PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY OF NEWS ORGANISATIONS: THE MEDIA CAPTURE FACTOR

BY

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Abstract
Of all the inhibitions to professionalism in news organisations, no factor is as pervasive as media capture by political and business elites who invariably control governance. Capture compels journalists to serve the narrow interests of the captors, in spite of the media operating in the public sphere. This article examines the causes, forms, processes and criteria for media capture. It offers interesting insight into trends in media capture and why news organisations and their operatives are vulnerable to capture. The article posits that the solution to capture lies more in the attitude of media proprietors and operatives than in the actions of political and business elites. Media capture would find a less fertile ground to thrive if news organisations accepted that they operated in the public sphere, hence in the public interest. The consciousness of public interest will provide the levers for journalists and media proprietors to meet public trust and resist capture.

Introduction

The mass media might have evolved as private concerns whose activities were, to a great extent, circumscribed by politics and economics, yet they were a public platform for the discussion of public affairs. They operated in the public sphere. Their intrinsic mediational functions, over time, have further strengthened their public nature since they mediate particularly between government and the public. Being in the public sphere makes the mass media a public institution whose proprietors and operatives should operate in the public interest.

To achieve this, Besley, Burgess and Prat (2002) maintain that the mass media need to probe, find out what is going on and disseminate quality information and opinions to the public. The media want scoops to establish their reputation and push up their credibility through the scrutiny of politicians and their activities.

In doing this, however, the

mass media arrive from a direction opposite that of the politician, a situation which leads to frequent collision between the politician and the mass media. It is such conflictual situations which give rise to possible *media capture*, here defined as the control of the media by external forces, such that the media are ingratiated or give favourable coverage where they would ordinarily not have given. It is the act of buying off a particular medium or the entire mass media institution. The politician, the businessman or corporate organisation that is at the receiving end of perceived unfavourable media coverage has the proclivity to attempt to 'capture' the 'offensive' media in order to influence their contents and policies.

This paper highlights the various ways through which news organisations may be captured, the consequences on the professional responsibility of news organisations, the various issues arising from media capture and possible ways to reduce capture. Although politicians, businessmen and corporate organisations all engage in media capture - greater emphasis is given in this paper to political leaders and government. While the differences between politicians and government are obvious and are sometimes so highlighted, many a time the two are used interchangeably in this paper. Similarly, news organisations, media outlets and mass media are used synonymously.

Theoretical Framework

This work is anchored on the Social Conformism Theory. As expatiated by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948), the theory posits that the mass media draw support, directly or indirectly, from powerful politico-economic and social structures in the society, by which reason they (the media) feel or are obligated to support such structures.

However, support for the media by key political and economic actors, whether institutional, corporate or individual, is not value-free. Embedded in the support, quite often, is the demand for the media to encourage conformism with the existing economic and political structures. The support from political and economic actors is a subtlety to capture, with a view to controlling, the media proprietors and operatives, and cause them to encourage a high level of conformism with the political and economic system from which they draw support, and upon which they are greatly dependent for survival and profitability.

According to Lazarsfeld and Merton, the media demonstrate social conformism through their manifest content that is, what is

said but, more importantly, from what has been left unsaid. This being so, the authors argue that such external control makes the media to "fail to raise essential questions about the structure of society... (and) restrain the cogent development of a genuinely critical outlook" (1948, p.107).

External control does not suggest the total absence of critical content, but as Severin and Tankard (1992, p.301) state, "there are occasional critical articles or programmes but...they are so few that they are overwhelmed by the tide of conformist materials...social objectives are abandoned by commercial media when those objectives interfere with profits...this economic pressure results in conformity by omitting sensitive issues". Social conformism is therefore a product of media capture which comes as a result of the support the media receive or out of the desire of corporate business and politics to influence the contents and policies of the media.

Causes of Media Capture

As stated in the preceding section, the whole essence of media capture is to control or influence the content of a mass medium in a particular direction by forces external to the medium. This is particularly so in countries such as Nigeria where media professionalism, general industry standards and democratic principles are yet to take deep roots; where secrecy thrives and enables both individuals and organisations to freely wheel and deal, and keep details of their political and economic manoevres under seal. While the politician or businessman basks in the euphoria of his tightly wrapped dealings (a majority of them unfair and corrupt), rumours on these manoevres usually emanate from a third party, or passerby or the very persons who are integral to the illegal practices. On picking up the rumours, the courageous media outlet probes into them, and, upon establishing veracity in the rumours, publishes the news story for public consumption. For reason of dissuading the media from publishing their findings or encouraging them to ignore such stories in future, or giving 'favourable' coverage or all of them, those affected or likely to be affected by the publication(s) attempt to capture the media.

