journalists themselves. This factor is, of course, relevant in the behaviour of the media worldwide. The world media, to varying degrees, are sensitive to proprietors' interests. "The piper dictates the tune" is the well-known adage (Jibo and Okoosi-Simbine, 2003, p.182).

Ugboaja (1980), cited by Anim (2007, p.4), after a study of Nigerian newspapers coverage of the controversial 1973 national census, showed how the *Nigerian Tribune*, representing the Southern Constituency whose population decreased, manifested anti-government behaviour on the issue while the *New Nigerian* newspapers, representing the Northern states whose population increased, was neutral, editorially speaking (Nwabueze, 2011, p.220).

Anim (2007) conducted a study on "the influence of geopolitical affiliations on newspapers' coverage of national Issues. Content analysis research method was used to carry out the study. Five national dailies were content analysed. The newspapers are *The Guardian*, *The Punch*, *The Trust*, *Daily Times* and *The Daily Champion*. The overall goal of the study was to find out if the newspapers coverage of the decision by the former Nigeria's President Obasanjo to contest the 2003 presidential election was influenced by the papers relationships with the six geopolitical zones of the country. Using systematic sampling technique to select the specific issues that were eventually analysed, the study found that the coverage by these newspapers was significantly influenced by their geopolitical affiliations. The papers reflected the dominant views of the geopolitical zones with which they were associated.

Before independence, the press jointly fought to see that the colonial administration handed over power to Nigerians by way of granting the nation independence. The press at that time sensitized the people on the need for independence and carried other anti-colonial government information. After independence, the objective of politicians who mostly operated through the mass media changed; politics of ethnic antagonism was projected through the press. As Aliede (2003) observed, "on independence, Nigeria inherited a complex political system. Politicians were already sectionally oriented. The situation was aggravated by the ethnic and religious differences of the different 250 ethnic groups in the country" (Nwabueze, 2011, p.218).

During the same period (after independence), each of the three regions came up with its own regional mouthpiece, still influenced by ethnic interests. The Western region started publishing *Daily Sketch*, *Daily Express*, *Nigerian Tribune* and *Irorun Yoruba*; the Eastern Region came up with *Eastern Observer*, *Nigerian Spokesman*, *Eastern Sentinel* and *the Nigerian Outlook*. The Northern region came up with the *Nigerian Citizen*, *New Nigerian* and *Gaskiya Tafi Kwobo*. The federal government had to come up with its own newspapers (*Morning Post* and *Sunday Post*) to serve its interest. Even ethnic minorities also had media organizations that protected their interests. For example, there was *Middle Belt Herald* in Jos, the *Midwest Echo* in Benin and *Advocate* in Uyo (Nwabueze, 2011, p.219).

In a study conducted by Okafor (1981) as highlighted by Amony (1995, p.37), ethnic and political biases were identified as factors that colour the receivers' perception of media credibility in Nigeria. In that study, legislators of the National Assembly of Nigeria were used as the audience. It was revealed in the study that the *New Nigerian Newspaper* was rated as high as "most credible" by respondents from the Northern states while no respondents from the Southern states except one from Anambra and another one from Lagos states gave the medium that credit.

Furthermore, Opubor (1976, p.14) writing on the influence of ethnicity affirmed that:

People believe the media are related to where they are located and who the audience are. Some of our researchers suggest that on some matters, people are more willing to believe any media from their home states. It should be expected that ethnicity will be highly rated in a country like ours.

This, however, is relevant during politics/civilian administration. People tend to believe more the stories of the newspapers that belong to their political party and their ethnic region (Amony, 1995, p.38).

Another obvious instance of ethnicity influence on the press was the flag off editorial of the *New Nigerian Newspaper* which appeared in its maiden issue of January 1, 1966. it stated as one of its objectives that:  
*As a Northern newspaper, we shall seek to identify ourselves with the North (of Nigeria) and its people, their interest and aspirations for this we offer no apology (Amony, 1995, p.39).*

Today, according to Nwabueze (2011, p.219), “there are still strong signs of geographical/ethnic influence in the Nigerian press (print and broadcast). The political class has contributed immensely in making the mass media a reflection of ethnic convictions.” Ndolo (2004), as in Nwabueze (2011, p.219), captured the geographical/ethnic colouration of the Nigerian mass media as brought by the selfish political class when he observed thus:

The mass media have developed vis-à-vis the political structure of Nigeria. Media evolution and structure therefore, led to ethnic interests at the expense of national integration and unity. Today, the media institution, especially print media, is a reflection of the ethnic divisiveness in the country.

Nwabueze (2011, p.219) affirmed that this development often reflected in the ownership pattern which plays an influential role in the content of the media.

