

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF ONDO JOURNALISTS' PERCEPTIONS OF NEWS COMMERCIALIZATION

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Abstract

Mass media are tools for mass communication which have huge responsibilities to keep members of society informed, educated, entertained and expected to play crucial role in people's opinion formation and decision making. Recent events have however shown that these responsibilities are threatened by news commercialization, which now shifts media and journalists attention from their social responsibilities to profiteering. The popular assumption about news commercialization is that it is of a negative impact to journalism. This paper therefore assessed journalists' perceptions in Ondo State, Nigeria, on this perceived unethical practice. The study was based on the Social Responsibility Media Theory. Quantitative research methods were used to generate data from the 325 members of the Nigeria Union of Journalists, Ondo State council who constituted the study population. The study found that commercialization of news in the Nigerian media industry is not considered an ethical issue due to the circumstances that gave birth to the practice. The study concluded that inadequate media funding, poor pay and benefit packages for journalists are largely responsible for the practice that now determines newsworthiness rather than the traditional news elements. It recommended improved welfare packages for journalists and increased budgets for media houses to be financially stable and independent.

Keywords: News, News commercialization, Perceptions, Journalists Media, Social Responsibility.

Introduction

The media, as a formidable institution has critical roles to play in the stability and general development of the society. Apart from serving as a force for social change, it also polices the society as explained by Lasswell (1965) who submitted that the basic function of the mass media is to act as the watchdog of society, expected to monitor the environment and correlate the components of society to ensure the effective functioning of the system involved in transmitting the social heritage from generation to generation.

Apart from surveillance function, Kenneth & Odorume (2015) posit that mass media are normatively expected to provide the public with relevant, diverse, pluralistic and carefully researched information. In addition, the media should place relevant information in a broader context and under different perspectives and comment on its various characteristics. In this respect, the media play a crucial role in the functioning of democratic societies, as they provide citizens with substantive information about politics. Their position was consistent with Udomisor and Kenneth's (2013) description of the mass media as tools for mass communication that have a unique responsibility to inform, enlighten, and entertain members of society.

Nwanne (2018) argues that the social responsibility media theory encourages the media to make a positive contribution to society, and that the media must act in the interests of society at large. This is based on the well-established thought that no organization can exist in isolation from the society where it operates. Thus, since the media operate in the context of society, they must be sensitive to society's needs and aspirations. This claim is consistent with Ugwuanyi (2005) argument that the media have a responsibility to the public. These responsibilities may include: contractual responsibilities in relation to the media and their internal organization; a social responsibility towards public opinion and society as a whole; responsibility or liability arising from the obligation to the law; and a responsibility to national and international communities to ensure acceptable values.

Amajiri (2016) explains that one of the platforms through which mass media fulfill their cardinal functions of informing, educating, entertaining, and mobilizing society to desired ends is news which Ekeanyanwu (2012) describes as an accurate, unbiased account of a current, timely event, which is reported in the mass media and is significant to a large number of people in a locality. While definitions of news vary, Ekeanyanwu (2012) explained that the main determinant of what can be considered as news is "INTEREST." What this means is that, to be news, an account of an event must be of interest to the readers, listeners or viewers. Interest in a story is determined by the news values: Timelines, Proximity/geographic location, prominence/personality involved, consequence/impact/significance, human interest, novelty, conflict, necessity.

However, since the advent of news commercialization in the media industry, commercial interests; rather than news elements now becomes the major news determinant or newsworthiness of an event. MacBride et al (1980) observed that "important developments, especially in the countryside are pushed aside by unimportant or even trivial news items concerning urban events and the activities of personalities. The implication is that most often, journalists no longer rely on professionally set standard for deciding what makes news.

Therefore, the primary determinant of news becomes the ability to pay a media organization a certain amount of money rather than the core news values. According to Asogwa and Asemah (2012), news is increasingly becoming a commodity valued for its role in informing or persuading the public on political, social, cultural and economic issues. Thus, in modern journalism practice, news is commercialized to the extent that only the rich get their ideas communicated to the public. This in turn, affects objective journalism practice, both in the print and in the electronic media, thereby, negatively impacting or democracy.

