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Between The Gulag of Government Control and Jaws of Commercialism: Wither Public Service Broadcasting?

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Abstract

Authoritarianism and permissivism are two basic broadcast orientations that have internally regulated the principles and practice of broadcasting in Nigeria. The former principally caters for government interest while the latter is driven by the profit motive. These two factors dominate the system and dictate how broadcasting operates in Nigeria with little or no concern to public interest. This article argues that the present broadcasting system cannot provide genuine service to the public, hence the need for a Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) that is neither profit-driven nor is subject to the whims of government dictatorship.

Introduction

Commercialism and government control are two forces that have become deeply entrenched in broadcasting in Nigeria. Of truth, they dominate broadcasting in the country. At the inception of broadcasting, the government funded the system exclusively, and viewed advertising money as an unnecessary distraction and negative influence on the smooth operation of the system as well as threat to the ideals of

broadcasting as a tool of development and national unity. Broadcasting was regarded as purely a social service; hence the federal government did not allow its stations to accept advertisements. State-owned stations that accepted commercials did it not with modern-day aggression, but with reservations in hunting and scouting for advertising revenue. To say the least, the influence of commercials was at its barest minimum. That left broadcast stations to grapple with the major challenge of total government control of the system which, interestingly, persisted until the National Broadcasting Commission Decree No. 38 of 1992. To some extent, the decree loosened the grip of government on the ownership and operation of broadcast stations to include, for the first time, private individuals and organisations other than government (Otu, 2006; Udejah, 2004).

The deregulation of broadcasting – removing its ownership and control from the exclusive list of government – opened a new chapter in commercialism in broadcasting. Ab initio, the private stations coming on board had no other source of revenue than advertising revenue, and thus explored and pursued it with aggression and creativity. With the private and so-called public stations combing the nooks and crannies of the nation for advertising revenue, and stations sometimes engaging in excessive (dog-eat-dog) competition (Head, 1985), Nigeria had its full plunge into commercialism in broadcasting with the attendant implications for broadcasting in particular and the nation in general.

Today, two major forces, centrifugal in nature, appear to be pulling broadcasting in a typical tug-of-war: the force of government control and the force of commercialism. Sometimes in combination, sometimes with no relation to each other, these two forces have tended to colour and define the path of broadcast operations in Nigeria. In this article,

commercialism and commercialisation are used interchangeably to mean the principle or practice of being more concerned with making money from buying and selling media content for profit than being concerned about the quality, especially in a situation such content would not usually be sold. Government-controlled and government-owned stations are also used interchangeably to mean broadcast outfits that are financed from the public purse as controlled by government.

This article disagrees from the outset that government-controlled stations are stations for the public, but argues that they are for the clique in power and do not, in any way, operate in the public interest. Their operations, in spite of public finding and rhetorics by government and the operatives themselves, are guided solely by the interest of those in government. Hence, they cannot be classified, in the true sense, as public service stations. This raises the question: between government control of most of the broadcast stations in Nigeria and the drive for advertising revenue, who services the public?

Broadcasting and the Gulag of Government Control

At the promulgation of the National Broadcasting Commission Decree No. 38 of 1992 (effective August 24, 1992), stakeholders in the broadcast industry were upbeat that the deregulation of the industry would reduce the stranglehold of government on broadcast ownership and control, a situation that had stretched from 1932 when broadcasting was first introduced in Nigeria through the BBC Empire Service. Yet, nearly two decades after private participation was allowed a bite on the cake of owning and operating broadcasting, government, at the state and federal levels, is still on the driving seat of broadcasting. Together, they control more than 95% of broadcast channels in Nigeria. The

federal government in particular has flooded the nation with FRCN-FM stations, with every state and the Federal Capital Territory having at least one each. This is in addition to the national stations in Lagos, Kaduna, Enugu, Ibadan and Abuja. The Nigerian Television Authority, NTA, has about 99 stations across the country, some of which are yet to be operational. Similarly, all the states of the federation have radio and television stations (Udejah, 2004).

No doubt, the establishment of radio and TV stations by the federal government has enlarged the coast of broadcasting in Nigeria. However, this multiplication of stations does not in any way suggest a diversity of voices. Rather, it is a multiplication of channels for a single, mighty dominating voice – government – that is often mistaken to represent the people (public).

