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Press Ownership and Nigeria's Democracy

Victor Jatula
University of Utah

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University of Dar es Salaam



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Editorial

After a silence of quite some time, brought about by a change of the coordinating team and a restructuring process, the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at St. Augustine University of Tanzania (SAUT), is pleased to publish another exciting issue of African Communication Research (ACR). The exercise of bringing ACR back into circulation did not just happen. It involved the tireless efforts and significant support from a great many individuals and institutions who deserve our appreciation. As such, ACR acknowledges the anonymous reviewers who recommended the articles for publication and the Chief Editor of this issue, Carolyn Cummings-Osmond, along with her Trainee Assistant Editor, Emily Smith, who undertook the challenging task of preparing the peer-reviewed articles. Two universities deserve credit for making this issue possible: St. Augustine University of Tanzania, the institution that oversees the publication of ACR, and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) who provided generous support in helping to get the journal out to the world so that others can benefit from it

The present issue has seven research-based articles directing our attention to three main debates, namely: media professionalism and democracy; media responsibility to society; and corporate communication. The first theme begins with Victor Jatula's contribution, which attacks media ownership in Africa for dwindling democratic practices in the continent. It is widely understood that reports on media ownership are plentiful. Likewise, contentions that media ownership and democracy are incompatible have consumed a considerable amount of ink. Jatula's contribution serves as a reminder of the debates through a lengthy depiction of the incidents evidencing the unlikely co-existence of media ownership and democracy in Nigeria. Using focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, Jatula indicates how owners of newspapers exert political influence on the way

news is selected, framed and reported to the extent of complicating Nigeria's regional political rivalry and consolidating democracy. In a very similar spirit, Thomas Masanja also draws our attention to how democratic principles are an expensive price to pay in Tanzania, in the face of the existing media laws. The research draws on several studies that report media practices and the presence of the laws which are enacted to ensure better operations, which in fact seem to arrive at the same conclusion: that media laws are a stumbling block to investigative journalism. Masanja concludes that there is an increasing pollution in the democratic environment in Tanzania. By highlighting how the Media Service Act (2016) limits the parameters of media practices, Masanja's scholarship illuminates how journalists strive to strike a balance between their practice and adherence to the existing media laws.

An article from Karanja Muturi and two further articles from multiple contributors Susan Ogundoyin and Olakayole Ogundoyin, as well as Raheemat Adeniran, Olujimi Kayode and Lai Oso seem to take a rather opposite trajectory through their implicit suggestion that media requires a control of some sort. Pointing to the fact that media coverage of religious practices in Africa and beyond has been the subject of intense academic debate, and specifically the observed increase in 'televangelism', Karanja Muturi's study illustrates how charismatic preachers use the gospel as a 'mediated spirituality' for capitalistic exchange in Kenya. In a separate but equally important study linked to the media, Susan Ogundoyin together with Olakayole Ogundoyin are skeptical of the media contribution in raising awareness about breast cancer treatment and prevention. Drawing from the answers of over 200 participants obtained purposively, the authors demonstrate the inadequacies of the media in making the masses aware of breast cancer, and associate this shortfall with the discouraging outcome of breast cancer prevention in Nigeria, thus calling for a rapid media response to the subject matter.

Campaigns urging the media to assume a more proactive role on health issues, are abundant, particularly those that require it to advocate for public health and responsibly alert the public about health risks. The journal article contributed by the research team comprised of Raheemat Adeniran, Olujimi Kayode and Lai Oso requests that the media in Nigeria inform the masses of maternal and child health care issues and point out that these issues are critical to the development of any nation. Perhaps a pertinent approach to the question of media inadequacy in informing the masses of various issues of importance, is suitably elucidated by Obasanjo Joseph Oyedele's work, which offers an alternative means of communication to farmers in Nigeria. In a departure from the increasing need for information about climate change to farmers in rural Africa, especially after some time of the apparent neglect of this group, the author discovers the significance of agricultural extension officers in communicating climate change to farmers in South-Western Nigeria. In so doing, his study creates a better understanding of the issues, and encourages improved use of climate-friendly farming strategies.

