

NEWS COMMERCIALISATION AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN JOURNALISM PRACTICE: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATION BUILDING

Momoh, T. N and Emmanuel, B. O

Department of Mass Communication, Kogi State Polytechnic, Lokoja, Nigeria

Email: momohsays74@gmail.com

Mobile: 08039246252

(Corresponding Author)

ABSTRACT

This paper examined the relationship between news commercialisation and social responsibility in journalism and the implications of such relationship for nation building. This is against the backdrop of the fact that news commercialisation has been an issue of ethical concern in journalism practice. Anchored on the social responsibility theory of the media, the paper extensively reviewed available empirical and conceptual literature on the contending positions on the issue. Findings revealed that while some insist that commercialisation or commodification of news should be allowed to have a place in the operations of the media, a counter position is that allowing such to prevail would affect the foundations upon which journalism is built and the growth of Nigerian nation as a consequence. Proponents of commodification see it as a necessity for the survival of media outfits while the opponents are of the conviction that it diminishes media trust, contributes to class domination by the rich and derails national integration which is needed for nation-building. The paper recommended, amongst others, that there should be enabling law clearly delineating between what constitutes commercial messages that should be fully paid for and what constitutes issues of overriding public interest which should go into public domain without attracting any form of payment. Such delineation and its enforcement will promote social responsibility, ensure media survival in the wake of harsh economic condition and ultimately contribute to nation-building.

KEYWORDS: News commercialisation, social responsibility, nation-building, media, news commodification

1.0

INTRODUCTION

The mass media are the channels through which information is passed to a large and heterogeneous audience. According to Amodu, Usaini & Ige (2014), the power of the press arose from its ability to withhold or give out information. Given the vital role the media plays in society as a watchdog that ensures the government is accountable to the people and that the people participate in the governance process, the media has been given the title of fourth estate of the realm or arm of government (Amodu, *et al.*, 2014).

The fact that the media has been assigned enormous responsibility and power makes it pertinent for its practitioners to be guided by codes and ethics (Hassan, 2020). Ethics requires that journalists do their job with sense of objectivity, fairness, accuracy, balance, truthfulness, amongst others. However, a growing concern in the practice of journalism practice that is likely to exert negative impact on the profession is the issue of news commodification or commercialisation. News commercialisation results from a situation where the media report a commercial message by an unidentified sponsor as news, giving the impression that such messages are news that are fair, objective and socially responsible (Udomisor & Kenneth, 2013).

News commercialisation in Nigeria can be traced to 1986 when the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) was introduced. It was an economic policy aimed at encouraging self-reliance and reduction of over dependence on government for financial subventions in business. As a consequence, government withdrew subsidies which were provided to federal and state owned media organisations (Chioma, 2013). This led these organisations to source for other means to fund their operations to cushion the effect of the removal of the subsidies and news commercialization became one of these strategies. This was finally given a legal instrument through the commercialisation of broadcast media under decree number 38 of 1992.

In addition, Asogwa and Asemah (2012) in Oberiri (2016) traced the fundamental objectives of setting up media houses as also responsible for the commodification tendency of some media stations. They explained that, while some media perform the ideal role of serving as the conscience of the society and setting agenda for national discourse, others express more interest in generating income and seeking profit. In Nigeria, the latter is more common, given that media content is considered a commodity for sale, just like other commodities in a capitalist environment. Azeez (2009) cited in Adebola and Onwuka (2021) shared this opinion which they stressed, has the implication of amplifying the voice of the rich while the poor is rendered voiceless. In essence, the owners of the means of production who control the media continue to dominate.

However, the media serving as the tool of the rich is antithetical to the attainment of its social responsibility role. Udomisor and Kenneth (2013) noted that one of the features that mark a socially responsible media is its reflection on the diversity of the society, allowing access of different points of views and right to feedback. Therefore, marginalising one group because they lack the purchasing power negates the provision of a socially responsible media as reflected in the theory of social responsibility. It also infringes on democracy as it negates the values of social justice. Where social justice is negated, a sense of segregation and oppression sets in and with the potential to create a divisive and retrogressive society.

