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Implications of News Commodification for Media Professionalism in Nigeria

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Abstract

The National Broadcasting Commission, NBC, which regulates broadcasting in Nigeria through the Nigeria Broadcasting Code, prohibits broadcast stations from charging fees for their news content. This is pursuant to the goal of the Commission to ensure a fair, objective and balanced news content which is not market-driven. However, this is not the case in the broadcast stations. Contrary to the broadcasting code, the stations place a price tag on their news content. By so doing, the broadcast outfits have made news a 'commodity' to be bought and sold at a price, often to the highest bidder. In the process, trivial content, driven by the market, is elevated above issues that really touch the daily lives of the people. This also causes professional dilemmas for the broadcast operatives. This paper examines the implications of news commodification and institutional failure for media professionalism in Nigeria. It attributes the 'commodification' of news by broadcast stations in Nigeria to the lack of institutional capacity by the NBC to enforce its laws. It recommends that the NBC should compel stations to abide by the broadcasting code to maintain the letter and spirit of the law, as this would further strengthen the nation's resolve to be governed by the rule of law.

Introduction

The mass media have always played a central role in the affairs of the society in which they operate. They depend on the goodwill of the

society for survival and sustenance, and the society in turn depends on the news media for intelligence on daily events, sometimes too tumultuous and, many a time, too distant and too fleeting for individuals to directly experience. Thus, the news media come to the rescue by acting as filters and reflectors for the public.

Watson (104), citing McQuail (1987), summarises the five normative functions of the media as: information, correlation, continuity, entertainment and mobilisation. Although these five functions are intrinsic in the media in the course of discharging their functions and are all important, the information function tends to be the most visible. Thus, the media provide, through news, information about events and conditions in society and the world; indicate relations of power and facilitate innovation, adaptation and progress (Watson, 2003).

Through the media surveillance of the society, a function which has been further deepened and enhanced by globalisation through the widespread use of and access to the information and communication technologies, ICTs, individuals and even organisations seem to form their opinions and images of others from their experiences and what the media say. Thus, many daily decisions are based on the intelligence provided by the media in their daily news reports. This, to a great extent, makes the daily news report the media's social responsibility to the society.

In an attempt to meet their cost of operation and break even in the process, the broadcast media in Nigeria are treating all content, including news, as a commodity. When considered against the backdrop that "mass media news, like other commodities, is an output from a combination of factors of production, namely land, labour, capital and the entrepreneur" (Udoakah, 26), broadcast operators are persuaded to view all aspects of their operation as a channel for making profit. As Akpan (119) notes:

Since the Privatisation and Commercialisation Decree of 1992 and the National Broadcasting Commission Decree 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

advertisements, while government-controlled stations struggle with the additional weight of government control.

While media publicity for products, services and ideas sponsored by individuals and organisations are largely accepted as genuine advertisements which should be paid for, the same cannot be said of news content as the media discharge their surveillance role. But, news on the airwaves of Nigeria's broadcast stations has become a 'commodity' it has been commodified! As Udoakah (26) says: "In economics, when mention is made of a commodity, the logical and natural thinking is that it is something which can be demanded, and supplied at a price".

It is a sad truth that all radio and television stations in Nigeria have commodified their news contents that is, put a price tag on them. They do this not surreptitiously, but brazenly, and are firmly encouraged by their umbrella organisation, the Broadcasting Organisations of Nigeria, BON. Founded on August 11, 1988, for ease of coordination of members' interest and operations, BON has created six zones corresponding to the geopolitical arrangement in the country (Otu). In newsrooms at Nigerian broadcast stations today, the question that is often asked upon the breaking of news is, "Has it been paid for?", and not, "Is it news worthy?" When newsworthiness is canvassed, the broadcast operators are wont to define newsworthiness as a product of commercial viability of the news events. In the regime of news commodification in Nigeria, broadcast stations have created the appendage 'LTP' (*Let Them Pay*) for some news stories.

