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NEWS COMMERCIALIZATION AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA



Adibah Ismail (a)*, Nazif Abba Pali (b), Woyopwa Shem (c)
*Corresponding author

(a) Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia, adibah@uum.edu.my
(b) Abubakar Tatari Ali Polytechnic, Bauchi, Nigeria, abbanazifpali@gmail.com
(c) Taraba State University, Jalingo, Nigeria, shem.woyopwa@yahoo.com

Abstract

Over the years, commercialization of media contents (news) has been a subject of concern in media studies; in fact, it has been widely discussed in different academic researches as one of the trending unethical issues in the broadcast media. It is against this backdrop that this paper critically examines issues of commercialization of media contents and its implication on national development in Nigeria. Through meticulous exploration of secondary data, the paper established that news commercialization is on the increase and also one of the unethical journalistic practices obtainable in the Nigerian broadcast media. Furthermore, the paper also unravelled that commercialization has an adverse effect on Nigeria's development as trivial issues are often reported at the expense of other development stories. In light of the above, the paper recommends among other things that Government and media proprietors should hold at high extreme the welfare of their staff in the area of improved remuneration and insurance packages as these were identified as the remote cause of news commercialization, furthermore the paper also suggests that the broadcast media in Nigeria should endeavour to refrain from news commercialization; their news should not be based on the amount of money one has to pay, instead, it should be based on the newsworthiness of an event.

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1. Introduction

Over the years, ‘news commercialization’ a situation whereby stations begin to raise revenue by charging fees for news reports they should normally carry free has been extensively discussed in different academic research. Several reasons trail this increasing research attention at the global level. For instance, Sean McBride’s Commission which was set up in 1980 by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) states that in most third world countries, news has become commercial product where important developments, especially in the countryside are pushed aside by unimportant or even trivial news items concerning urban events and the activities of personalities. This implies there is an ongoing alteration in journalism practice that hampers with the application of the traditional core news values.

Describing the pathetic nature of the news industry in Nigerian, Asemah (2011) asserts that the Nigerian economy is characterized by high rate of unemployment, inflation, fluctuation of workers’ wages, the continual depreciation in the value of Naira and the attendant increase in the cost of living which affects the communication industry. This implies that the news industry has to spend more on production thereby making “profit” the watchword for survival.

In an ideal ambience, journalists are supposed to be objective, balance and accurate in their reportage and also to be guided by the traditional core news values which include but not limited to timeliness, human interest, oddity, novelty etc. Notwithstanding the economic reality on ground serves as catalyst that encouraged news commercialization thereby making its practice ubiquitous in most media outfits in Nigeria. It is unarguable that news commercialization now made “money” a news determinant whereby the amount of money received from a news source determines the newsworthiness of a story. Based on the above view, Nwodu (2006) corroborates that the traditional criteria for judging or determining newsworthy events, ideas, places and personalities are fast giving way to “cash and carry journalism”.

Despite the fact that media managers in most cases try to justify the notion behind news commercialization, conversely, communication scholars still perceive it as an issue that need to be addressed (Nwanne, 2018). It is in light of the above this paper attempts to explore the subject ‘commercialization of media contents in Nigeria and its implication on national development’

1.1. Theoretical Underpinning: Social Responsibility Theory

Amidst the wealth of theories that abound in the communication corpus, the researcher considers the social responsibility theory as the most appropriate framework for this paper. The social responsibility theory which was propounded by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in the mid 19th century rests on the notion that media outfits and journalists should accept and fulfil certain obligations to the social milieu within which they operate (Suntai & Shem, 2018). This automatically mandates journalists to report balance, objective and fair news without distorting facts or commercializing news on the altar of objectivity.

The social responsibility theory emerged because the press abused the freedom, which they enjoyed as a result of the free press (libertarian era). Under a free press, there is supposed to be a flow of objective information that will allow citizens to make intelligent and informed political decisions and other decisions affecting their lives yet journalists as at that time abuse the freedom by venturing into what is known as “sensational journalism” thereby distorting facts and reporting issues lopsided. From the foregoing, the need for a responsible and a free press came into existence (social responsibility theory). The core tenet of the theory is that it charges media practitioners to ensure representation of all facets of the society without any form of prejudice.