A study on “ownership and coverage of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) strike” was conducted by Jibo in 1981. In the study, Jibo studied the coverage of event by the *National Concord*, *the New Nigerian*, *The Daily Sketch*, *The Nigerian Tribune* and *The Daily Times Newspapers*. Using content analysis research method to content analyse the selected editions, it was found that the *National Concord*, *the New Nigerian* and *the Daily Times newspapers* owned by a member of the Federal government partly at that time and the federal government respectively condemned the NLC strike and gave little coverage to the strike. While on the other hand, *Daily Sketch newspapers* owned by the UPN controlled government, the *Nigerian Tribune* newspaper owned by the leader of the UPN, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, and *The Punch Newspaper* owned by Chief Aboderin were on the side of the workers. Jibo (1982, p.7) concluded that:

Every newspaper under study defended the interests of their mentors. All of them gave prominence to their stories where necessary. Divisive political considerations based on sordid sentiment dictated their manner of coverage and analysis of the event explored.

Olusola in 1982 conducted a study entitled “The Influence of Ownership on the Coverage of the Collapse of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and Nigerian people’s Party (NPP) Accord”. That was a content analytical study with code sheet as the instrument for data collection. Findings of the study revealed that the *National Concord* owned by Chief M.K.O. Abiola who was a member of the NPN and the *New Nigerian Newspaper* owned by the federal government were in support of all the actions of NPN on the accord. On the other hand, the *Nigerian Tribune* and the *Daily Sketch newspapers* were totally for the abrogation of the accord which in effect would draw the NPP to the side of their political mentor, Chief Awolowo’s UPN. Olusola (1982, p.47) further stated that:

In Nigeria, the press is either used to consolidate the proprietor’s stand on any issue, or to try as much as possible to guard against anything which, though may be truth, that can bring into the open those misdemeanours of the proprietor. The pronouncements of these press, therefore, must only be the singsong of the proprietor. Really, he who pays the piper dictates the tune.

In a study conducted by Adesoba (1975, p.40) entitled, “Press Coverage of the Student’s Crisis of 1974,” a fundamental finding, amongst others was made. The study, adopting the content analysis research method revealed that ownership of newspaper influenced the editorial direction of the papers on the crisis. Four newspapers were content analysed to ascertain the nature of coverage given to the crisis. The papers include *New Nigeria*, *Nigerian Observer*, *Daily Times* and the *Nigeria Tribune*. From the study, *New Nigerian* and *Nigerian Observer* newspapers were found to be pro-government while the *Nigerian Tribune* and *Daily Times Newspapers* were on the side of the students.

In addition, Aborisade (1981, p.5), asserts that:

What we have in Nigeria under the rubric of the press is sectional press which caters for sectional interest and not national interest. The press are basically UPN papers, NPN papers, NPP papers and GNPP papers. The

papers were all out to protect the interests of their owners and criticize the opposing camps without any respect for available facts.

The performance of journalists is mainly determined by the whims, caprices and wishes of the newspaper proprietors. Journalists are disciples of this or that politician whose praises they frame and sing for better only and never for worse (Agbazue, 1981 cited in (Amony, 1995, p.37).

Afolabi (1981, p.39) in a study on ownership and reportage of the regular meetings of the nine governors of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), People's Redemption Party (PRP), and Great Nigerian People's Party (GNPP), known as the Progressive Governors' meeting found that the *Nigerian Tribune* supported the nine governors' meeting, because the newspaper's proprietor was favourably disposed to the meeting. On the other hand, the *National Concord* newspaper was against the governors' meeting because of its publisher's opposition to the meeting. The study established that owners of newspapers can decide what the contents of their papers shall be. Afolabi further asserts that "the proprietor, printer or publisher can publish or cause to be published dishonest, irresponsible and subjective reports on events. He can manipulate news as he pleases."

Bower (1967) through interview with managing editors of 613 daily evening newspapers confirmed publisher's interference in newspapers content. He found that publisher's interference is higher in geographically close topics in areas related to newspaper revenue, in areas close to the personal concern of publishers and on papers lower in circulation (p.57).

Ownership/ethnicity and geographical influences on the media could impact negatively on the society in many ways. It basically creates an atmosphere of insecurity and even sparks off or worsen existing crisis. By reporting or interpreting issues from an ethnocentric perspective or by the influence of ownership, the media heat up the system and bring about distrust and friction between 'rival' ethnic/political groups. The coverage of political issues, especially "ethno-political" issues is capable of causing uproar in the society. As a matter of fact, the unconventional, unethical, sectional and unpatriotic approach of politicians (through the media) to national issues during the post-independence era, overheated the system and led to the January 15, 1966 military coup that dismantled the first republic (Aliede, 2003). Restraint is necessary in the reportage of issues capable of igniting crisis in the political arena (Nwabueze, 2011, p.220).

