

ASSESSMENT OF THE INFLUENCE OF OWNERSHIP ON PROFESSIONALISM IN MEDIA PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study assessed the influence of ownership on the professionalism in media practice in Nigeria. The finding of this study was based on secondary data. From the review of the literature available on the subject, it was discovered that ownership influence is a global phenomenon. The study traced the trajectory of the media influence in Nigeria from the colonial to the fifth republic and discovered that the influence on media practice is as long as the history of media itself. Government; colonial, military, democratic and private media owners wield influence on the media they operate. It was discovered that the owners have used their media platform to suppress the truth, influence the public opinion, denied the dissidents access to the media, peddled false information, settled political scores, character assassination, sacrifice their workforce for relationship and mislead the public. The study recommends as following: There should be demarcation line between the role of the media proprietors and the editorial team. Owners should detach self from editorial decisions, while the editorial team should play above the board in the discharge of their professional duties. Arbitrary influence and control be discouraged, while excellence should be the watchword of the practitioners.

Keywords: Assessment, Influence, Ownership, Professionalism, Media Practice.

1.1 Introduction

Professionalism in the media for some time has been a subject of discuss with different headings; editorial independence, media freedom, to being socially responsible which engender accuracy, objectivity, fairness and balance on the path of journalist in the discharge of their professional responsibilities to the public. Wen (2021) said “the availability and accuracy of information are therefore of utmost importance for the massive public, including voters, investors, consumers, and executives, to make rational decisions on daily matters in modern economies and societies”, while the ownership of the media structure determines to a great extent the tune of the subject disseminated to the public.

The landscape of media in Nigeria is tilted toward: government, private and joint ownership. The ownership is what McQuail (1994: 100) refers to as “organized technologies” which make mass communication possible, communication scholars and political economists have been interested in the nature of media ownership and how this impacts on their functions and operations.

1.2 Media ownership influence from global perspective

There is no doubt that owners in market based media have ultimate power over content and can ask for what they want to be included or left (McQuail, 2010).” Owner often than not dictates the directions of works in any organization media inclusive. Therefore owner wields enormous influence, on the workforce and its output. Ali, (2015) said “it is so bad in some media organisations that the ethics of journalism are exchanged with the opinions and decisions of the proprietors of the organization”.

Ajilore, Ojomo, and Ige, (2012) observed that when the first mass medium, the newspaper press emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, there was not much problem with ownership and the issue of control did not attract the attention of the society. According to Ajilore, Ojomo, and Ige, the reason for this might be that it was relatively cheap to publish the letters, bulletins and pamphlets that characterized early news print media. Again, there was a limited audience and market demanding for media products. But industrialization era of nineteenth century was a turning point in the mass production of mass media commodities due largely to new technology. These technologies were expensive, requiring huge capital outlay to acquire and operate. They equally brought with them the era of mega-profit in the media industry. Profit thus suddenly shot up as an important factor in the information and culture industry. Thus, the era of the one-man publisher and editor gave way to the “absentee” publisher, the entrepreneur who saw in the media essentially a means of making profit. The natural implication of this was that whatever the media through the operators did must bring adequate returns on investment either through direct sales or advertisement.

The influence of media ownership is felt more by government owned media organisations especially in Africa. In countries like the United States of America and Britain, there are laws meant to check the excesses of owners. In Britain, there is limited (if any) influence on the content produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation by government. According to McQuail (2010) Meyer’s survey evidence confirmed that US journalistic ethics frowned on owner intervention, although editors reported a fair autonomy in practice.” Contrary to this survey, Schultz’s study of Australian journalists showed strong support for the fourth estate role but also a recognition that it was often compromised by commercial consideration and owner pressure.

According to a report compiled by Media Development and Diversity Agency in South Africa, control of any media company can be divided into three: Shareholdings and equity, general management and editorial control. According to this report, “There are codes of good practise that govern how media controllers (editor and station managers) interact as laid out by regulatory bodies.” But how many media owners stick to these codes?

In Africa, government has continuously used the state owned media to crush the voice of the opposition. Many governments have used these media to their advantage during elections campaigns across the continent, especially if the government in power is contesting. In such cases, the opposition would have to turn to God for a miracle. Melody in Meier, stated that "in addition to ownership concentration of the mass media industry, content provision, packaging and distribution have also become a standardised production and marketing process in which the messages communicated are contained and directed in both quantity and quality to meet the economic imperatives of media owners." Giddens in Meier said, "The media have a double relation to democracy. On the one hand the emergence of a global information society is a powerful democratising force.

1.3 Ownership and professional challenges: Nigeria chronicle examples

If professionalism in the media is measured and applied to the extent of priority accorded balance, accuracy, fairness and objectivity, journalism in Nigeria has been put to several tests, right from the colonial era to the fourth republic of democracy.