The Concept of Commodification

According to Watson and Hill (48), "Commodification is the notion that information is something upon which the possessor can put a price; thus, information is bought and sold because it is a commodity rather than a public service". Therefore, in demanding that news be paid for before it is aired, the broadcast media are saying that dissemination of news is not a public service, that they are not obliged to render that service to the society because news is a "commodity". This has led Watson and Hill to further describe this syndrome as "the privatization of information". News is thus transferred from public to private ownership.

the Marxist theory, "according to which all entities have a material cash value the treatment of all media messages as 'product' to be bought or sold in the media market, without reference to other criteria of value". He links commodification to commercialisation which he defines as "a process by which media structures and contents come to reflect the profit-seeking goals of the media industries and are too much governed by market considerations". It is not a claim but a reality that broadcast stations in Nigeria are driven by the goals of profit-making, a situation that has translated into media contents, particularly news, being decided not on public good or public consideration, but by market considerations.

Lorimer and Gasher (199) view commmodification of news as economism. They argue that:

While the merits of economism the perception of cultural production as commercial enterprise can certainly be debated, further consideration takes us back to the notion that private ownership is most often applied when management of a resource is not deemed critical to either the resource's or the community's survival. This is a key point because it goes to the heart of how we perceive cultural production and what role we assign the media in society.

Lorimer and Gasher's concerns are timely: Is it that Nigerian broadcast operators regard their news contents as not critical to the survival of the nation? Or is it that they do not consider news an important cultural activity which is critical to the survival of Nigeria as a nation? When these questions are considered in the light of the media function of information, correlation, continuity, entertainment, mobilisation, education and ethicisation, and of the fact that the society, globally, tends to depend on the media for daily intelligence, then the critical role of news can be appreciated, particularly in relation to its content and access to it. The problem seems to be the proclivity on the part of many to apply the free-market perspective to all sectors of the economy which is counterproductive. Simply put, the market does not and cannot adequately serve the cultural needs of the society at all times (Lorimer and Gasher).

and Gasher).

Theoretical Framework

This discourse is anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory propounded by F.S. Siebert, T. B. Peterson and W. Schramm in 1963 and published in their 1972 classic, *Four Theories of the Press*. The theory holds that the media should accept and fulfil certain obligations to the society. Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso (57), citing McQuail (1987) and Ojobor, explain that the social responsibility theory stresses the point that "the media should reflect its society's plurality, giving access to various points of view and granting all the right to reply... That through professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance, these obligations can be met".

In a further comment, Anaeto *et. al.* say that under the social responsibility theory, freedom of expression is grounded on the duty of the individual to his thought, to his conscience... free expression being a moral right, media operators are obligated to make sure that all significant viewpoints of the citizenry are presented by the press... The press need not publish every idea, especially the preposterous ones; but they should ensure that all ideas deserving a public hearing shall have a public hearing. The crucial point here is that the media, and in this case the broadcast stations, in line with the theory, are expected to:

- (i) reflect the society's plurality in their news content;
- (ii) give access to various points of view;
- (iii) grant everyone the right of reply;
- (iv) respect individual's freedom of expression, and
- (v) ensure that all ideas deserving public attention should so have.

The broadcast stations can only discharge these responsibilities if their news content is free from commercial entanglements, free from a situation where news items become a commodity to be bought and sold, and free from circumstances where access to the media is predicated upon payments of fees as prescribed by individual stations. Conversely, where the broadcast stations charge fees for their news, access will be denied many, and the broadcast stations would have failed in their responsibility of providing a fair, balanced and objective representation of the day's intelligence to the society.

by Decree No. 38 of 1992, with the commencement date of August 24, 1992. It was amended by Act No. 55 of 1999 with the commencement date of May 26, 1999. The Commission was established to regulate broadcasting in Nigeria after it was deregulated. The NBC operates through the Nigeria Broadcasting Code, hereinafter referred to as The Code or The NBC Code. The Code undergoes a periodic review after every three years. The last review was in 2010, its fifth edition.