Dietrich Kaijanangoma's scholarship rounds off this issue of ACR by departing from the mass communication debates and instead offering an intriguing corporate communication discussion by exposing the negligence in deploying public relations practices via internal communication strategies in universities. The lack of comprehensive internal communication strategies in Tanzanian universities can result in a love-hate relationship and lead to a crisis situation between universities and their students, thus disrupting academic activities and possibly even destroying property. Kaijanangoma's work, then, urges university managers to take note of the significant role public relations functions can play in controlling student crises situations and establishing favorable relationships. This contribution, together with the other six in this publication, are powerful initiatives cementing the

discourse heralding effective communication as a panacea to the world's uncertainties.

Albert Tibaijuka, ACR Coordinating Editor

Press Ownership and Nigeria's Democracy

By Victor Jatula

Abstract

This paper examines the effect on democracy of press ownership in the context of Nigeria. Scholars have used a framework of reference drawn from Marxist political economy to reduce patterns of media ownership in Nigeria to class interests. This study investigates if and how newspaper proprietors shape their news organizations and it explores the implications of their influence on Nigeria's political process. Evidence from focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews indicate that owners of newspapers exert political influence on the way news is selected, framed and reported to the extent that news reportage not only complicates Nigeria's regional political rivalry and consolidating democracy; it also hinders efforts at modernisation. This paper will seek to elucidate these issues and make recommendations concerning the maintenance of a democratic press. It suggests that the press needs to offer a more professional, robust and comprehensive worldview for public interest.

Keyword: Nigeria, politics, democracy, media ownership, press freedom

Author biographical note

Victor Jatula is a lecturer in communication (journalism sequence) at the University of Utah (Asia Campus) in South Korea. Specifically, he teaches news and feature writing, digital journalism and public speaking. His research focuses on political communication and the role of the press in democratic societies with a particular emphasis on sub-Saharan Africa. His current research focuses on political culture in post-colonial societies and its impact on democracy.

Introduction

In post-colonial African states with a history of military rule, ethnic division and a relatively young democracy; a free and independent press is regarded as quintessential to the political process. The assumption is that a free press will empower citizens to make informed political decisions, function as a marketplace of ideas, and serve as watchdogs to political office holders; thus, ensuring that elected politicians and public institutions are open, transparent and accountable (Graber, 2003). It is believed that the press protects freedom of speech, fundamental human rights, universal civility and rule of law - vital essential components of a just and egalitarian society (Sen, 1999).

The potential of the press to transform the political process in Africa has historically been constrained by legal, political, regional and ethnic forces. In countries like Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Congo and Sudan, the stifling of the press contributed to civil unrest and ethnic conflicts that dislocated large portions of their societies. In non-democratic, single-party states with little tolerance for an independent press, restrictive media laws, arrest and detention of journalists and subtle forms of censorship, have limited the social and political openness that a free and critical press facilitates (Ogola, 2015).

In Nigeria, press ownership patterns as well as the influence proprietors exert on their publications, have come under close scrutiny. Two decades after the end of military rule, ownership patterns of national newspapers have raised fundamental questions as to why various political parties and politicians affiliate with or venture into newspaper ownership and/or control. Adesoji and Hahn (2011) have also questioned why new titles continue to emerge and why newspaper proprietors in Nigeria retain ownership when it is economically risky and often financially difficult. Do newspapers owned by certain individuals disproportionately benefit certain political, regional and economic interests? Are privately-owned newspapers (as suggested by Increase Coker in 1979) sophisticated political instruments used by their

owners to serve personal causes, promote certain agendas and defend specific positions? What effect, if any, do newspaper proprietors have and how does their influence impact Nigeria's political process?

These questions are tackled here through an analysis of the historical construction of Nigeria's media and a small-scale research project examining the link between ownership, media content and ideological reportage of political news in seven news organizations across Nigeria. Additionally, the study closely investigates the implication, if any, of news on the democratic process. The overarching goal of the study is to provide insight into the institutional structure and functioning of the news media in Nigeria as well as to illuminate the complex, multi-layered relationships between proprietors, news content and public opinion.