Statement of the Problem

Notwithstanding its ethical concern, Udomisor and Kenneth (2013) concluded that news commercialization has "unfortunately come to stay in the Nigerian media industry as a result of economic and psychological considerations. The practice, according to Asogwa & Asemah (2012) has challenged the integrity of the mass media enterprise. This compliments Chioma (2013) description of news commercialization as a contradiction of the social responsibility function of the mass media. Adaba (2001) was also of the view that, by charging and receiving fees, by whatever name called, to cover news, media stations are not only prostituting the integrity of news, but are also insulting their audiences and breaching the National Broadcasting Code. Although the topic of news commercialization has been severally researched into, popular assumption is that it is of a negative impact to journalism and the social responsibility theory which mandates the media to make information available to the public to aide their decision making and opinion formulation. In addition, most of the studies adopted only quantitative method (survey) which this researcher felt could not sufficiently capture or probe deeply into the subject matter. This study, therefore, examined various viewpoints using both quantitative and qualitative methods to broaden the perspective by allowing respondents to bear their minds through open-ended questions to create an understanding based on the perceptions of journalists in Ondo State.

Research Questions

This study provided answers to the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of Journalists on news commercialization?
2. To what extent does news commercialization influence journalists' news judgments?
3. What do journalists perceive as reasons for commercializing news?
4. To what extent is news commercialization ethical?
5. Can news commercialization be eradicated in the media industry?

Review of Literature

News Commercialization

Several studies have been carried out on the topic of news commercialization in the Nigerian media industry. For instance, Chioma (2013) conducted a study on News Commercialization in Nigeria: Undermining Issues in Public Interest for Financial Gains. The study concluded that commercialization of news conflicts with the social responsibility function of the media because news should be presented as news and not as advertising or publicity. The study recommended the need for the National Broadcasting Commission to hold the broadcast media accountable to their social responsibility to protect the public's right to receive reliable and accurate information.

Similarly, Nwanne (2018) examined the impact of news commercialization on national development in Nigeria in his study, *News Commercialization: Implications for Nigeria's Development*. The study anchored on social responsibility media theory concluded that many media organizations have abandoned the professional practice of news presentation and formed an unprofessional alliance with businessmen and other stakeholders in order to "manipulate" the news and therefore make it less valuable, especially for the coalescing populace who depend on real and relevant news, to move it in the right national direction to direct development, all in an effort to survive financially. The study recommended proper funding of media organizations to enable them operate at their best and abandon the stealthy marketing strategy of commercializing their news content.

Udomisor and Kenneth (2013), in their study, *Impact of News Commercialization on Nigeria Broadcasting Commission Communication Policy*, assessed the impact of news commercialization by the mass media in Nigeria and its impact on institutional credibility. The study found that news commercialization has negatively impacted the image of media institutions in the country. The researchers recommended that media professionals must be paid appropriately for media houses to regain their fame and rightful place in the public mind. Kenneth and Odorume (2018) carried out a study on *Commercialization of News Content in Nigerian Broadcast Media Industry* to ascertain the impact of news commercialization and the rationale behind it. Anchored on market theory of news production, the study concluded that commercialization of news is neither in the best interest of journalism practice nor in the best interest of the people, who are being shortchanged in the quality of the information they are provided, just as Okoro and Chinweobo-Onuoha (2013) also concluded that, "the fact that the brown envelope Syndrome is about to destroy the lofty height which the journalism practice has attained in Nigeria, should be a source of concern to journalism practitioners and stakeholders in the profession. Wherever the brown envelope culture exists, truth is often suppressed and the highest bidder usually gets away with injustice and unfair treatment."

In the same vein, Apuke (2016) in his study, *Journalists' Perception of News Commercialization and its Implication on Media Credibility in Nigeria*, examined Nigerian journalists' perception of news commercialization and media credibility with particular reference to journalists in Jalingo, Taraba State. He adopted the quantitative survey design for the study and anchored it on the social responsibility media theory. The study concluded that news commercialization is unethical and unprofessional practice that damages the reputation of the media and journalists in general.

Amajiri (2016) conducted a study on *Journalists' Perception of News Commercialization in Selected Media Houses in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, South-South, Nigeria*. The study found out that most journalists in Port Harcourt see commercialization of news as a source of revenue generation for their media organizations. It also discovered that commercial interests take precedence over professional news value in many media houses. Its findings also revealed that news commercialization negates ethics of journalism as evidenced in the responses of respondents who admitted that it was professionally wrong for media organizations to charge for news coverage since it is the responsibility of the media to the society.