The NBC Code holds that broadcasting is the most powerful medium of mass mobilisation and social change, to influence democracy and social engineering. As a result, the Commission states in Chapter 5.1 under General Guidelines that “in news, facts are sacred, and shall be treated as such; news shall be factual and presented in a correct and fair manner, without distortions, exaggerations or misrepresentations, material omissions or summarisations.” In Section 5.1.3, the NBC further holds that “as news, in all its forms, is universally accepted as sacred, sponsorship of newscasts, commentaries, analyses, current affairs programmes and editorials detract from their integrity and predisposes a bias in favour of the sponsor. Therefore, news and news-based programmes shall not be sponsored in any manner, including the use of commercial backdrops”. Suffice it to say that the NBC, the ombudsman of broadcasting in Nigeria, has outlawed or prohibited the commodification of news in Nigeria's broadcast stations and acknowledged, and rightly so, that sponsorship of newscasts raises serious doubts on, and lowers the integrity of, a station's bulletin as well as the station itself. The Commission believes that so long as news is sponsored, stations, willy-nilly, will attempt to skew the news contents in favour of the sponsor. That news should not be sponsored does not foreclose the placement of advertisements during news bulletins.

Conscious of this, The Code provides that: “In the interest of fairness and balance, any form of commercialisation of political news is not allowed” (Section 5.2.16), and Section 5.1.18, states: “Commercials in News and Public Affairs programmes shall be clearly identified and presented in a manner that shall make them clearly distinguishable from the programme content”.

The explicit provisions on non-commercialisation of news are in addition to other provisions on editorial guidelines of objectivity, balance, public interest, legal and ethical considerations and good taste.

in addition to other provisions on editorial guidelines of objectivity, balance, public interest, legal and ethical considerations and good taste. While broadcast stations in Nigeria, in fairness, have striven to uphold and maintain the above editorial guidelines, they have dismally failed to adhere to the provisions of the NBC code prohibiting or restraining them from making news content an item to be exchanged for money. As stated earlier, broadcast stations now treat news content as their first source of monetary earnings. In circumstances that they cannot attract the patronage of advertisers, news assumes the primary and only source of revenue. Matters are worsened as the broadcast stations fail to identify news content treated as a commercial, and that which is not sponsored. This failure consequently blurs the line between the two and confuses the audience on what to accept as a commercial or advertisement or unsponsored, objective content. This is akin to subterfuge on the part of the broadcast operators, who sometimes gloat and take glory in it.

The argument by Branston and Stafford that commodification implies the undue spread and unnecessarily high valuation of certain services or items is appropriate. News regarded globally as a public service has been given price tags which are unnecessary and high. Broadcast stations have been busy making news their primary commodity for sale, many a time oblivious of the need to engage in creative programmes which could attract more audience and by extension advertising patronage. This situation raises the question whether the NBC is a success or failure.

The National Broadcasting Commission: An Institutional Failure?

The Nigeria Broadcasting Code in its introductory statement avers that, “The Code represents the minimum standard for broadcasting in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The Code shall be applied in the spirit as well as in the letter, in accordance with the professional ideals of broadcasting”. This implies that all stakeholders in the broadcast industry, the broadcast operators and regulators inclusive, are guided by the provisions of the code. The law establishing the National Broadcasting Commission empowers the Commission to punish any station that contravenes the Code: “Any station which contravenes the provisions of the National Broadcasting Code or any order of the commission shall be liable to the sanctions prescribed in the code.”

a commodity. This raises some questions: Does the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) see the broadcast stations collectively as Broadcasting Organisations of Nigeria (BON), and too powerful for it to regulate? Is it that the NBC is just turning a blind eye and compromising, in spite of its code? Is it possible that broadcast stations have blackmailed NBC with insufficiency of funds to pay their yearly fees to the Commission if they do not charge fees on news? Why does the NBC enforce other aspects of broadcast regulations but does not enforce the aspects which prohibit commercialisation of news? Does NBC have a code on commercialisation of news other than the Nigeria Broadcasting Code? Could it be that the NBC lacks the verve to implement that aspect of the code because its sister parastatals under the Federal Ministry of Information the Nigerian Television Authority and the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria are involved? The questions are many!