Theory and Literature Review

Media and power

Globally, the concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few, well-resourced individuals has raised concerns over the future of politics in both established and new democracies. McChesney (2007) has warned that in the United States of America and elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere, corporate interests and the elite class, through favorable state policy, advertising influence and ownership of the media, largely shape the framework within which the media operates. This, they claim, is good for the minority political class but detrimental for the rest of society. Similar concerns were raised about the influence of ownership on editorial content. This is premised on the assumption that too much media power in too few hands is bad for democracy. Concentrated ownership, according to Chomsky (1989) often conflicts with the diversity of content required for participatory democracy. Powerful media owners can prevent markets from self-adjusting and reallocating resources to newcomers in the industry. This impediment to new entrants poses a threat to the free-market ideology on one hand,

while on the other, it can harm the dissemination of news ideas. Proprietorial monopoly, through ownership, decreases diversity and plurality. The absence of competition can potentially decrease input in news gathering, in editorial diversity and can weaken journalistic quality and media efficiency (Graber, 2003).

McQuail (2005) argued that although the concentration of media ownership is necessitated by commercial, neo-liberal, technological and organizational factors, it can also lead to an emergence of a market-driven media system that is loyal to sponsors, advertisers and governments (McChesney, 2000). Moreover, it can lead to control by an elite who are predisposed to using their resources to further their hegemonic interests. McChesney (1999) argued that concentrated media monopolies are beneficiaries of the current economic structure and because of this, they seek its preservation. In 1989, Noam Chomsky observed that corporate-owned news and communication media are largely revenue-driven. Therefore, the way in which news is reported and framed is structured to further corporate interests. Using the "Propaganda Model", Chomsky and Herman (2010) argued that concentrated media ownership in the United States of America has resulted in a decline of competition. The absence of competing opinions and voices has limited the quantity and quality of news content available in the public domain. This in turn depletes public participation in politics. When ownership concentration exists within the media, significant monopoly power arises that is likely to restrict the effectiveness of political and social debate in the public sphere. McChesney (1999) and Bagdikian (2000) estimate that a few massive, vertically integrated media corporations dominate and control America's air waves. These corporations not only exert significant leverage on what the public are offered but are also not accountable to financial public scrutiny (Graber, 2003). Concentrated media ownership, especially by profit-driven corporations can constitute a threat to public interest (Graham, 2007).

Nigeria's newspaper press

In Nigeria, ownership structures that link the control of several titles in a single company are rare. Most major national newspapers are family-owned such as the *Nigerian Tribune* (the Awolowo family), the *Guardian* (Ibru family), the *Champion* (Iwuanyanwu family), *Punch* (Aboderin family) and *This Day* (Nduka Obiagbena). However, Nigeria's newspaper owners do share certain common commercial and political interests that suggest a restraint on what Chomsky (1998) referred to as the "market-place of ideas".

The context in which Nigerian newspapers emerged as well as their formative characterization was influenced by Christianity and Western education. The first newspaper - *Iwe Irohin*, established in 1865 by the Revd. Henry Townsend of the Anglican Missionary in Abeokuta, Western Nigeria was principally for proselytization (Oduntan, 2005). The introduction of mission schools in general and the spread of literacy in particular, provided the necessary fillip for newspaper readership to increase. In Southern Nigeria, newspapers quickly became the main conduit of information dissemination and ownership was concentrated in private hands (Aro, 2011).

Colonialism and the rise of Nigerian nationalism also influenced the press. As observed by Omu (1978), dissatisfaction with colonial rule and racial inequality led to the establishment of a radical Nigerian press. The foremost newspapers for Nigerians by Nigerians were mainly political in content with increasing popular appeal. Repressive colonial laws and conflicting interests between Nigerian traders and British interests, set the stage for the emergence of a political press that engaged radicalism, confrontation and nationalism as instruments of redress. Within five decades (between 1880 and 1930), the press had outgrown its missionary and literary roots and had been transformed into an indigenous, vibrant newspaper press owned by Nigerians and largely based in Lagos. Their focus was politics, specifically in demanding

reform from colonial authorities and raising the political consciousness of Lagos residents (Omu, 1978).