Many factors account for these mistaken assumptions:

- (i) the public sector funding of government controlled stations;
- (ii) the enabling laws for the operation of such stations which mandated them to serve as a platform for the public to participate in the communication process; and
- (iii) arising from the two points above, operatives engage in self-adulation that they are the mouthpiece of the public.

For the uncritical mind, these reasons appear real and overwhelming. However, to the student of broadcasting, the above reasons, coupled with the unprecedented multiplication of government channels, are parallel to the very existence of government-controlled channels. From the beginning of broadcasting in Nigeria, politicians have used it as a tool to achieve their political interest. Right from the time that the late sage, Obafemi Awolowo, was denied the right of reply on federal radio (NBC), consequent

upon which he established the Western Nigeria Television (WNTV) in 1959 to canvas his political viewpoints, broadcasting in the hands of government has maintained that distinctive character of being a political weapon wielded by government to maintain the status quo and possibly decimate its opponents. The federal government uses the NTA and FRCN in this manner. However, it is worse with broadcast outfits controlled by state governments.

As an unwritten rule, the FRCN and NTA turn back at their news gates contents that are critical of the federal government. But they may open the gates to contents that do not support the government, when the operatives feel no harm is implied. This is discretionary, and is intended to give a semblance of balance. Thus, when the opposition is within tolerable limits, NTA and FRCN would accommodate such views. But state government-controlled stations go a step deeper in denying access to the people. As the experiences during the 2011 general election showed, there are some voices who, because of their socio-political association and background, are permanently adjudged enemies of government who should not be granted access to the airwaves, their viewpoints notwithstanding. It is not only politicians that are shut out of the channels but other members of the public too.

For example, in Akwa Ibom Broadcasting Corporation, which is controlled by the Akwa Ibom State Government, a simple, harmless complaint by the citizens over flood or bad roads in Akwa Ibom State which should, ordinarily, spur the relevant government agencies to action, is regarded as an affront on government and contradiction of the Akwa Ibom Ado Ok campaign (Akwa Ibom is okay) which government has portrayed. A report on any negative occurrence in the state such as kidnapping or electoral fraud is viewed in this light. The question arises: how

often do government-controlled stations become a voice to the citizens on issues which touch on government failings?

It is important to note that the survival of a TV or radio station controlled by the government is guaranteed to the extent that it caters for and protects the interest of government elites. It is indisputable, but regrettably so, that the interest of the government elites are assumed by both the elites and the broadcast operatives to be synonymous with public interest and, by extension, the interest of the station, such that the various broadcast channels are but a mere megaphone of the government. When critical voices are shut out, when broadcasting is used to disparage and prosecute dissenting citizens, it is reasonable to posit that broadcasting and its operatives are in fetters, an ineluctable gulag. A media channel in fetters is in tatters, always disseminating a version of reality that agrees with and supports or services the structures of power. Under these circumstances, public service, though claimed by the government and broadcast operatives alike, becomes an illusion.

Broadcasting and the Jaws of Commercialism

Commercialism, according to McQuail (2005, p. 550), is a "process by which media structures and contents come to reflect the profit-seeking goals of media industries and are too much governed by market considerations." The commercialisation of media operations stems from the laissez-faire model of the economy "where producers compete with one another to sell their products to consumers. Thus, media corporations are seen as having to compete for the attention and loyalty of their consumers, the audience" (Watson and Hill, 2006, p. 47). Under commercialisation, the consumer is sovereign, and media organisations tailor their products in line with

audience desires, tastes and preferences.

In commercialism, news contents are commodified. McQuail (2005, p. 550) explains two aspects of commodification:

One is the treatment of all media messages as 'products' to be brought or sold in the media market, without reference to other criteria of value. The other is that the audience can be treated as a commodity to be sold by media to advertisers at so much per head, according to ratings and other market criteria.

Watson and Hill (2006, p. 49) further explain commercialism as "the notion that information is something upon which the possessor can put a price; thus information is brought and sold because it is a commodity rather than a public service." The argument by Watson and Hill is apt, because in any situation that media content is given a commercial value, it ceases to be a public service but some product to be bought and sold for profits to the investor.