An attempt at the last question would reveal that since the NBC, NTA and FRCN, for instance, are of co-ordinate jurisdiction they are all federal parastatals the NBC is helpless in controlling the broadcast contents of NTA and FRCN. The administrative heads of these "institutions" obviously report to the Minister of Information. This incapacitation contributes to making the NBC a symbol of institutional failure. One point is unavoidable the NBC appears to lack the institutional capacity to assume the responsibility of keeping news free from the commercial trappings of broadcast stations. It represents an institutional failure which has emboldened broadcast operators to flout other aspects of the code with impunity. Apart from undermining the NBC itself, the failure to enforce the no-commercial status of news in broadcast stations has exposed the commission as weak, compromising and unable to discharge its critical role in the regulation of broadcasting in Nigeria.

This failure may well represent the general lack of capacity by many institutions in Nigeria to execute the functions duly assigned them by the law of the land. The NBC being at the front burner of information dissemination, its failure may weaken other institutions in the enforcement of standards, and cause stakeholders in other industries to undermine the standards expected of them. As the NBC fails to enforce its own code, news remains an item to be bought and sold, and broadcast

operators are more brazen than ever before in putting a price tag on news for it to be aired. What then are the consequences of Nigeria's broadcast stations' commodification of news?

Effects of Commodification of News

We need to appreciate the fact by McQuail (2005) that the media are a "conscience industry" which is as much driven by social responsibility as by economic logic and cultural changes. A conscience industry connotes that the media should not shirk their responsibilities to the society. They should rather ensure that the society has access to news, which is objective and free from commercialism. A failure to uphold this conscience has several consequences and implications for the polity in general and the audience in particular. Media production is cultural production, hence the commodification of the software of cultural production is the commodification of culture. Lorimer and Gasher, citing Hayes (1980), argue that when cultural activities are organised commercially, their purpose becomes the generation of profit, not the transmission or promotion of the culture.

As news attains the status of commodities, this imposes commercial constraints on the production of news, such that the freedom of access to the media is illusory. William (88) captures it aptly: "You can say that at times freedom in our kind of society amounts to the freedom to say anything you wish, provided you can say it profitably". It is the content of the pocket how much you can pay that seems to determine the latitude one has to say something. Broadcast stations now grant access to those who can speak profitability, ignoring those who, though having something important to say, have no financial muscle to pay and have access to these stations. Commodification is a question of access (who get in the news) and of representation (how they are depicted). Access here means control over broadcast contents and financial consideration, as opposed to access relating to receiving broadcast contents.

Access affects both the personality in the news and the content of the news. Banal issues, for the reason of having been paid for, find space in the airwaves, while those that may draw attention to the living conditions of the people are ignored. News items on child dedication, birthday balls of the politico-economic elite and their families, weddings

and general thanksgiving, skirmishes among politicians, superficial show of philanthropy, etc. dominate news contents, while the daily struggles of citizens to attain a higher level of living are consigned to the waste-basket. Commercialisation in itself is a gatekeeper to the newsroom keeping the news gate free from news that has not been paid for; keeping the news gate free from personalities who cannot pay their way through to the airwaves.

Cornell says that in commercialisation of news, stations go for 'sensationalist' news discourses which have replaced 'rationalist' discourses McQuail (2005, 125), citing Picard, caps it all:

The result is that stories that may offend are ignored in favour of those more acceptable and entertaining to a larger number readers... stories that are costly to cover are downplayed or ignored and... stories creating financial risks are ignored... This leads to a homogenization of content, to coverage of safe issues and to a diminution of the range of opinion and ideas expressed.

Quite often, the news content of Nigerian broadcast stations can be predicted. It becomes the usual rather than the unusual. After the perfunctory mention of the top political gladiators and their spouses, it could be predicted with certainty that the rest of the content will be the usual trivial issues which, perhaps, would not have passed through the news gate but for the fact that they were certified by their commercial value.

Picard links commercialising trend with a decline in quality. This aptly captures the current situation in many broadcast stations in Nigeria news is aired for the sake of the money it yields, irrespective of the content. And in the contest between quality and finance, the latter often wins. And regarding homogenisation of content, when the news content is made up of items which have been paid for, the bulletins can well be described as commercial propaganda. As McQuail (2005) has observed: "Commercial content is likely, for this perspective, to be more oriented to amusement and entertainment (escapism), more superficial, undemanding and conformist, more derivative and standardized" (125).