The introduction of local elections in Lagos and moderate political representation in Calabar in 1922 (Clifford Constitution) further cemented the role of newspapers in politics (Ogbondah, 1992). The most prominent newspaper of the era was the *Lagos Daily News*. Owned and edited by Herbert Macaulay, the paper together with Macaulay's radical political party - the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) - became a formidable force in the politics of Western Nigeria. The NNDP won consecutive elections to the Lagos Town Council between 1923 and 1933 (Eribo and Ebot, 2000). Thereafter, newspaper ownership by politicians and political parties, particularly in Southern Nigeria became an essential feature supplement. Dailies such as the *West African Pilot* (1936), the *Nigerian Tribune* (1948) and the *Southern Defender* (1951) were established as important propaganda organs of affiliate political parties. These papers, with the exception of the *Daily Times* newspaper, were critical of colonialism and were instrumental in drumming up political support for their owners. Constitutional reforms in 1946, 1951 and 1954 led to broader political representation and a shift towards regionalism. The three regions (East, West and North) that emerged during decolonization all owned newspapers: the *West African Pilot* – East, the *Nigerian Tribune* and *Sketch* – West and *Gaskia Ta Fibo*- North (Edeani, 1985).

At independence in 1960, newspaper ownership remained concentrated in private hands and in regional governments. In recognition of the expanding influence of the press, the Federal Government in 1961 acquired its first newspaper by incorporating the Nigerian National Press, publishers of the *Morning Post* and the *Sunday Post* (Ogbondah, 1992). The Federal Government also acquired controlling shares at the *Daily Times* - a successful, yet politically-detached national daily. However, the military intervention since 1966

changed the dynamics of press ownership. The unresolved constitutional crisis and questions around resource-control led to the Nigerian-Biafra Civil War from 1967-70 (Daramola, 2017). As a consequence, regions were balkanised into states in 1967. This had implications for federal and regional newspaper ownership to the extent that by the early 1990s, all government newspapers had ceased publication. Although privately-owned newspapers continued to operate, the most direct and decisive effect of military rule was media suppression through decrees, prosecutions, censorship and proscription. In 1999, democracy was restored in Nigeria after a long and sustained struggle by the press and civil society. What, therefore, is the effect on democracy of press ownership in the context of Nigeria?

Methodology

To gather data for this study, Focus Group Discussions (FDG) were conducted in Nigeria. As recommended by Krueger and Casey (2000), each group involved participants who were not total strangers, possessed certain similar characteristics and were willing to share their perspectives (convergent or divergent) in a focus group setting. The questions were predetermined, open-ended and structured to further the research goal. The same questions, in addition to follow-up questions were posed to each group but responses differed. Below is a summary breakdown of participants.

Table 1: A breakdown of data captured during FGD

Groups	Participants	Vocation	Gender	Age group	Location	Ethnicity
One	6	Journalists	4M/2F	35-45	Lagos	Yoruba/Ibo
Two	6	Civil servants	4M/2F	40-50	Abuja	Hausa
Three	6	University students	3M/3F	20-25	Abuja	Mixed
Four	6	Self-employed	5M/1F	35-45	Lagos	Yoruba/Ibo
Five	6	Job seekers	2M/4F	23-33	Lagos	Mixed

Source: FGD participants

Altogether, five FGD were conducted with journalists, civil servants, university students, self-employed and job seekers in order to gather data from a wide range of Nigerians. Table 1 summarizes the vocation, age group, gender, location and ethnic origins of participants. FGDs involving Group One, Four and Five were held in Lagos (Nigeria's former capital) and discussions with Group Two and Three were held in Abuja (the Federal Capital Territory). This ensured that the views of Nigeria's major ethnic groups (Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo) were represented. Discussants were selected in different ways. Groups One (journalists), Four (self-employed) and Five (job seekers) were invited individually to participate in the discussion. In Groups Two (Ministry of Information civil servants) and Three (university students), participants were contacted collectively and persuaded to participate in group discussions. The complexity involved in assembling participants included time scheduling issues and discussants' anxiety. These challenges however, did not negatively impact the outcome of the focus group discussions. The composition of each group proved useful for research.

The use of the news game, developed by the Glasgow Media Group, was employed, albeit with limited results. Newspaper cuttings were shown to participants to generate useful commentaries. While most discussants were willing to comment on news content; they were

reluctant to write alternative content as required by the news game. Nevertheless, newspaper cuttings (from newspapers listed in Table 2) elicited broad and useful responses from participants. The open-ended nature of the questions essentially allowed follow-up questions, either to clarify issues or probe participants when required. Newspaper cuttings used for the news game were selected within a six-month period (January to June) in the three presidential elections years in 2007, 2011 and 2015. The justification for the six-month period is underpinned by the presidential election timetable that pitches Nigeria’s general election in April of each election year. The news game therefore focused on newspaper content in the first four months running up to elections and the immediate two months after the election. The six-month period allowed for the contextualization of news content before, during and after elections.