Nwabueze (2010) in his study on the perception of Nigerian journalists about brown envelope and the need for ethical reorientation found that news commercialization persists among journalists because of their orientation. According to the study, most journalists saw nothing wrong with accepting brown envelope to either publish or kill a story. It therefore recommended improved welfare for journalists to provoke change in their perceptions and attitudes towards the practice.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Social Responsibility Media theory.

The Hutchin's Commission on Freedom of the Press introduced the Social Responsibility Media Theory in 1947. The theory, according to Una (2014) rests on the notion of free press acting responsibly- the press, which enjoys a privileged position under the government, is obliged to be responsible. It also implores media professionals to ensure representation of all facets of the society. Folarin (1998) in Odunlami and Adaja (2015) explained that the social responsibility theory identifies six specific functions for the press among which are: to serve the political system by making information, discussion and consideration of public affairs generally accessible and to inform members of the public to enable them to take self-determined action.

Methodology

Quantitative research method of survey research design was used for this study. In line with this approach, survey allowed the researcher to follow up on questions raised in the questionnaire used to collect data for the study.

The Union's database was accessed and the total number of registered and financial members was 325 as of August 2021. The data was gathered from the Union's general secretary. The researcher, therefore, carried out census using the entire population since the population of the study is not too large, in agreement with the view of Krppendoff (2004) who maintains that, sampling is necessary only when the universe of available element is too large to be examined as a whole. Questionnaires were administered to 314 respondents. Out of the questionnaires distributed, a total of 308 were recovered, representing a 1.9% mortality rate. However, the sample size for the qualitative aspect of the study was eleven (11). The respondents purposely selected for the interview were NUJ members who had been practicing journalism for at least 20 years and were senior members of staff in their respective media houses. The study also used snowballing sampling method which enabled participants to identify others in that category who had understanding of the impact of news commercialization.

Data analysis

TABLE 1: News commercialization as a good development in the media industry

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	105	34.1
Disagree	75	24.3
Neutral	55	17.8
Agree	55	17.8
Strongly Agree	18	5.8
Total	308	100

Source: Field Survey, 2022.

According to table 1 above, a total of 105(34.1%) strongly disagreed that commercialization of news is a good development in the media industry; 75 (24.3%) disagreed that it is a good development; 55 (17.8%) were neutral, 55 (17.8%) agreed that it is a good development and 18, representing 5.8% strongly agreed that news commercialization is a good development in the media industry.

TABLE 2: Showing whether news commercialization helps media houses to raise fund

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	10	3.2
Disagree	10	3.2
Neutral	21	6.8
Agree	170	55.10
Strongly Agree	97	31.5
Total	308	100

Source: Field Survey, 2022

The table above showed that 10, representing 3.2% of the respondents, strongly disagreed that news commercialization generates fund for media houses; 10, representing 3.2% disagreed and 21(6.8%) were neutral. 170, representing 55.10%, agreed that news commercialization helps media houses raise funds, while 97, representing 31.5% of respondents, strongly agreed. So majority of the respondents agreed that news commercialization is a viable revenue generation option for media houses.

TABLE 3: Showing whether news commercialization is unethical

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	141	45.8
Disagree	82	26.6
Neutral	50	16.2
Agree	50	16.2
Strongly Agree	35	11.4
Total	308	100

Source: Field Survey, 2022

In Table 3, 141 respondents, representing 45.8% strongly disagreed that commercializing news is unethical; 82(26.6%) disagreed; 50(16.2%) took a neutral position, 25(16.2%) of the respondents agreed it is unethical and 35(11.8%) strongly agreed that the practice is unethical. The analysis showed that majority of the respondents claimed that news commercialization is unethical.

TABLE 4: Showing whether journalists' news judgments are influenced when they receive money from news sponsors.

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	17	5.5
Disagree	43	14
Neutral	18	5.8
Agree	159	51.6
Strongly Agree	71	23.1
Total	308	100

Source: Field Survey, 2022

Table 4 above showed that of the 308 respondents, 17 accounting for 5.5%, strongly disagreed that money influences journalists' news judgment; 43 (14%) disagreed; 18(5.8%) were neutral, 159(38.2%) agreed that journalists' news judgments are influenced when they are paid by news sponsors and 71(23.1%) strongly agreed that journalists' news judgements are influenced when they are paid by news sponsors. This implies that majority of the respondents agreed that journalists' news judgments are influenced when they are paid to cover assignments.