Commercialisation of news content does affect both the

normative disposition of the station and professional conduct of the broadcast operatives. Normatively, the media and their operatives are news hunters with nose for news. They discover the most hidden information and break the most secret of codes. However, many broadcast stations have lost interest in hunting for exclusives, but prefer to sit back for members of the audience, better known as clients, to bring in items and pay for same to be aired.

Payment for news gives the clients some editorial discretion to decide what aspects of the news are to be used or left out of the bulletin. At other times, editors and reporters are obliged to first show the scripts to the clients for approval before going on the air. This is highly unethical. The client may also assume further gate-keeping role by determining news items of opponents that may be allowed on the air. In the midst of this, the media operative is faced with many professional and ethical dilemmas, one of which is the broadcast operative being a ceremonial gatekeeper while the client is the de facto gatekeeper. The operative struggles with "the notion of professionalism and the principles and operational conventions which shape that professionalism" (Watson 185). In the light of the above, the journalist encounters the awesome threesome: objectivity, impartiality and balance. These three concepts are subject to different interpretations though, but as Watson puts it:

Journalists must not take sides; must not reveal their perusal bias, show favour, sympathy or antipathy. In other words, journalists must position themselves outside the action. They are observers, not participants. This is a convention hardened by tradition, and occasionally regulation. To breach it is to commit the worse crimes – to be unprofessional. The dilemma is real, profound and largely examined (185).

The fall in professionalism has a direct effect on creativity. When professionalism in news reporting is non-existent, creativity is stifled as journalists are unable to express themselves and seek new ways of doing things (innovations). They over-rely on commercial news, hence are condemned to wait for the same kind of news every day. On the whole, the commodification of news reduces the integrity of the station concerned. As the audience members come to the knowledge that a

station's bulletin is nothing but market-driven items, in their perception the credibility and integrity of the station drops.

Conclusion

The discourse has shown that the commercialisation of news content by broadcast operators is in breach of broadcasting code, the law governing broadcasting in Nigeria. This situation arises, not out of the ignorance of the law by broadcast operators, but as a result of the lack of institutional capacity by the NBC to enforce the law. The leadership of the commission, successively, lacks the nerve to ensure that the news that reaches the public from the broadcast media is free from commercial sponsorship. This, some observers argue, suggests an unholy collaboration between the NBC and the broadcast operators to circumvent the law. Otherwise, how can the NBC explain this glaring breach of its code and the obvious blind eye to such breach?

Naturally, the broadcast operators will attempt to justify their illegal act by arguing that their stations must survive, and charging fees for news is one of the survival strategies. Stations that adopt this approach charging fees for news are not in tune with modern programming which is the key to the survival of stations. Modern programming seeks advertisers' support to offset cost. Eastman and Ferguson (6) make it clear that "programming is a unique product in that it is used to lure the attention of consumers so that advertisers can show those consumers commercial message that help sell other products. Programmers work only indirectly for the audience; *the primary customer is the advertiser*; without whom there would be few programmes to see or hear" (6). In other words, broadcast stations in Nigeria should creatively produce and schedule programmes that will first boost their audience size which will then attract advertisers in the long run to patronise such stations. As Eastman and Ferguson have stated, broadcast stations' primary customer is the advertiser, and not the listener or viewer.

Recommendations

The NBC should fully accept the responsibility entrusted upon it and enforce the Nigeria Broadcasting Code which is usually reviewed

by stakeholders in the broadcast industry, including the broadcast operators. The NBC should be willing and ready to enforce the law; if it is institutionally deficient or weak, it should strengthen itself or ask for such strengthening, if necessary, from the Federal Government of Nigeria. It does not portray the NBC in good light that portions of the code are breached with impunity. If NBC feels that there are portions of the code which it cannot enforce, or are simply unenforceable, then such portions should be expunged from the law in order not to mislead the people.

One point is certain: the broadcast stations will not willingly give up a veritable, albeit wrongful, source of revenue. They must be compelled to do so. And by so doing, Nigeria would have further strengthened the rule of law in the land. The broadcast stations would be seen to operate according to the spirit and letter of the broadcasting code as envisaged by the National Broadcasting Commission.

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