Pre-Colonial Example: Awo Vs McPherson

Osuntokun (1989) recalled that in the early days of the Nigerian media, operators have not disguised their biases, preferences and prejudices. The colonial controlled NBS was worst. La'aro cited in Zakariyau, (2015) said there was no any guarantee for programme to reflect the political, economic or social interest of receiving audiences....the content of broadcasting. Osuntokun (ibid) cited a case in 1956 when Action Group party members walked out of the House of Representatives in protest against the way the Macpherson Constitution was being operated. The Governor had in a public broadcast condemned the act by the party. When in the spirit of fairness and objectivity the Action Group demanded for equal air time to state it's the party led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo was denied.

Military era: Amakiri vs Rivers Governor, Commodore Alfred Diete Spiff – *The Tide* blackout

Ajilore, Ojomo, and Ige, (2012) reported the instance of Mr. Minere Amakiri case in 1974. Mr. Amakiri, was a journalist with *the Nigerian Observer*. Amakiri had reported the planned strike action of teachers in river State, by sheer coincidence the story was published on the military Governor, Commodore Alfred Diete Spiff's birthday, the governor considered the story as embarrassment and ordered his security aide to shave Amakiri's head and beard and beat him with 24 strokes of the cane in the presence of his guests. Although the incident occurred within Rivers State, the state newspaper *The Tide* did not report the story but other state newspapers gave ample space to the story. As reported by Onuoha in Uche, (1999: 124), the reportage ...exposed an abuse of human rights which was later addressed by a court of law; some agents of the state lost their jobs as a result and Mr. Amakiri got compensated for the violation of his rights."

Second Republic: Network Movie Turn Real Live Drama on NTA Enugu

A news caster in the service of Nigerian Television Authority, Chuma Edozie had protested against false information which he was presented to read as news in July 1983. Edozie was said to have walked out on air in the full glare of the viewers. Uche (1989) quoted the *The Sunday Concord* of July 31 1983 in a story titled:

“Network Movie Turn Real Live Drama on NTA Enugu”

An NTA newscaster caused a major "air wave shock" on Thursday evening when he announced his resignation shortly after he had been cued on screen to read the 7.00 p.m. news bulletin.

Mr. Chuma Edozie, who had been primed to read the bulletin, scanned the scripts and discovered that one of the stories contained "false information"

He immediately threw down the bulletin and let loose in the full glare of viewers: "I am fed up with this false information. I hereby tender my resignation. I can't continue with this stuff; no, no, no, I am fed up" he screamed, and walked out on camera in apparent disgust.

Completely taken unawares by Mr. Edozie's reaction to the bulletin, the studio hands were all said to have been thrown into a state of confusion.

As a result, viewers had to stare at blank television screens as the station went off air for about 10 minutes. A senior broadcaster, Mr. Chike Ubaka, was hurriedly called in to read the news bulletin abandoned by Mr. Edozie.

NNPC Scandal: NTA sacked Vera Ifudu

An additional case noted by Uche, (1999) was the sacking of the Nigerian Television Authority, National Assembly Correspondence, Vera Ifudu by Shehu Shagari's information minister, for broadcasting details of a scandal alleging the disappearance of N2.8 billion from the accounts of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). Here again, ownership plays out as a factor in determining the fate of an employee. This time, in a government media, thus suggesting that the issue transcends private ownership interests.

The Concord: MKO v Three; IBB Connections

Another relevant case is that of Bayo Onanuga, and his colleagues Dapo Olorunyomi Babafemi Ojudu, Kunle Ajibade, Seye Kehinde and Kunle Fagbemi of the defunct African Concord who resigned in protest against the publisher, MKO Abiola's demand that they apologize to Ibrahim Babangida for a story which he (Abiola) considered inimical to his relationship with IBB. Bayo and his colleagues stood by their story and resigned to stand for professionalism.

In the Fourth Republic: Champion Saga

For his relationship with Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, the publisher of Champion Group of Newspapers, Chief Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu, sacked the editor of Daily Champion; Ugo Onuoha for running a story headlined *Obasanjo Funds OPC Senators* in its 20th January 2000 issue. Perhaps in a bid to further humiliate the sacked editor, the publisher replaced him with his (the editor) bosom friend and confidant Andy Ike Ezeani who was on honeymoon at the time of the incident (Sanni, cited in Ajilore, Ojomo, and Ige, 2012).

The New Nigerian: Obasanjo third term agenda

Another case here is that of the Editor of the New Nigerian, Mallam Mahmud Jega who in 2006 was removed from office over a story considered to be critical of the Obasanjo government. Mallam Jega was reportedly sacked over his paper's lead story of March 10, 2006 which berated the government over the third term agenda.