TABLE 5: Showing whether the media still perform social responsibility with the advent of news commercialization.

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	20	6.5
Disagree	20	6.5
Neutral	30	9.7
Agree	200	65
Strongly Agree	38	12.3
Total	308	100

Source: Field Survey, 2022.

From the table above, 20, representing 6.5%, strongly disagreed that the media still perform social responsibility, 20, representing 6.5%, disagreed that the media still perform social responsibility and 30 representing 9.7%, were neutral. The table also showed that 200, which is 65%, agreed that notwithstanding commercialization of news, the media still fulfill social responsibility, while 38(12.3%) strongly disagreed. Majority of the respondents agreed that the media still perform social responsibility regardless of news commercialization.

TABLE 6: Showing whether commercialization of news can be eradicated

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Disagree	57	18.5
Disagree	25	8.1
Neutral	28	9.0
Agree	75	24.4
Strongly Agree	123	40
Total	308	100

Source: Field Survey, 2022

From Table 6 above, 57 representing 18.5% strongly disagreed that commercialization of news can be eradicated, 25 representing 8.1% of the respondents disagreed that commercialization of News can be eradicated and 28(9.0) believed news commercialization can be eradicated. Still from the table above, 75(24.4%) strongly agreed that commercialization of news can be eradicated while 123, representing 40%, strongly agreed it can be eradicated. Majority of the respondents were of the view that news commercialization can be eradicated in the Nigerian media industry.

TABLE 7: Showing how commercialization of news can be eradicated

Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Adequate funding of media houses	48	15.6
Regular payment of journalists' salaries	125	40.6
Improved welfare package	133	43.2
Sensitization of Journalists	2	0.7
Total	308	100

Source: Field Survey, 2022.

Table 7 above showed that 48(26%) of the respondents indicated that commercialization of news can be eradicated by adequate funding of media houses, 125 (40.6%) of the respondents opined that commercialization of news can be eradicated through regular payment of journalists' salaries, 133(43.2%) of the respondents were of the opinion that news commercialization can be eradicated by improved welfare package for journalists and 2(0.6%) of the respondents believed that it can be eradicated by sensitizing journalists.

Comparative Analysis and Discussion of Findings

At this point, the researcher compared and discussed results of the two methods across the five research questions.

Research Question One: What are the perceptions of journalists on news commercialization?

Here, the researcher assessed the perceptions of journalists on commercialization of news. Table 1 and 2 showed that majority of journalists viewed the practice as ill-omen but justified it on the account that it helps media houses generate funds to keep their operations hampered by insufficient funding. They also believed that commercialization of news was necessary to

generate income for journalists who suffer from poor pay and benefits. This agrees with the position of Nwabueze (2010) who found that most journalists saw nothing wrong with accepting brown envelope to either publish or kill a story, an individual form of news commercialization which Omenugha and Oji (2008) found exists in the Nigerian media industry. It also confirms the study of Amajiri (2016) which found that most journalists in Port Harcourt see commercialization of news as a source of revenue generation for their media organizations.

Research Question Two: To what extent does news commercialization influence journalists' news judgements?

The question was designed to find out whether journalists' news judgments are influenced by news commercialization and table four (4) provided answers to this question. Majority of the respondents agreed that journalists' news judgements are influenced when they are paid to cover assignments. What this simply means is that journalists designed their news to serve and protect the interests of news sponsors, rather than the interests of the public. This lends credence to Chioma's (2013) conclusion that commercialization of news conflicts with social responsibility function of the media. News should be presented as news and not as a publicity stunt for individuals or groups. It should be based on the coverage of local and international events of social importance rather than a profitable lifeline for media owners and the journalists. This also corresponds with the findings of Udomisor and Kenneth (2013) who found that public broadcasting which supposed to service the public interest had become a powerful tool for the continued colonization of the poor by the rich. The practice is also in contrast with the social responsibility media theory in that, rather than being socially responsible to the society, the media and the journalists now serve and protect interests of a privileged few who could pay their ways into the media.

Research Question Three: What do journalists perceive as reasons for commercializing news?

From the data generated, media houses commercialize news to raise fund. The respondents largely attributed the practice to insufficient funding, poor remuneration and welfare packages as well as non-payment of journalists' salaries as and when due. The data also showed that most media houses do not pay their journalists but only give them identity card as "meal cards" and turned them to marketers looking for news that could fetch them and their media stations money.