Commercialism, just like government control of the media, operates within clearly defined principles. As McQuail as well as Watson and Hill already cited have alluded to, media operators within the *laissez-faire* system place premium on the expected profits from the products to be put in the market for would-be consumers. Public service takes a back seat or disappears completely. References to public service by the operators are a mere cloak to disguise their profit motive.

Profit motive drives both the private broadcast operators and their counterparts who are publicly funded. Once a broadcast station is driven by the profit motive, it must, of necessity, operate in line with the principles of a *laissez-faire* economy. This, undoubtedly, affects the operations and output of

such stations. Advertisers and other corporate sponsors, without coming out in the open, surreptitiously dictate the contents to be put on the public sphere as well as the timing of such publication. They also dictate the relationship between a media organisation and their (advertisers' and sponsors') rivals.

While media organisations do compete in terms of creativity in content, there seems to be more and stiffer competition in wooing advertisers. Oftentimes, broadcast organisations, both government-controlled and privately owned, have engaged in excessive competition:

A dog-eat-dog competition which occurs when a market contains more competitors than its economy can readily support. Failing stations or services, struggling desperately to survive, begin to cut corners and resort to substandard (if not downright illegal) practices in order to keep from going under. Even the more successful stations in the market may be forced to lower their standards simply to meet the competition (Head, 1985, p. 94).

The free enterprise system dictates that if this downward spiral occurs, its end result will be the elimination of the weak and the survival of the strong.

The 'in-fighting' within the broadcast industry in Nigeria for advertisements and sponsorship of programmes has provoked the unending demand by private broadcast operators that government-funded broadcast outfits should not 'struggle' against them for the little advertising revenue, given the fact that those government-controlled stations already enjoy the largesse of public funds. This article is neither concerned with the competition for advertising revenue and sponsorship among Nigerian broadcast

stations, nor the necessity or centrality of commercialisation to the survival of the broadcast industry.

The concern here is that to the extent that players in the industry actively seek and secure advertising and programme sponsorship, to that extent can they not lay claim to genuine public service in their operations. Profit motive and public interest, in most cases, run parallel to each other. In the contest of importance and priority between profit motive and public service, the former often wins. Just as government control of broadcasting compels the affected stations to serve as both a megaphone for the official structures and instrument of affliction for the 'off-the-line' citizens, commercial broadcasting subjugates the benefiting station to the dictatorship of its corporate sponsors. It makes broadcast organisations to pander to needs of advertisers. In these circumstances, the major casualty is always public service.

It is sometimes argued that broadcast stations do produce programmes that educate, entertain and inform the public; programmes that are a must-watch or must-listen. The truth which is varnished by the education, entertainment and information functions is that the stations are doing so, not for the love of the public, but to attract a large, reasonable audience which would be sold to the advertiser. Hence, the audience, as noted earlier, becomes a product, just as the content of a media programme. And the advertisers and programme sponsors are ruthless: once they conclude that the audience of a particular channel is shrinking, the advertisement and programme sponsorship go elsewhere!

There is no denying the fact that keen competition among broadcasters for endorsement often leads to creativity and higher programme quality in order to

impress and capture the advertisers and programme sponsors. However, as Ehrenberg and Barwise (1983, p. 13) have noted:

When television programming is determined by an unregulated market, it does not in practice give people the degree of choice they want. The market place is not that simple. Other factors are involved...Market forces and competition can be in the consumer's interest. But they are not synonymous.

It is undeniable that market forces do lead to competition, enlargement of the coast of operation, creativity, freedom of choice to the audience and freedom of employment to speakers, musicians, writers, actors and all who seek their chance on the air (Head, 1985). Yet the consumer's interest cannot be said to be synonymous with a *laissez-faire* system whose primary motive is not the audience per se, but the satisfaction of the audience as a means to economic success.