The mass media would be failing in their social responsibility role to the society if they operate from ethnic/geographical or ownership perspective. When for instance, a Yoruba reporter projects a politician from an Igbo speaking area in bad light just because of personal interest, objectivity and fairness which are tenets of social responsibility of the media, are slaughtered on the altar of ownership, ethnicity/geographical affiliation (Nwabueze, 2011, p.220).

Furthermore, as part of the social responsibility function, Uchem (2003, p.255), writing on the role of the media in times of political crisis asserted that:

What is to be done, therefore, when a conflict arises is to bridge the gap arising between the two parties who have found them hauled into the terminal flood of the dialectic process..... what the mass media need to do is to quickly study their situation and package effectively, information responsibly that emphasizes the common grounds they still share together or could share to bring them back once more to a synthesis. Such useful and important information or communication on the areas that unite while leaving out those that divide is all that is needed to end conflict and reconcile the actors on the line of the divide.

Also, McQuail (1987, p.117), cited in Obot (2004, p.104), x-rays the main principle of social responsibility function of the media to include;

- a. Media should accept and fulfil certain obligations to society.
- b. These obligations are mainly to be met by setting high or professional standards of information, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance.
- c. In accepting and applying these obligations, media should be self-regulating within the framework of the law and established institutions.
- d. The media should avoid whatever might lead to crime, violence or civil disorder or give offence to minority groups.
- e. The media as a whole should be pluralistic and reflect the diversity of their society, giving access to various points of view and right to reply.
- f. Society and public, following the first named principle have a right to expect high standards of performance and interaction and can be justified to secure the public.

- g. Journalists and media professionals should be accountable to society as well as to employer and the market.

In a related study conducted in 2003 by Xinkum Wang of Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, sufficient evidences were found to support the fact that ownership influences the contents of the news media. Wang (2003) used content analytical research design to establish whether ownership of newspapers in the United States affected the contents of news reports during the 2000 presidential contest between President George Bush and Albert Arnold Gore. In conducting this study, Wang used quantitative content design to examine the news contents of two daily newspapers, *The Boston Globe* and *Boston Herald*.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

Two theories – Media Ownership theory by Altschull, J.H. developed in 1984, and Media Ownership and News Content developed by Shoemaker and Reese in 1987 were used to anchor this study.

Altschull's Media Ownership theory contends that "the content of the press is directly correlated with the interests of those who finance the press (Wang, 2003, p.5). For Shoemaker and Reese's theory of Media Ownership and News Contents, the basic tenet of interest remains the fact that "the owners of a media organization have ultimate power over the news content of the newspapers" (Wang, 2003, p.6). Shoemaker and Reese (1991), cited in Wang (p.6), explain that:

The primary focus of a news organization owned by a publicly held corporation is to make profit, and objectivity is seen as a way of attracting the readers desired by advertisers. The content of the news is built into the economic objectives of the company. Though in some rare cases, the owner may choose to make profits secondary to an ideological goal, such as promoting a particular agenda, the organization can't indefinitely ignore the economic goal (Wang, p.6).

Basically, these theories are very apt in explaining the variables in her study.

The findings of the study revealed that ownership greatly influenced the way the two dailies used in the study covered the election. In analysing the result, Wang (2003, p.11) states that:

A content analysis of 238 news stories and eight editorials from publicly-owned *Boston Globe* and privately –owned *Boston Herald* showed that not only did the ownership affect the objectivity of the coverage of these two newspapers on 2000 presidential election, the endorsements also affected the degree of objectivity.... the study found more evidence to support shoemaker's theory of news content and ownership.

From most of the studies reviewed, it will not be out of place for some conjectures to be made in relation to the study under review. It can be argued, theoretically, that ownership and geographical considerations play roles in media coverage of political crisis.

### **Conclusion/Recommendations**

Arguably, ownership, ethnicity and geographical considerations have continued to be very instrumental to the non-observance of the above social responsibility principles of the media in every part of the world. When the trio are in control of media/information flow, inaccurate and unbalanced reports are definitely the end products. This, no doubt, contravenes the demands of the social responsibility function, particularly, the fourth and the fifth principles which states that the media should avoid whatever might lead to crime, violence or civil disorder or give offence to the minority groups, and the media as a whole should be pluralistic and reflect the diversity of their society, giving access to the various points of view and right to reply.

Therefore, the principles of the social responsibility function of the media demand that for the media to effectively discharge their duties, particularly in political crisis, there must be a requiem for ownership, ethnicity and geographical influences.

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