The Nigerian Compass: PDP v ACN

It is equally no coincidence that the Nigerian Compass owned by Otunba Gbenga Daniel, a People's Democratic Party Governor only reports Bola Tinubu when there is something negative to say about the Action Congress stalwart just as The Nation published by Tinubu sees and reports nothing positive about the activities of PDP. For example, *the Nigerian Compass's* leading story of 18th August 2008 had the headline: "War in Lagos AC- Tinubu Hijacks Council Polls". Interestingly, *The Compass* was the only news publication that ran this story. Also, on the 2nd of March, 2009, the same newspaper had this headline: Ekiti: Fayose shuns Tinubu." To further substantiate the potential influence of publishers on media objectivity, as newsworthy as the declaration of Adams Oshiomole as the rightfully elected Governor of Edo State by the electoral Tribunal was, it was completely blanked out by Gateway Television of Ogun State.

Death wish advert: The Punch, Guardian, The Sun erred

In the build up to 2015 General Elections that saw the emergence of President Muhammadu Buhari, the then Ekiti State Governor, Ayodele Fayose had placed "Death-wish Advert On Buhari" on National Newspapers; Punch, the Guardian and several others' front page. The advert started with a quote from the book of Deuteronomy in the bible talking about life and death. The advert then listed three former Nigerian head of states from the Northwestern part of Nigeria, who have died tragically and the placed Buhari at the end with a question mark placed over his photograph. Saharareporters, (2015, January 19) viewed that the advert followed several desperate efforts by operatives of President Jonathan to hang a prostate cancer diagnosis on Buhari. The group went as far as concocting a laboratory report claiming Buhari had been diagnosed with prostate cancer at the Ahmadu Bello University Teaching Hospital, the claim which the hospital later denied.

Defending his role in the matter, the then Editor the Sun newspaper, Femi Adesina said ownership will always matter where press freedom is concerned. Mr. Adesina said that he is widely regarded as an "APC man" although he does not belong to the party, and that rejecting the advert would have meant trouble from Orji Uzor Kalu, the newspaper's proprietor and a founding member of the PDP.

According to him:

"Now but if you ask me, why did I approve that advert?" he said. "I knew that the toned-down version was still bad enough. But don't forget the ownership of my newspaper. A PDP chieftain owns the newspaper.

"If I had rejected that advert, they would have told my publisher that this APC man has denied your paper revenue. He has rejected this advert because he doesn't like Jonathan.

“So, after we watered it down, we decided to take it. Punch also took it. But we know the uproar that still came after it. But I tell you, if you see the original of that advert, you would still then have to commend the media.

He stressed that there is no freedom without boundaries and the owners will always constitute the boundary.

2015 General elections: AIT v Tinubu

In the build up to 2015 Presidential election, perhaps to discredit, All Progressive Congress party, her flag bearer, Muhammadu Buhari and her, national leader, Bola Tinubu, the African Independent Television aired a documentary on the station titled “*Unmasking the Real Tinubu*” showcased various properties and companies across Lagos purportedly owned by Mr. Tinubu, described as “Nigeria’s biggest landlord”. The programme also claimed that Mr. Tinubu was “charged for narcotics” in 1993 in the United States. Mr. Tinubu gave the TV station 24 hours to apologise and retract the publication and demanded N20 billion as damages. AIT could not identify the sponsor of the said documentary. Wole Olanipekun, a counsel in the legal team of Tinubu told *The AIT* not to hide under media freedom or freedom of expression to maliciously injure a citizen’s reputation at a Lagos High Court of Justice. AIT in February, 2016, almost a year after the General Elections apologized to Tinubu on the said documentary. In a letter of apology tendered before a Lagos High Court on Friday, Daar Communications, the owners of the TV station, said they hold Mr. Tinubu in high esteem.

The apology letter reads *inter alia*:

“Daar Communications Plc acknowledges that Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu is an outstanding political leader of unblemished character and integrity, as well as a leading public figure and opinion-moulder, who has made and continues to make immense contributions to the progress and development of the nation in general and Lagos State in particular”.

“Daar Communications Plc admits that in airing the said documentary, it had no intention, whatsoever, to embarrass or diminish the high reputation of Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu which it respects and attests to” (Ezeamalu, 2016, February 16).

Conclusion

Femi Adesina said ownership will always matter where press freedom is concerned. There is no freedom without boundaries and the owners will always constitute the boundary. Thus, the media owner, as the one who pays the piper almost always insists on dictating the tune. As far as he is concerned, the best the piper can do is to find a way of playing professionally within the constraints imposed by ownership (Momoh, 2007).

Recommendations

Having x-rayed the events and incidents of arbitrary influence on the media in Nigeria and the review of the empirical studies that confirmed that ownership influence is a global phenomenon, the researcher recommends as following:

1. There should be demarcation line between the role of the media proprietors and the editorial team
2. Owners should detach self from editorial decisions, while the editorial team should play above the board in the discharge of their professional duties.
3. Arbitrary influence and control be discouraged, while excellence should be the watchword of the practitioners.

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