While private broadcast operators are explicit in their motive – profit – government – controlled outfits sometimes find themselves at crossroads – whether to pander to the needs of government with the power to hire and fire at will, or to commercial interest for self-sustenance in the face of dwindling subvention from government. Government – controlled stations have, on many occasions, sacrificed commercial interests for the 'good' of government officials. Like a bat that confounds classification either as a bird or mammal, government-controlled stations roam between commercialism which is a permissive broadcast orientation and government-control which is the authoritarian orientation. Quite often, news with commercial contents is turned back at the news gate because the content may be considered by the media

operatives as 'harmful' to government.

Broadcasting in Nigeria roams between the merciless gulag of government control and the sharp incisive jaws of commercialism, each system with the principles which define its operation. Some of the principles may overlap, though. The meeting point for government control and commercialism is that each seeks to make its influence to be overbearing. The difference lies in the fact that while government may be brazen in its attempt to influence content, commercialism is subtle and less direct, but, nevertheless, effective in limiting content, and, in the long run, jeopardizing and making a causality of the interest of the public that the broadcast organisation claims to serve. Since government-control serves government, and commercialism caters for profit, it is imperative that the public who has become a whipping boy in the hands of broadcast operators be actually served. This is where public service broadcasting becomes a necessity.

Public Service Broadcasting: Wedging the Gulag and the Jaw

Public service broadcasting is predominantly European (Eastman and Ferguson, 2008), and owes its roots to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) which gave the world a model of broadcasting at its debut as a public corporation in 1927. Since then, the BBC has been a major influence on the landscape of broadcasting across the world (Branston and Stafford, 2008). Nigeria, as a former colonial territory of Britain, the home of the BBC, adopted the BBC model on April 1, 1957, when the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation was created. According to Otu (2006, p. 4):

The prospects that broadcasting could serve as a veritable instrument for fostering national unity and development was to be explored and exploited to the full. Consequently, Government

began to think of forming a corporation to superintend over the development of a truly Nigerian Broadcasting Service. The corporation was to be modelled after the BBC but adapted to the exigencies of the regional political arrangement of the Nigerian nation...The NBC in the fashion of the BBC was given a freehand to perform its functions...

Otu (2006, p. 4) further states that the NBC which began operation on April 1, 1957, after the Nigerian Broadcasting Service signed off the previous day, "was the first public service broadcasting corporation of its kind in any colonial territory. Government specifically desired the NBC to be modeled after the BBC as reflected in the document containing the proposals for the NBC." Otu (2006, p. 5) states that to underline its public service nature, the NBC:

By its conception...was not to be an arm of government, it was designed to have some form of public ownership, operation and control. The essential role of the corporation...was to reflect the strength and diversity of Nigerian thought, satisfying the differing interests and tastes, fostering ethical values, providing the impetus and creating a conclusive climate for development.

Although broadcasting in Nigeria has undergone some metamorphosis, it is glaring that at its beginning, broadcasting was in principle and in practice meant to be a public service. According to Eastman and Ferguson (2009), public service broadcasting is non commercial, and should not compete for commercials. On the basis of this, "it means that the public station programmer is relieved of one of the most relentless constraints inhibiting a

commercial programmer's freedom of choice" (2009, p. 222).

Rodman (2006) states that public service stations should, apart from their non commercial status, provide alternative programming that may not be available on commercial radio and television. As Eastman and Ferguson (2009, p. 222) have stated "Public TV programming need not pursue the largest possible audience...public broadcasting has a special mission to serve the audiences that would otherwise be neglected because they are too small to interest commercial broadcasting." McQuail (2005, p. 566) corroborates that public service broadcasting:

Is publicly funded and operated in a non profit way in order to meet the various public communication needs of all citizens... Survives on public interest and because it can meet certain communication needs that tend to be neglected in commercial systems because they are unprofitable.

In Nigeria today, all broadcast outfits are either government-controlled or solely profit-driven, and therefore fall sort of the basic ingredients of public service broadcasting. And they seem to also fall short of the point by McQuail (2005) that public service stations are under obligation to be neutral and balanced – holding the middle ground and acting as a broker between disputants rather than being a participant.

Branston and Stafford (2008, p.134) state that the purposes of public service broadcasting require the provision of:

- (i) programmes dealing with a wide range of subject-matters;
- (ii) broadcasting services that are likely to meet the needs and satisfy the interests of as many

- different audiences as possible;
- (iii) a proper balancing of programming; and
- (iv) services which maintain general standards of programme-making.