Asemah and Asogwa, (in Ismail, Abba-Pali & Shem, 2021), observed that there is an increasing commercialisation of the media in Nigeria, a situation that has brought the integrity of the mass media enterprise to question. While the survival of the media is hinged on its financial foundation, excessive drive for news commodification in search of survival and profitability erodes the very basis of its existence in the first place. Nigeria as a country in search of nation building due to its diversity therefore needs a media institution that gives practically equal voices to all diverse elements, irrespective of social status. It is against this background that this paper attempts to examine the relationship between news commercialisation and social responsibility of the media in Nigeria and the overall implication of such relationship on nation building.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual and Empirical Review

Harrison (2006 p.100) in Chioma (2013) captures news commercialisation as an economic process of 'commodification' whereby media audience are primarily seen as consumers. This economic rationalisation of journalism has been heightened by the fragmentation of the mass audience as consumers. In essence, the primary determinant of news worthiness becomes the ability to pay a media organisation a certain amount of money rather than the presence of the classic elements of the news, especially as it bothers on news values and virtues.

According to Omenugha (2008), in Una (2014), news commercialization occurs at two

levels. The first is institutional, which involves charges being placed for sponsored news programmes bordering on socio-economic issues. Omenugha explained quoted the National Broadcasting Commission as saying that when commercial contents are passed off as news within the media and assigned news quality, such raises ethical concerns. The second level of news commodification is at the individual journalist level. What this reflects is that journalists make monetary demands before covering or reporting news events even when such events are news worthy. Similarly, Adelabu and Onwuka (2022) submits that some media houses in Nigeria makes it mandatory for journalists to add marketing roles to the reportorial roles, increasing the pressure on journalists to undermine their primary ethical roles, and yielding to the pressure of commodification. Omenugha and Oji (2018), carried out a survey to find out the major means of news gathering by Nigerian journalists, and discovered that scheduled events had the highest percentage. They also discovered that, in most cases, journalists are given gifts and monetary packages to take home after attending such events. They concluded that failure of journalists to investigate situations, conduct interviews and embark on fact finding mission, make them vulnerable to powerful commercial interest groups who are willing to pay for news.

Asemah and Omula (2013) investigated the influence of news commercialisation on objective journalism practice through a survey method. From the findings of the study, respondents asserted that news commercialisation thrives due to lack of principle and economic pressure. They submit that the practice negates the codes of ethics of journalism such as accuracy and fairness, reward and gratification and public interest and weakens the gatekeeping and editing power of journalists. The study recommended thus that commercialised news should not be disguised as news but rather treated as advertisements. It also called on government to provide subvention to media organisations in order to reduce their dependency on commercialised news.

Oberiri (2016) in his examination of the perception of news commercialization and its implication on media credibility among registered journalists in Taraba State revealed that majority of the respondents believe that news commercialisation was disguised as advertisements. Majority also believe that news commercialisation is the acceptance of money for news publication which is a situation whereby journalists collect money before publishing a news event. In addition, majority of the respondents confirmed that news commercialisation affects objectivity and balance in reporting as well as credibility and media trust. Respondents believed that corruption, poor remuneration, and personal greed was responsible for the situation.

Oredipe and Udoudo (2019) assessed the implication of news commercialisation in the coverage of the Rivers state governorship election by three radio stations namely; Rhythm FM, Nigerian Info FM and Radio Rivers. Findings showed that stakeholders without political interests had free access to the three radio stations whereas, coverage of campaign news of political candidates and parties and election monitoring were determined by how much they could pay, which was against the provision of the National Broadcasting Commission that warned against commercialisation of political news coverage. Oredipe and Udoudo (2019) concluded that by sacrificing social responsibility for commercialisation, the media had failed to promote the nation's fledgling democracy which amounted to a disservice to the nation.

From the foregoing, there is a growing pattern that investigative journalism has been less of a priority for news organisations due to their desire to make profit and this has led to a loss of variety in the news as media houses have lost focus on their primary mission (Omenugha & Oji, 2015). This makes the news susceptible to abuse by interest groups

who can pay their way into the media to project an idea they want people to accept, whether it is positive or not (Ismaila, et al., 2021).

Ismaila et al. (2021) explained that news commercialisation has implications for national development and the journalistic profession. This is because it suppresses the voice of the have nots in society including their development needs. This perpetuates class interest and class dominance. By extension, it contributes to the domination of the owners of the means of production over the working class, which has been a Marxist concern.