Table 2: Newspaper ownership and political affiliation

Title	Publication location	Owner	Ethnicity of owner	Political affiliation
<i>Leadership</i>	Abuja	Sam Nda-Isaiah	Hausa, North	PDP
<i>Daily Trust</i>	Abuja	Kabiru Yusuf	Hausa, North	PDP
<i>Tribune</i>	Ibadan	The Awolowo family	Yoruba, South West	APC
<i>Guardian</i>	Lagos	The Ibru family	Delta, South-South	PDP
<i>Vanguard</i>	Lagos	Sam Amuka	Benin, South-South	APC
<i>ThisDay</i>	Lagos	Nduka Obiagbena	Igbo, South-East	PDP
<i>Punch</i>	Lagos	Aboderin family	Yoruba, South West	APC
<i>Nation</i>	Lagos	Bola Tinubu	Yoruba, South West	APC
<i>Champion</i>	Lagos	Iwuanyanwu family	Igbo, South East	PDP
<i>Sun</i>	Lagos	Kalu Uzor Orji	Igbo, South East	APC

The success of the 1969 Chapel Hill study by McCombs and Shaw (1972) formed the basis for selecting presidential election years for this study. The anticipation that newspapers seek to educate the electorate, influence voting decisions and provide a platform for political parties interested in swinging electoral outcomes in election years through political propaganda, campaigning and advertising, was justified by the quantity of data generated. The three election years 2007, 2011 and 2015 were significant, not only by the amount of political and electoral content in newspapers, but also for an equally important reason. The presidential election in 2007 was the first time in Nigeria's political history that a successful election will hold for the third consecutive time. This seemingly significant milestone and an indication of democratic consolidation was, however, marred by allegations of corruption and vote rigging. The 2007 presidential election was unanimously adjudged by both local and international observers as corrupt and unfair (Obi, 2008). Thus, there was renewed interest from the Independent National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (INEC) and the Federal Government to ensure that the 2011 presidential election was credible, free and fair (Ibrahim, 2007). This same attitude prevailed during the 2015 general election.

The study also gathered data using semi-structured interviews with news editors (2), senior political correspondents (2), journalists (4), academics (2), media critics (2) and members of the public (6) to capture broad commentaries required to investigate the research objectives set out in the introduction. In total, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted in Lagos (10) and Abuja (8), respectively. Equal representation of the participants in terms of gender, age and the ethnic backgrounds of the respondents was prioritized. A total of 10 males and eight females participated. Similarly, 10 participants were recruited from the South and eight from the North.

To ensure validity, a key criterion was that each participant understood the research questions and consented to participate in the study. The questions were open-ended and semi-structured. The topics covered, centered around whether media owners use their titles as leverage for increased political influence and the extent to which media owners scrutinize and micro-manage their organization. Non-verbal communication and the body language of participants was fully observed in interviews. These promoted further enquiries or meant that a question was rephrased and re-framed to elicit further commentaries from respondents. In some cases, questions were repeated to ensure that participants' responses were accurately captured. Commentaries from SSI and FGD are sometimes used interchangeably in the findings section.

Findings and analysis

Nigerian newspaper proprietors and control

In privately-owned Nigerian newspapers, it is difficult to get to the truth of the proprietorial influence on news content due to a culture of corporate confidentiality and non-disclosure. Owners and editors have reasons to remain guarded on this issue. Proprietors who indirectly oversee the daily running of their titles (such as the *Guardian* and the *Tribune* newspapers), in assuring press freedom, do not want the public to think they interfere with what is published. Editors, in asserting their independence, claimed impartiality and objectivity. In owner/editor newspapers such as *This Day*, claims of professionalism were equally strong. These assertions notwithstanding, the study found evidence to suggest that media ownership in Nigeria is substantially motivated by political influence, particularly to sway public opinion and win elections on behalf of affiliate political parties.

The financial gains motive is relevant but not sufficient to explain why new titles continue to emerge and old ones endure. Dwindling advertising revenue, declining circulation figures and Nigeria's poor-

performing economy are major disincentives (ADVAN, 2015). A Lagos-based newspaper editor confirmed that:

the news industry is struggling: salaries are significantly small. Salaries in Champion, This Day and new Nigerian newspapers are often unpaid for months. Revenue is generally dwindling. Owners keep their paper afloat for non-financial purposes.