The authors also identify four core components of public service broadcasting:

- (i) range and balance (range of genres and sub-genres, balance for genres, availability);
- (ii) quality (decency, production values, challenging and innovatory programming);
- (iii) diversity (of audiences, producers, values and opinions); and
- (iv) social values (cultural diversity, informed democracy and education citizenry).

For a station to achieve these public service objectives, it is necessary to state, as McQuail (2005, p. 179) has, that public service broadcasting is:

A system that is set up by law and generally financed by public funds...and given a large degree of editorial and operating independence...The rationale for such systems is that they should serve the public interest by meeting the important communication needs of society and its citizens, as decided and reviewed by way of the democratic political system.

Left to it, free market cannot satisfy these goals because it might be unprofitable to do so. Therefore, for the system to be effective, it must meet certain structural conditions: a founding charter or mission; public financing; independence from government; mechanisms of accountability to the society and the general public (McQuail, 2005). Rodman (2006, p. 229) sums it all: "Broadcasting should operate in the public interest, convenience and necessity."

Interestingly, it is these structural conditions,

modified as the need may arise, that have sustained the BBC as the leading public service broadcaster in the world. The BBC is founded on a charter that defines the organisation's administrative structure and its relationship with the government and politicians as a whole. Although much of its funding comes from the government, there are many insulators that prevent government from using its "financial prerogatives to influence or control the BBC's programme policies and output" (Head, 1985, p. 73). That the BBC has, with admirable success, been able to maintain its independence over the years should inspire Nigeria to give room to a system that comes between the extremes of predominantly government control and predominantly profit-driven.

A causal look at the laws establishing government-controlled stations in Nigeria would indicate that, really, they are fashioned according to the BBC. This has been so since NBC days. Yet as the hood alone does not make the monk, legal structure alone does not make the broadcasting system a public service outfit. Quite interestingly, the realities on ground are contrary to the spirit and letter of the establishing laws. Government stations falsely assume that being public corporations they belong to the people. The FRCN, for example, claims to uplift the people and unite the nation. Yet one asks, uniting under whose terms and under whose version of reality? The answer is simply government.

The key to public service broadcasting is service which comes in as a wedge between the goals of profit and the goals of government control of broadcasting, and according to Watson and Hill (2006, p. 235), the first duty of public service broadcasting is to a public within a DEMOCRACY, serving to inform, educate and entertain, and to regard AUDIENCE as constituting citizens, members of communities and individuals

rather than merely consumers...PSB is essentially the creation of government in the first instance, though for this reason safeguards are built into the system so that its operation is (relatively) free of government control and influence.

The Way Forward

Since the Privatisation and Commercialisation Decree of 1992 and the National Broadcasting Commission of the same year, the broadcasting landscape has not been the same again. Government (state and federal) and private operators seem to know no bounds in sourcing for advertisements, while government-controlled stations struggle with the additional weight of government control. It is sad that the tyranny of government-control and the silent dictatorship of commercialism have left the audience dissatisfied. To be an effective participant in the communication process as both sender and receiver under the prevailing system, one would have to be part of a clique or have a pocket with contents that can readily pay to have a voice. While the existing broadcasting structures need not be dismantled, there is need, however, to have an additional broadcast model – a public service model – that is free from advertisers and government control and modeled after the BBC. The BBC itself has occasionally come under the pressure of government to compromise, but the institutional safeguards within the system have enabled the corporation to weather the storm and maintain its credibility of non partisanship.

That the Nigerian Broadcasting Service and later the NBC were created in this model underlines the fact that Nigerians, from the beginning, were interested in and willing to have a system whose voices are not dictated by the size and contents of the pockets or by

being part of the royal choir, but by having something of genuine interest for all. Even the operators of the present system are not shy to accept that in spite of their claims to public service or public interest, their motivation lies elsewhere as a result of the political and economic foundations of such stations.

If broadcasting is to contribute effectively to the attainment of genuine democracy, there is need to address public interest and allow it to co-exist with other interests (government and commercial). By so doing, we would liberate broadcasting, at least to some extent, from the gulag of government control and the jaws of commercialism.

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