From the foregoing, it is apt to say that news commercialization is a rival of the social responsibility theory hence, it is axiomatic to say that there is nexus between the selected theory and this study, since news commercialization is the bane of social growth and social responsibility theory which charges journalists to be balance, objective and sincere in their reportage. To put it another way, suffice to say that if all practising journalists would admit the fact that they have a social obligation as societal wangles then news commercialization would definitely be minimized in Nigerian journalism practice.

1.2. The Way Forward

Based on the reviewed literature, suffice to say the mass media has the power to make or mar the society. This enormous power of the media can said as what stimulates Thomas Jefferson, a onetime president of the United States to say “if I were to choose between a newspaper without a government and a government without a newspaper, I will not hesitate a moment to choose the latter”. This implies that the mass media is an agent of social change and also a catalyst that encourages good governance and consolidates democracy.

Notwithstanding, it is apposite to infer that all the aforementioned auspicious social responsibility of the media would be a mirage if it’s bedevilled with unethical and funding issues. Therefore, it pertinent for Government and media proprietors to hold at high extreme the welfare of their staff in the area of improved remuneration and insurance packages as these were identified as the remote cause of this professional embarrassment (news commercialization inclusive) (Una, 2014).

Finally, it is pertinent to provided sound education and professional training to journalists. This will serve as a good antidote for solving the problem of news commercialization. The acquisition of sound education has a way of giving the journalist a self-worth, which makes him look beyond unlawful avenues of getting gratifications (Una, 2014).

For Nigeria to have socially responsible media, this paper proposed a model below. Nigerian media should take advantage of the IR4.0 and move towards online audience to break free from ownership control and advertisers’ decrees. Most importantly, as mentioned in the Social Responsibility Theory, since the media were given the freedom to publish, they should allow the society they serve to monitor their contents. The society should be able to use their power as consumer to monitor contents, biasness or wrongdoings of media serving them and choose their media rationally. On the other hand, the media needs to obey to the demand made by their audience in order to remain relevant.

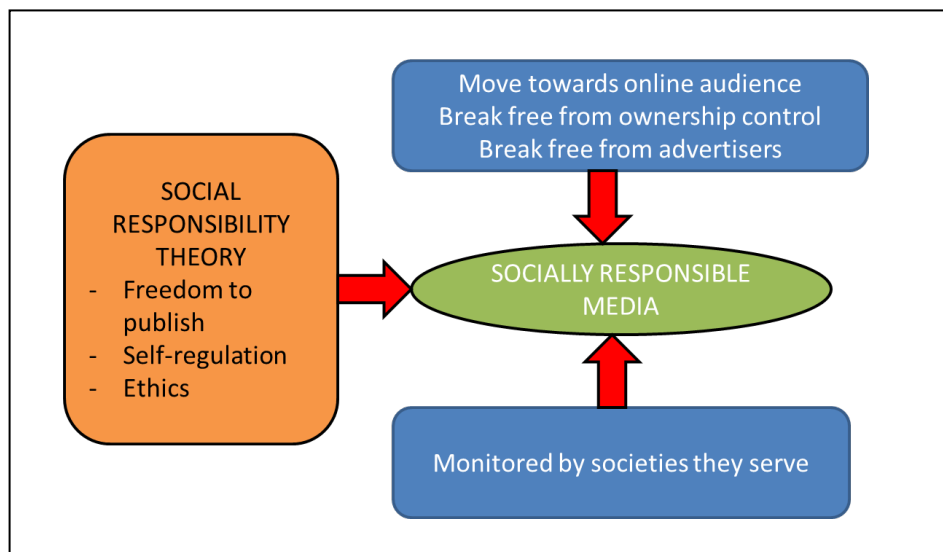


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of the study

Figure 1 above gives clear explanation of a socially responsible press; it unravels the core responsibility that the press is saddled with.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. News Commercialization: A cursory Explication

The term Commercialization, regardless of wherever it is been used denotes the idea of “exchange”, “advert” or business. From the foregoing, it is obvious that the term commercialization is multifaceted hence this paper specifically focused on “news commercialization” which forms one of the trending issues in broadcasting. News commercialization simply means making news a commodity, which can be bought by those who have the money so that their voices can be heard. In other words, it is a situation where news becomes a commercial product to the detriment of important developments (Una, 2014).