Nwanne (2018) posits that news commercialisation 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 journalist. But when financial benefit is the consideration for news, the interest of those who have the financial resource have the advantage, rather than the elements of news worthiness that guide the profession. This is detrimental to national development. It also infringes on the National Broadcasting Commission code 2006 section S.1.3 which borders on the sacred nature of the news. Hence, sponsorship of news, commentaries, current affairs programmes and the likes infringes on the integrity and predisposes a bias in favour of the sponsor (Udomisor & Kenneth, 2013). The situation notwithstanding, media scholars remain of the consensus that it is the duty of the journalist to refuse any reward for publishing or suppressing news or comment (Pepple & Acholonu, 2018; Lai in Nyong & Ekwok, 2015).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory. An off-shoot of the Libertarian Theory, it was formally designed by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in 1956 in their book 'Four Theories of the Media'. It demands that freedom carries concomitant obligations, and that the press which enjoys a privileged position in the society, is obliged to be responsible in carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication. It stresses that socially acceptable press behaviour is to be anchored on self-regulation, but if the press would not voluntarily give them, then there must be certain social structures to ensure that it behaves in compliance with recognised social standards. The theory is therefore, both ethical and normative in inclination.

In relation to the current study, the theory is significant because it outlines the framework for the operation of the media to ensure a functional society. Since the concept of news commodification is of ethical concern, the theory captures the responsibility of media practitioners and how the responsibilities should be exercised within a plural society in search of advancement. In other words, it shapes the work within the context of journalistic responsibility of ensuring balance, fairness, objectivity etc, which are required for cohesiveness and growth of a nation.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Qualitative content analysis is adopted for the study. The qualitative approach enables the researcher to make “knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspective (i.e. multiple meanings of individual's experiences) with the intent of developing a pattern” (Creswell, 2003, p.18). It provides “rich, elaborate descriptions of specific processes or concerns within a specified context”. In qualitative studies, there are no scientifically validated rules that guide the selection of sample size; “The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-

richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with the sample size (Patton, 1990, p.185). The study therefore uses secondary data gathered from relevant literature to make inference on the relationship between news commercialization and social responsibility of journalists and how such relationship impacts on nation building.

4.0

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The secondary data obtained from related studies show that commercialisation of news is increasingly becoming a dominant feature of the Nigerian media content. This is attributable to poor revenue base of the media houses, poor remuneration for journalists, ownership control, political dominance, lack of clear cut legislation on media contents and socio-cultural Nigerian environment. The contending issues as obtained are analysed thus

4.1 Social Responsibility and the Brown Envelope Syndrome

From the available literature, there are two basic schools of thought regarding receiving brown envelopes. One school of thought believes it is not wrong to accept brown envelope because it is an expression of their consonance with African culture, while the other school of thought believes it is an act of bribery capable of negatively impacting on the role of the media as conscience of the society (Adelabu and Onwuka, 2022).

Those in the first school of thought advocate for news commodification because they see it as an avenue for the stations to generate revenue for their operation, thereby giving them some form of autonomy which makes them less dependent on government subvention and curtail unnecessary dictate in terms of contents. In addition, they explain that it helps to improve the economic status of journalists through the 10 percent of any payment on a unit of adverts they attract to the media organisation (Omenugha & Oji, 2016). The proponents of commodification also hinged their position on the poor remuneration of journalists which they claim, make it difficult for them to survive without some form of gratification. The harsh economic reality, they stressed, dictates the disposition of journalists to other means of survival, including brown envelope (Omenugha & Oji, 2016).

However, the opponents of commodification in general and the brown envelope syndrome in particular have expressed that the phenomenon should have no place in journalism practice in Nigeria. Adelabu and Onwuka (2022), for instance, advanced reasons for maintaining such position. These include inhibition of neutrality and objectivity, unwarranted censorship, inhibition of free flow of information and overall obstruction to national development. In summary, therefore, the proponents of brown envelope would have us accept that it is a necessary evil which the society has to contend with if the media organisation must survive, while the opponents believe that the very foundation of a plural society would be eroded if the situation is allowed to continue.

4.2 News Commercialisation and Social Responsibility

Melisande (2009, p. 6) in Obagwu and Idris (2019) argues that, from the perspective of developing countries, social responsibility of the media requires that *the mass media are expected to inform the citizenry of what goes on in the government, report on and prompt discussion of ideas, opinions and truths towards social refinement and act as bulletin board for information and mirror the society and its people*. In addition, Melisande (2009) posited that the press is accountable in four ways; including to the audiences (to whom they owe correct news reportage, analysis and editorializing), to the government (to which they owe constructive criticism, a relay of popular opinion and adequate feedback from the populace), to the owner (to whom they owe the survival of the media

organisation as a business venture as well as a veritable source of education, enlightenment and entertainment), and to themselves, to whom they owe fulfillment in their calling, satisfaction and an entire success story.