During the news game, most journalists observed that traditional methods of revenue generation are no longer effective. One observed that the major reason why journalists are close to politicians and political parties is to secure much-needed political advertising contracts. He added that: "...people rarely buy newspapers. The result is that news organizations must find alternatives in politicians." Other participants also pointed to the high cost of newsprint and "unsustainable" associated production costs, which have led some newspapers (*Next* and *Premium Times*) to become online-only publications. A significant amount of interview participants noted that most Nigerian newspapers now combine a growing online presence with aggressive marketing and advertising strategies.

The political gains motive has its roots in history. Nationalist and post-independence leaders all owned newspapers. This trend has not only increased since 1999 but has expanded, especially in Southern Nigeria. New newspapers include: *Business Day* (2005), *Hallmark* (2000), *Independent* (2001), *Nation* (2006), *Osun Defender* (2003), *New Telegraph* (2014), *Mirror* (2006), *Next* (2004), *Sun* (2001) and *Compass* (2008). And in Abuja, *Blueprint* (2011), *Premium Times* (2011) and *Leadership* (2004). While no newspaper of note is owned by a political party, most new titles are linked to owners with interests in politics and are part of a conglomerate of sorts with horizontal and vertical linkages within and across industries. These titles are owned by politicians - former governors of Lagos, Osun, Ogun, Delta states. Although Nigerian newspapers are financially often quite precarious, the political dividends that accumulate from their publications are probably more

important and rewarding than the economic benefits. An interview participant noted that: "...politicians who own newspapers do so for obvious political reasons- to win elections and thereafter accrue economic gains."

How media owners influence content

The structure inherent in the management of selected Nigerian newspapers offer some insight into how owners influence news content. In addition to strategic decision-making oversight, Nigerian newspaper owners have a more direct ideological and political influence, as they seek to impose their values and priorities on journalists. They ensure that news coverage reflects how they see the world, how they want their readers to perceive the world and how and whether they think it should change. Their economic motive is to accrue benefits, through state-sponsored advertising as they advance the interest of certain political parties. The conflation of proprietor and editorial roles contributes to the perception that newspapers are propaganda outlets.

To influence news content, the management configuration in all seven newspapers (*This Day, Tribune, Punch, Vanguard, Guardian, Trust and Leadership*) indicate large concentrations of power in the office of owner/editor (and in other cases, editors).

Editorial/Proprietorial structure in a newspaper



Figure 1: Description of editorial structure in a typical Nigerian newspaper organization

As indicated in Figure 1, owners oversee all aspects of their organization. According to an Abuja-based reporter, this power structure allows owners to wield control, micro-manage reporters, hand-pick news headlines and promote their political, personal and corporate interests. A former *This Day* reporter remarked that:

It is naive to believe owners will not interfere with media content. They censor information potentially damaging to companies within their conglomerate, and some third parties which do business with them.

He added that:

My former boss was very hands on. He sits as the chairman of the editorial board and nothing gets past him. While this may work well in certain matters, it also restricted certain freedoms.

Strands of proprietorial influence

The study found four strands of influence. Although the weight of this influence varied from one organization to another, the overarching objective of owners is common: control. The first is at the point of entry. Newspaper owners from the outset are deliberate in selecting or appointing an editorial team that will implement the owner's agenda. Proprietorial control is exercised at the point of appointment, particularly in the case of senior journalists, correspondents and editors. This filtering process ensures that only

'like-minds' are recruited. As noted by an anonymous senior correspondent with a Lagos-based newspaper: "my entry interview was attended by the owners as well as the editor and the former left no one in doubt who controlled operations and directed affairs." Another journalist added that promotions into senior positions are also determined by owners.

The second strand of proprietorial influence is that Nigerian newspaper owners determine the roles and business models of their organizations. While this seems the norm in all enterprises, its implication in the news business is that allocation of resources, influences which news stories are covered and how they are framed. It is therefore possible and sometimes the case, that some aspects of the news gathering venture are better resourced than others. In the context of critical journalism, not all organizations are willing to invest in detailed, long and expensive investigations such as those carried out by Nick Davies (*Guardian* newspaper reporter) on the now defunct *News of the World*. Similarly, not all owners are willing to jeopardize their economic benefits by investigating their sponsors and advertisers. A senior reporter from Lagos observed that journalists "are pieces of a puzzle and if you fail to act accordingly and as directed, you will be replaced." Another reporter added that editor's preference and not always the story, sets the pace for what is investigated and reported.