Oso (2000) notes that publishers in Nigeria, rather than paying attractive wages to the journalists, they refer to their identity cards as a meal ticket. In other words, the journalists are encouraged to make money on their own in whatever manner they deem fit, thus encouraging the popular brown envelope syndrome within journalism parlance in Nigeria. In some media organizations reporters are officially made to function as marketing officers in addition to main reportorial duties. This agrees with the position of Daramola (2014) who claimed that many media houses do not pay their staff regularly and that the salary and wages paid to journalists in their employ are too poor to take care of their needs. As a result, journalists engage in freebie (bribe) to maintain themselves. To eradicate this, he recommended the need for journalists to be handsomely paid wages "that can banish poverty and make them shun bribery, brown envelope or freebie tantamount to unethical practice".

Research Question Four: To what extent is news commercialization ethical?

The question sought to confirm the ethical concerns raised by the arrival of news commercialization in the media industry and Table three (3) provided answers to the question. The respondents strongly disagreed that commercialization of news is unethical because it is a necessity in the media industry. The neutrality maintained by some respondents, as shown in Table three (3) indicated that journalists did not consider commercialization of news to be either ethical or unethical. With the quest for commercial benefits, journalists exhibit flagrant disregard for professional ethics and this agrees with Okoro and Chinwebo-Onuoha (2013) finding which showed that the immoral act of brown envelope affects the practice of journalism adversely as certain vital development are underplayed whereas insignificant events are spotlighted in the news with the intent to satisfy the givers of the brown envelope and this amounts to corruption and violation of professional code. It was inline with the claim of Apuke (2016) who concluded "that news commercialization is an unethical and unprofessional practice that damages the reputation of the media and the journalists in general".

Research Question Five: Can news commercialization be eradicated in the media industry?

Having known the circumstances that heralded news commercialization in the Nigerian media industry, this question sought to find out whether the practice can be eradicated. Quantitative data and tables six (6) and seven (7) showed that though the practice has become a norm, it can be eradicated through adequate funding of media houses, regular payment of journalists' salaries and improved welfare packages for them. However, this is in contrast to the position of Udomisor and Kenneth (2013) who claimed that "news commercialization is a practice that has unfortunately come to stay with the Nigeria society as a result of economic and psychological considerations.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study and with reference to the research questions, the study concludes that:

Journalists in Ondo State regard news commercialization as a baby "that" cannot be thrown away with the bathwater. Although the practice is a bad omen in the media industry, they indulge in it to generate fund to sustain media operations.

Majority of Journalists in Ondo State see news commercialization as a child of necessity in the Nigerian media industry, as it helps individual journalists to raise fund in the face of poor pay and welfare packages.

Despite the justifiable need for commercializing news as a mode of survival, the media still fulfills its social responsibility to society, as confirmed by the majority of respondents who indicated that they still use their airtime and newspaper pages for stories of public interest. The media and the journalists considerably pay more attention to stories of commercial interest than those that benefit society. In addition, the study also concluded that journalists and the media protect interests of news sponsors.

News commercialization (brown envelope) influences journalists' news judgements.

Media houses are victims of insufficient funding, thereby prompting media executives to look inward and use their news content to generate funds.

Media executives have become lazy to pursue an aggressive advertising strategy that could bring them huge revenues. Rather, they relied on news commercialization to do the magic for them.

Commercialization of news can be eradicated through improved welfare packages for journalists and increased budgets for the media to be financially stable and independent.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and questions raised in this study, the researchers recommended the following:

There should be improved welfare packages for journalists and prompt payment of their salaries to stop brown envelope syndrome and other unethical behaviours in the media industry.

Federal and state governments should adequately fund their media stations through increased budgets and also ensure that bureaucratic bottlenecks that prevent managers from accessing allocated funds are eliminated.

Private media owners should also ensure that their stations are adequately funded in order to be financially stable and independent. This will allow them to do their best and give up the stealthy marketing strategy of commercializing news content.

Government should also give bailout funds to the media to enable them meet their pressing needs.

Journalism is a noble profession and so its practitioners should always display nobility by upholding ethics and professional conducts regardless of economic situations.

The NUJ should do more to promote ethical behaviour and professionalism among members and most importantly, mobilize other critical stakeholders to lobby the Nigeria's National Assembly for the speedy passage of Media Enhancement Bill into law.

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