In his view, McManus (2009), sees news commercialization as “any action intended to boost profit that interferes with a journalist’s or news organization’s best effort to maximize public understanding of those issues and events that shape the community they claim to serve” (p. 220). Conversely, Onoja (2009) sees news commercialization as a situation whereby stations begin to raise revenue by charging fees for news reports they should normally carry free. From the definitions above it could be deduced that, it is unethical to cover news stories for profit making yet there is a distinction between airtime paid for commercial messages and news commercialization.

In his point of view, Adaba (2001) established a succinct distinction between the legitimate sales of airtime for paid messages adjacent to or within breaks in the news and charging news sources for the privilege of covering and relaying their pre-paid views or messages as news. According to him:

In the first case, what the sponsors are buying is the credibility of the newscast and newscasters to confer status by association on their company’s logo, message or product” while in the latter: What the broadcast station is doing is selling cheaply the integrity of its newscast and newscasters by attesting to

the “truth” of the claims of the so called “sponsor”. By also charging and receiving fees by whatever name called, to cover ‘news’ of company annual conference meeting, weddings, funeral, chieftaincy installation, town festivals, workshops and seminars, even events organized by charity organizations, the stations are not only prostituting the integrity of news, but equally insulting their audience and breaching the National Broadcasting Code.

From the foregoing, it is apt to infer that the news commercialization is an unethical practice that has the potency to retard development as trivial issues could be reported on the altar of development related beats. Hence, there is the need for a paradigm shift, in other words journalists needs to “go back to the drawing board” by adhering to the traditional core news values which include but not limited to novelty, proximity, prominence, humans interest, oddity, timelines etc. Amidst the wealth of theories that abound in the communication corpus, the researcher considers the social responsibility theory as the most appropriate framework for this paper. The social responsibility theory which was propounded by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in the mid 19th century rests on the notion that media outfits and journalists should accept and fulfil certain obligations to the social milieu within which they operate (Suntai & Shem, 2018). This automatically mandates journalists to report balance, objective and fair news without distorting facts or commercializing news on the altar of objectivity.

The social responsibility theory emerged because the press abused the freedom, which they enjoyed as a result of the free press (libertarian era). Under a free press, there is supposed to be a flow of objective information that will allow citizens to make intelligent and informed political decisions and other decisions affecting their lives yet journalists as at that time abuse the freedom by venturing into what is known as “sensational journalism” thereby distorting facts and reporting issues lopsided. From the foregoing, the need for a responsible and a free press came into existence (social responsibility theory). The core tenet of the theory is that it charges media practitioners to ensure representation of all facets of the society without any form of prejudice.

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3. Research Questions

- What are the issues surrounding commercialization of media contents – specifically news and its implication on national development in Nigeria?
- What is a suitable model for socially responsible media?

4. Purpose of the Study

- 1. To examine issues of commercialization of media contents – specifically news and its implication on national development in Nigeria through meticulous exploration of secondary data.
- 2. To suggest a suitable model for socially responsible media.

5. Research Methods

This research will utilise meticulous exploration of secondary data by examining previous discussion on the topic in academic resources including journals, newspaper cutting and online blogs in order to find a pattern of news commercialization in Nigeria.

6. Findings

6.1. News Commercialization and National Development

The media of mass communication more especially the broadcast media are in a strategic position to accelerate development within the ambience they operate. According to Chiaakan et al. (2015), “both developed and developing nations fix their hope on the media in order to persevere in cultivating development tract,” (p. 1). The veracity of the above assertion is associated to the fact that the broadcast media’s core functions include; preservation of cultural norms and values, educating populace on salient issues and boosting economies of nations via adverts and other marketing communication strategies.

In Nigeria, the defining moment for the broadcast media came in 1992, when a new broadcast media regulatory authority, the National Broadcasting Commission, (NBC), was established. This was in response to plurality of the broadcast media as practised in the liberal democracies of the world. In line with the Act establishing the NBC, Ihechue and Okugo (2013), averred that NBC regulatory functions are in line with the implementation of the National Mass Communication policy, which covers national motivation, mobilisation and the attainment of national or public interests. This implies that broadcasting in Nigeria should influence societal values positively; and in so doing improve and strengthen the social, cultural, economic, political and technological values of the nation and set agenda for public good (NBC, 2010).