Process of Media Capture

Besley et al (2002:15) have explained the process of media capture. According to them:
The timing of the game is as follows:
(a) the media outlets receive or do not receive verifiable information about the incumbent;
(b) the incumbent knows what

information the media received and makes them transfer offers;

(c) each outlet chooses whether to accept or reject the offer;

(d) the outlets that accept the offer suppress their information, while the ones that reject it report their information to voters;

(e) voters re-elect their incumbent or replace the incumbent with a challenger.

Criteria for Media Capture

Media capture comes in many and varying ways from the subtle to the open, and from the legal to the illegal. Whichever method is to be adopted, the potential captor always weighs the options, particularly the necessity and cost of buying off an outlet or a group of media outlets. Any outlet without a history of courage to publish or whose owners may not withstand the heat of pressure from government may be ignored. Government-controlled media fall into this category.

Media outlets that have received offers before, and complied, need not be bought off the second time. They may, however, be reminded of the likely negative feelings government would develop towards the news organisation should such a publication be made. Capturing efforts are therefore concentrated

on media channels with a realistic chance of publishing and whose credibility level is high.

Quite interestingly, the government sometimes maintains a high level of secrecy when buying off the media in order to shield other media outlets from what is transpiring between government and a particular outlet. At other times, the capture is done brazenly. The journalists look forward to it and delight in it. In such situations, those who are overlooked (but know that they cannot publish such material) feel that their genuine efforts to help the government in the past have not been acknowledged. This is in spite of the probability that such journalists would have been the first to censor the story and/or draw government's attention to it as an impending story in other outlets.

In Nigeria, for example, there is little or no respect for ethics or self-worth, hence some journalists blackmail the government or individuals to buy them off, especially when, in the journalists' own opinion, they are in possession of a potentially 'damaging' news item. In the event of failure by government to agree on terms with the media organisation or its operatives, the threat to publish is carried out. Thus, publishing in this case is not a product of professionalism and need to serve the public, but a

protest by the journalists and punishment on the defiant, likely captor for refusing to co-operate or acknowledge the journalists' worth in the first instance.

However, not all attempts to capture the media are always successful. Some media professionals do reject the offers to suppress or varnish the information at their disposal in order to provide the public with the necessary input to either accept the incumbent or replace him with a challenger during election. Besley et al (2002:51-52) have further noted that "if an outlet thinks that all the other outlets are going to be quiet, then its incentive to reject the incumbent's offer rises, because it would be the only one to break the news to voters and would gain a large audience. This means that in an equilibrium in which all media sell out, the incumbent must pay each outlet as if it were the only one who could break the news".

Forms of Media Capture

Once media capture has been decided upon as a course of action in response to a media outlet' publication or intending publications, the capture may take one or a combination of these forms.

i) **Bribes:** This is one of the most commonly used ways to capture a media outlet. It thrives as a result of poverty and lack of ethical standard by the media operatives who cannot resist such an offer. Many a time, the bribes are offered in a blackmailing manner in which the 'options' are spelt out: either the bribe is accepted or unpleasant consequences would follow. Similarly, insinuations or references are made to the poverty level of the operatives, and the bribe is portrayed as a final intervention to end the poverty.

ii) **Ingratiated:** This is a situation where the captor tries hard to get the media outlet's approval of what the captor does. This can be achieved using any or a combination of the forms of capture being discussed.

iii) **Threats:** In many instances, the media owners, media operatives and the organisation itself are targets. It is fresh in the minds of Nigerians how the Abacha Regime attempted to kill Alex Ibru, proprietor of *The Guardian,* for failing to rein in his editors and reporters. One of Nigeria's foremost journalists, Dele Giwa, was killed via a parcel bomb suspected to have been packaged by government for allegedly being a gun runner. Many media outlets have been torched by unknown persons for reasons not further from publishing things government

regards as unpleasant, and therefore unacceptable. There have also been instances that staff of media outlets have been locked out of their media premises; some are trailed by strange cars and persons; family members are also pressured to warn such operatives of the looming danger should they persist in the alleged anti-government posture.

iv) **Suppression:** Quite often, government seizes and confiscates the printing plates of a newspaper or magazine that carries as part of its contents issues which government would not want published. At other times, the entire print runs have been seized. Where the publication still makes it to the newsstands, attempts are made, sometimes unsuccessfully, to buy off all the copies to prevent the publication from circulating. Government usually cites threats to national security as the compelling reason for the action.

v) **Laws:** These could be passed to directly or indirectly punish the stubborn media outlet by making it difficult for it to operate. This was a common tool in the hands of the military government in Nigeria. Between 1984 and 1999, the Military passed eleven anti-press laws aimed at either crippling the media outlets or putting them out of business completely (Thompson, 1997). Many of them were thus proscribed or suspended from publishing for a specified period.