The third form of control is that managing editors know what their proprietors think about economics and politics (though they would not publicly admit it), and act accordingly. Even without explicit instructions, senior journalists and editors simply sense - through the tacit social cues and agreed-upon patterns that often structure newsrooms - that their time and attention would simply be better spent elsewhere, not on issues that are implicitly understood to be out of alignment with their proprietor's agenda. A reporter based in Lagos commented that:

It is a rule of thumb that reporters intrinsically understand the house rule of the organization they work in and are able to pick non-verbal communication from the top. As a reporter, I not only understand the house rule, I am also guided by what my editors are interested in.

This influence is often wrapped up as directives from supervising editors. An Abuja reporter observed that:

It is a matter of setting the tone, of ensuring that editors and their subordinates know what is required of them. Compliance and job security are connected at many levels to the extent that the latter feeds on the former.

The final strand is through direct control of editors and reporters. This includes directives on the prominence of reportage, the angle of coverage and depth and repetition. An anonymous interview participant based in Lagos commented that the proprietor of the newspaper he worked for was a “control freak” and “very hands-on.” He added that: He went through a long period of using his papers as personal publicity sheets. He saw every leading article and determined front-page news. He intimidated junior staff and regularly interfered in editorial matters, ordering the paper to run negative articles about so-called ‘enemies’ and exercised control on major issues, such as which party to back in a general election or which policy issues to oppose. A Lagos-based editor commented that newspaper owners know what they want and how to get what they want. According to him:

Owners know their niche market and understand their readers. This involves saying some things to satisfy some interest, which may dissatisfy others. You can’t blame editors who approve certain articles for publication because if they don’t, they will be sacked and replaced.

Beyond proprietors

It is believed that proprietors and the organizations they own are conditioned by social forces that are beyond their control. FGD participants in Group Four (self-employed) observed that business

owners in general and media proprietors in particular, play an important role in driving their organizations. The majority of the participants agreed that without owners, most newspapers would no longer be in business, particularly in the context of Nigeria. According to one discussant: "In Nigeria, it is too simplistic to expect owners to take a back seat and hand over their investments to editors or managers." Another participant added that: "The business terrain here is quite different from Europe and America. In Lagos, owners need to be involved in order to steer their companies to success." Their arguments rest on the view that medium-scale media organizations with fluctuating advertising revenues and relatively small circulation figures are not only vulnerable but also exposed to commercial pressures. This necessitates owners to exert control. As indicated by a participant, the "proprietor in a former newspaper outlet in Abuja had to curry government's favor in order to secure an important state advertising contract that kept the newspaper afloat".

Cut-throat competition along the Lagos/Ibadan newspaper axis also requires proprietors to play decisive roles in their companies. A Lagos-based reporter commented that: "In Lagos alone, there are over 13 national newspapers. This concentration makes it hard, if not impossible to be hands-off." The effect of market forces as against professionalism and editorial independence, situates media owners "between the devil and the Red Sea" observed a discussant. It is hard to find a balance between these two extremes. The ideological-political press that championed the course of Nigeria's independence and resisted military dictatorship, post-independence may have given way to a commercial-industrial press with forward and backward linkages to politics, public opinion and economic success. According to Oso (2012) in contemporary Nigeria, financial imperatives have become the defining character of the media. The link between profit and news organizations is mainly driven by social forces and proprietorial priorities.

Press ownership and its implication for Nigeria's democracy

Democracy works best when reporters are free from proprietorial constraints, when the system allows for the free flow of ideas and when the public have access to accurate, diverse and detailed information from a variety of opinions on important political, economic and social issues. In its current form, most media proprietors of Nigeria's national newspapers have allowed their titles to be used for personal and political propaganda. A large section of participants agreed that just as the *Nigerian Tribune* newspaper was used as the mouthpiece of its late founder - Obafemi Awolowo and continues to defend the particular interests of south westerners and political parties within the region; other newspapers - *Vanguard, Punch, Champion, This Day, Nation*...with links to particular ethnic groups and political parties, are also partisan in their reportage. This often leads to politicized reporting and biased media coverage of issues. As indicated by a former reporter, "rather than report impartially, journalists are expected to toe the line of their proprietors without question. Non-conforming-reporters are systematically made redundant."