However, Akinreti (2017), observed that recently, lopsided reportage by different broadcast media outfits most especially government owned media “fuelled criticism among public analysts, scholars and stakeholders that broadcast media licence is being used for political patronage and profit making instead of developmental purposes” (p. 5).

From the foregoing, it is apt to infer that some broadcast media outfits in Nigeria have derailed from their core developmental functions as enshrined in the Code of the NBC. In other words, despite avalanche of efforts by the NBC to effectively regulate the broadcast industry in Nigeria, some broadcast stations and journalists have on different occasions indulged in diverse unethical conducts that are against the codes of the Commission. For instance, at the end of presidential election held on 23rd of February,

2019, the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission sanctioned forty-five (45) broadcast stations across the country for violating section 5.2.12, 7.6.6 and 7.6.7 of the NBC code. (Vanguard, 2019).

News commercialization which is one of the factors that retard development is not a novel subject matter in the Nigerian news industry. Tracing its origin, Omenugha and Oji (2008), narrates that commercialization of news began in Nigerian media houses as a result of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced in 1986 and the eventual withdrawal of subsidies from government owned media houses. SAP which was an economic policy aimed at encouraging self reliance and reduction of over dependence on government business made most social institutions to think of shoddy tricks including commercialization of the news as an alternative survival strategy to make up for the removed government subvention. In his words, Ekwo (1996) cited in Oberiri (2016) summarized the above situation thus:

Faced with the inability to pay salaries of workers, produce or service available equipment and myriad of other problems occasioned by the decline in government subvention, the Nigerian Television Authority and Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria devised several other means to make money.

Ekwo further described commercialization as one of these means of survival:

Individuals, communities, private and public organizations, local and government, state governments and ministries, gain access to the mass media if they are able to pay a prescribed fee. In other words they can be heard on these media during news times for a prescribed fee.

The above scenario led to a lot of compromise, with sensationalism of news stories and half-truths. In the same vein the media be it broadcast or print have lost their credibility as they have slowly negated the social responsibility of journalism to an income generated journalism practice. (Oso, 2000; Oberiri, 2016). In their words, Asogwa & Asemah (2012) abridged the above scenario thus:

There is an increasing commercialization of the media in Nigeria, the situation that has brought the integrity of the mass media enterprise to question. The social responsibility theory holds that while the press functions as a free enterprise, as guaranteed by the libertarian theory, it must be responsible to a society in which it operates. Based on this theory, the mass media are able to raise issues of public importance. Our mass media today do not seem to perform this social, duty as issues that set agenda for national development are compromised for “naira and kobo”. This abuse at practice has received the attention of mass communication scholars and other stakeholders who now advocate for a reinvention of our media contents to make the media realize their potentials as tools for national development.

The above view implies that news commercialization has avalanche of hazardous effects on both journalism profession and national development. The above assertion is associated with the fact that news commercialization has the potency to make journalists ignore news events that are geared towards development and go for stories that fetch them “food on their tables”.

One of the core implications of News commercialization on national development is the fact that it encourages perpetuity in the voicing of the opinion of the super-rich while suppressing that of the numerous poor who may have newsworthy information to share but lack the financial muscle to pay for the airing or publishing of the news (Acholonu et al., 2015). This means that the voices of the downtrodden in rural areas who need good healthcare, electricity, good roads would not be heard thereby leading to an increase in mortality rate, diseases, illiteracy etc. which are all enemies of development.

In the same vein, news commercialization also erodes the credibility of the news medium. Today, some mass media audience members in Nigeria hardly believe the information they receive from the local mass media because of this credibility problem. This insinuates that the “deceitful presentation” of news stories by media outfits may hamper with credibility of these outfits which has the potency of making audience members to render developmental subject matters unserious and incredible.

Finally, since the news items are paid for, it becomes problematic for the editor to edit the item based on known professional standards or principles. The story becomes so sacrosanct to the extent the editor is constrained to edit the purported news item on the basis of what might interest the sponsor, as against public interest. In this case, money becomes the news determinant.

7. Conclusion

Despite the hazardous effect news commercialization on journalism profession and the society, this paper concludes that the issue of news commercialization can be effectively surmounted when both practicing journalists, media proprietors, the government and the audience put all hands on desk by playing their responsibilities as expected.

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