vi) **Beneficial Regulations:** These could be passed in favour of the compliant media outlets, although this rarely occurs.

vii) **Public Relations Gesture:** Such gestures may be extended towards the targetted media outlets. For example, the outlets may suddenly be eulogized for their professionalism and patriotism; advertisements may be placed in such outlets; some of their operatives may be sponsored on courses; a breakfast/lunch/ dinner meeting could be arranged with officials of the media outlets as part of efforts to gain the goodwill of the news organisations and their operatives.

viii) **Rents:** Media captors may also apply 'rents', which Stiglitz (2002: 40), describes as "a situation where public officials disclose secrets to those members of the press that treat them well", while ignoring the hostile press. The idea is to starve the latter of

news which could help to boost their sales and attract advertising revenue.

Media Vulnerability to Capture

The operational pattern of news organisations makes them vulnerable to media capture. It often leaves the journalists no room to resist capture. We briefly look at some of the factors which make the media institution and journalists vulnerable.

i) **Business Interest:** The economics of media production weighs heavily against the journalist who has found himself in the thick of economics of production. For example, an advertiser may use the crudest means to ensure that the offering of a particular news outlet supports his business interest and exhibits hostility to competitors whose advertising revenue for the outlet is far less than his own. And for the sake of advertising revenue, the media may abandon best industry practices to satisfy the desire of the advertiser. In addition, the media themselves are members of, and participants in, the markets. Thus, in the face of economic realities, the media may capitulate to pressures to soften or compromise their stand on issues so as to remain in business profitably.

ii) **Ownership and Control:** Media owners have strong political views and do align themselves politically. They try to avoid possible conflict with other power blocks that would negatively affect their political or economic base. Therefore, they impose proprietary influence on their media outlets. Herman (2002:65) has aptly captured proprietary influence: "Policy is likely to be transmitted to the lower echelons in subtle ways by hiring senior editors known to fit the owner's general outlook and to be sensitive to proprietary demands; by politically based selection, promotion, and dismissal of reporters; and by editorial instruction on story selection, emphases, and tone that guides underlings as to what is expected of them".

iii) **News sources:** The media want news that is reliable and fresh, news that singles them out among the comity of mass media. This makes the media to depend on some news sources that may in turn make demands on the media. The need to maintain the news source(s) pushes the media to compromise standards and invariably allow a source to provide a news frame for the organisation.

iv) Flaks: These refer to "negative feedback to news and other media offerings, which may take the form of individual calls and letters of protest, organized actions such as picketing and boycotts, lawsuits, and even congregational hearings and regulatory actions" (Herman, 2002:66). If such flaks emanate from people, organisations or government on whom the sustenance of the media outlet depends, and who can withdraw, reduce or withhold their patronage, the media outlet may not muster the courage to maintain its professional stand on issues.

Sometimes, media operatives are dragged to the floor of the parliament and are humiliated, threatened and vilified to serve as a lesson to them and deterrent to others.

New Trends in Media Capture

Current trends, rather than reduce media capture, have increased the possibility of silencing the media. One of such trends is concentration of media ownership. In Nigeria today, the Nigerian Television Authority and FRCN own a chain of broadcast stations which they dub as networks and use them to restrict the flow of information and open debate. Murdock and Golding (2005:67-68) have noted that "the rise of these comprehensive communications conglomerates adds a new element to the longstanding debate about potential abuses of owner power. It is no longer a single case of proprietors intervening in editorial decisions or firing key personnel who fall foul of proprietors' political philosophies. Cultural production is also strongly influenced by the commercial strategies built around 'synergies' which exploit the overlaps between the company's different media interests".

The effects are multiple. Although there may be more media products available, the diversity of the products is compromised or reduced, while what is available are mere variants of the same products. The media proprietors wield tremendous power, indirectly though, over other operators in the industry who are either driven out of the market or are acquired or swallowed up. They make the rules, raising the bars of operation and entry and making it difficult for new entrants to come in. With their financial muscle, they offer incentives to advertisers by way of rebate or buy up the best personnel in the industry etc. Only those with tested financial muscle, business acumen and professional excellence can survive in the thick of the business

storm.

Another trend is the emergence of mushroom, cash-strapped newspapers in various state capitals of the nation, a situation that has pushed media capture to a new level. These self-styled grassroots newspapers, lacking the capital needed to operate a modern newspaper, depend mainly on government and individual politicians, in one way or the other, for survival. To sustain their source of revenue, such newspapers readily offer themselves, unofficially though, as monitors of likely unco-operative newspapers for news that government may term unpleasant. For this they get paid, and remain on the payroll of government as long as they do this.