With the study and positions of many scholars on the implications of news commercialisation, it is evident that the phenomenon is against what a socially responsible media should be. According to Nwanne (2018), it is extremely difficult to embrace commercialisation without compromising social responsibility to the citizens who, at least on paper, have a right to know, as this is one of the duties of a socially responsible media. While on one hand, those who argue for news commercialisation may see it as a means of survival for the media organisation, it still does not change the fact that it negates another tenet of the social responsibility of the media which must allow for exchange of comments and criticisms. When news becomes a commodity that is sold to the highest bidders, it suffers because the traditional and professional idea of news is sacrificed on the altar of financial gain.

Lending credence to the foregoing, Romanyuk and Kovalenko (2019) explained that social responsibility entails a responsibility to the society and a duty to carry out actions reflecting socially accepted norms that contributes to the overall wellbeing of the public. They also added that social responsibility implies that the mass media provide publication of materials that meet up with high professional standards of information, accuracy, and balance. When news becomes commercialised, these standards are watered down, and with the social responsibility as casualty.

4.3 News Commercialisation and Nation-building

According to Unya and Adaeze (2022), nation building is generally understood to be the process of creating and establishing a national identity through the use of state power and therefore, nation building includes the procedures designed to bring the people of the state together in order for it to stay politically stable and viable over the long term. Obiozor (2015) in Unya and Adaeze (2022) advises that for Nigerian unity and nation-building efforts to succeed, the leaders need to take a leaf out of or emulate the experiences of countries that did not ignore the element of pluralism in their respective countries and societies.

Embracing such pluralism means allowing a media institution that give equal voice to the diverse elements that make up the society. However, news commercialisation does not allow this to be achieved as it hinders the presentation of pluralistic views in society by the media. This is because it is the voice of the elites (who can afford to pay for their opinions to be known) that is heard while others are sidelined.

Nwanne (2018) asserts that nation building is a rigorous activity that requires the cooperation of a vast majority of people in society. For it to be successful, national political integration is compulsory. This is especially because Nigeria is a country that comprises of various ethnic groups. Nwanne (2018) further explained that the government owned media which should be well funded with tax payers' funds are in the best position to provide the citizenry with news and information to enhance nation political integration. But unfortunately, many of these media stations are neglected and in a bid to sustain themselves, they engage in news commercialisation which ultimately compromises their ability to improve national integration and nation-building.

Nwanne (2018) stressed that news commercialisation repudiates ethical pillar of journalism. He therefore submitted that the job of determining the content of news should not be handed over to anyone, except the professional journalists. News if handled from outside on the consideration of financial benefit the ingredients of news would disappear

while the outside interest becomes the beneficiary at the expense of national development effort.

5.0

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, there is an inverse relationship between news commercialization and social responsibility. On one hand, excessive news commercialisation deprives the media of its social responsiveness. On the other hand, media practice that places much emphasis on social responsibility automatically reduces tendency towards commodification.

Stakeholders in the media have argued for and against news commercialisation, but there is overwhelming conviction that news commercialisation is antithetical to ethical practice in the media. In fact, journalist loses its professional status if ethical consideration is sacrificed on the altar of commodification. In other words, news commercialisation is against what a socially responsible media should be, and audience mistrust the media when they perceive it to sacrifice accuracy for personal gains. Consequently, a media mistrusted by its audience will not be effective in carrying out its functions in society such as informing, educating, socialising the audience.

A media outfit cannot adequately perform its function in a democratic society when it is viewed as untrustworthy by its audience. For instance, when coverage of political actors in a democratic society especially during election campaign period is determined by how much payment the parties can make, the result is that the voices of well-established parties are heard more loudly while the weak ones are marginalised. This does not give room for the people in a democratic setting to have access to full information about political actors in order to help them make informed political decisions and voting. This derails democracy and consequently infringes on nation-building.

5.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations are therefore advanced:

1. There should be enabling law clearly delineating between what constitutes commercial messages that should be fully paid for and what constitutes issues of overriding public interest which should go into public domain without attracting any form of payment;
2. Media organisations should as much as possible, try to maximise their advertising resourcefulness so as to generate substantial revenue to fund their operations and pay their employees;
3. Government should provide subsidy for the operations of media outfits so that it can ease their financial burden and wean them off dependence on wealthy individuals and corporations;
4. An enabling legislation for a special salary scale for journalists in the country should be enacted to make journalists financially stable and make them resistant to financial inducement;
5. Journalists should be subjected to mandatory professional training and retraining from time to time in order to instill in them, self-worth that can make them look beyond unethical ways of making money and help them to focus on accuracy, objectivity, fairness and balance reportage.
6. Regulatory bodies such as the National Broadcasting Commission and the Nigerian Press Council should be more dedicated to disciplining individual journalists and media outlets that go against ethical and legal practices so as to serve as deterrent to others.

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