Proprietorial control in the Nigerian press is counterproductive on many other fronts. On exposing corruption, vital resources are diverted from critical journalism that investigates serious abuses of power, resource misappropriation and gross violations of human and fundamental rights. This is especially so when the interests of proprietors and their business associates are in conflict with, and prioritized over public interest. Some participants also argued that media owners hesitate to fund critical journalism due, in part, to cost. A participant noted that "...the pursuit of commercial success and profit, not a lack of resources or will, is the main reason why most news organizations shy away for serious reporting." The findings indicated that Nigeria's democracy may not deliver its dividend if corruption remains largely unchecked and unexposed by the watchdog. "What the press relies on are court proceedings, information from anti-corruption

agencies and press releases from the State House” added a participant who claimed that these may not be enough. Proprietorial control is also unhealthy for regional and ethnic relations in Nigeria - a country sharply divided along geographical and religious lines. Most owners seek to win political support for affiliate political parties- parties that often represent regional interests. What is more, most newspapers are used by their proprietors to whip up ethnic sentiments and/or appeal to their readers. As a consequence, most national newspapers have served narrow ethnic or proprietorial interests. This is most apparent during presidential election campaigns, when newspapers, in a bid to win support for affiliate political parties become biased, partisan and sensational. While all Nigerian newspapers claim to adhere to strict professional codes of journalistic conduct (neutrality, objectivity and balance); in reality, owners exploit the regional competition for state power to further narrow interests.

Conclusion

Power relations prevalent in the Nigerian press concentrates control of managerial and editorial decision-making in the hands of proprietors, most of whom have complex political and business interests to the extent that they disproportionately influence news gathering, selection and framing to serve predetermined ends. They use direct proprietorial control to micromanage journalists, exert strategic editorial pressure to channel organizational resources in favourable directions, recruit compliant journalists into senior positions, and support entry-point selection to appoint journalists who agree with their agenda. Media owners have used their dual role as proprietors (and in a few cases), editors, to influence news content and by extension, the opinion of their readers. The evidence suggests that new newspaper titles continue to emerge, even when they are economically unprofitable, because of the proprietors’ desire to exert political influence. The quest for increasing soft power amidst ethnic and regional competition for state offices has allowed politicians, in alliance with proprietors, to

dominate a section of the Nigerian press and limit critical reporting and press freedom. The modern press is industrial and multidimensional and as such, requires substantial economic resources. However, it is noteworthy that the press differs from other businesses that exist for commercial ends. The media in general and the press in particular, in Nigeria should serve as the conscience of society by effectively performing their watchdog role with minimal proprietorial influence.

Recommendations

This paper recommends specific state support for online news platforms in Nigeria to enhance public and small-scale news organizations to participate in information gathering, reportage and dissemination. The concept of citizen journalism and the use of social networking sites can further broaden the scope and capacity of civil society to function as active watchdogs. Online news can potentially increase the quantity of information available in the public domain. It is hoped that as the public become increasingly aware of political actors, political actions and the political process, a culture of transparency, accountability and inclusive decision-making will endure. State support for online news should potentially cover three critical areas: first, investing in digital mass literacy; second, investing in infrastructural development through public-private partnership; and finally, incentivizing high-tech start-up news companies. The State can potentially drive down connection charges as they partner with internet service providers, introduce tax breaks and legislate policies that will increase access to online news, particularly outside urban areas. Critics have observed that online news is beset with questions of credibility, authenticity and source verification; yet, online news has become a credible compliment to mainstream media. The relative ease and speed with which content is created, uploaded and shared would benefit the polity. These shifts can culminate in a model of press that transcends commercial and owners' interests.

Limitations of the study

A few limitations must be acknowledged. The fieldwork was mainly done in Lagos and Abuja. As indicated in the methodology section, participants were purposely selected. They may not fully represent a comprehensive cross-section of Nigeria's population. However, these challenges did not limit the reliability and validity of the study. Further research in the area of the press/politics nexus should include an evaluation of online news and social media in democratizing information- gathering and dissemination. It might examine how online news, especially by non-mainstream media, shapes public perception and politics in Nigeria.

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