The operatives of the self-styled grassroots media provide an interesting variant of media capture. In their quest for money to cushion a life that may have gone on for months without salary, the so-called journalists confront politicians, businessmen and corporate organisations with perceived negative news items about them, whether fact or fiction, with the intent to blackmail and get such victims to buy them off to drop the news stories. The general effect is that whenever a journalist, notwithstanding his honest, professional intentions, undertakes to investigate or confirm a story from a political office holder, he is immediately regarded as a poor, wretched fellow on a look out for a sucker to blackmail off some of his hard earned money!

Media Capture: Wither Professional Responsibility?

According to McQuail (2005:214), professional responsibility on the part of the media "refers to accountability that arises out of self-respect and ethical development of professionals working in the media (e.g. journalists, advertisers, public relations), who set their own standards of good performance". From the discussion so far, it is obvious that in the face of the various tactics employed by government, individuals or organisations, and in the face of the vulnerability of the media to capture, it is difficult for the professionals to discharge their duty responsibly. The question that arises, rhetorically though, is, to what extent would news organisations resist capture, and perhaps risk going out of business, rather than subtly give in to the arm-twisting tactics of media captors? Would a media operative in Nigeria stand his ground and reject the stick and carrot offers of media captors and perhaps lose his job in the process? Both the journalist and

the media outlet find themselves in a professional dilemma, which in most cases is resolved by acquiescing to media capture.

Professional responsibility is further put on the line as both operatives and their media outlets accept Altschull's (1984) second law of journalism, as cited by McQuail (2005:226), that "the contents of the media always reflect the interests of those who finance them". The tacit acceptance of this law makes it common for proprietary influence to provide the yardstick and set the standard for professional performance in a media outlet. This sums up the degree that professional responsibility can be allowed within the media set-up.

While professional responsibility emphasizes "debate, negotiation, voluntariness and dialogue as the best means to bridge differences that arise between media and their critics or those affected" (McQuail, 2005:209), media capture puts premium on material penalties imposed by those who have access to power. The net effect is that within the circumstances of media capture, hence media control, professionalism and the attendant responsibility are severely compromised.

Towards a more accommodating Media Performance

Media capture is a survival strategy. Those who seek to capture the media tend to be steeped in the pre-renaissance view of the divine rights of kings, which sees political leaders as maximum rulers, full of political presumptions of infallibility and omnipotence, hence intolerant of contrary views and pro-active in suppressing such views. In these circumstances, media capture offers a very powerful tool in the hands of the captors to cripple the media and deny the public access to critical information. Despite these, there is need to pursue policies which could, in the long run, help to de-capture the media.

The solution lies as much in the actions of political and business elites as it lies in the attitude of media proprietors and operatives. However, it is the latter which appears to hold the key to reducing media capture. Media professionalism offers more hope to solving the shortcomings earlier diagnosed. Commitment to professional demands will assist the media to fulfill their informational role and serve public interest. According to Curran (1991:98-99), this demands "journalists' commitment to higher goals neutrality detachment, a commitment to truth the adoption of certain procedures for verifying facts, drawing on different sources, presenting rival interpretations. In this way, the

pluralism of opinion and information, once secured through the clash of adversaries in the free markets, could be created through the 'internal pluralism' of monopolistic media. Media pressures to sensationalize and trivialize the presentation of news could be offset by a commitment to inform".

The implications of professionalism are many: the primary duty of the journalist is to serve the public; the journalist should act as a counterweight to both internal and external forces that threaten the integrity of the media including, but not limited to, media controllers, advertisers, publicists, government, and big business. As Curran (1991:98) puts it: "By emphasizing accuracy and facticity, media professionalism seems to be defining the role of the media in a way that will assist people to make up their own minds for themselves. Professionalism is thus seemingly a philosophy of empowerment rather than of control; professional self-interest appears, in this case, to coincide with the public interest".

The above does not overlook the fact that journalists operate within certain structures which can influence and/or distort their concept of professional obligations. Rather, it emphasizes the point that journalists can reduce likely capture if their central goal is the realization of, arising from their commitment to, professional norms. Media capture would find a less fertile ground to thrive if journalists accepted that they operated in the public sphere, hence in the public interest. McQuail (1991:71), citing Banfield (1955), defines public interest as something that "serves the ends of the whole society rather than those of some sectors of the society". This consciousness will provide the levers for journalists to meet public trust and the restraint for the potential captor. On the foundation of this consciousness, both the media proprietor and the media operative will be emboldened to resist capture.

As highlighted in the introductory part of this article, the mass media have always operated, despite politics and economics, in the public sphere and as a public institution. To the extent that the mass media have continued, notwithstanding the passage of time, as a public institution, to that extent would the demands upon journalists and media proprietors to discharge their trust in the public interest continue to endure.

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