

Reflection on Some Socio-Economic Factors That Shaping the Evolution of Mass Communication in Nigeria

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Abstract

Mass Communication as a field of discipline has undergone several evolutions from one stage to the other in the course of its existence. One reason is because different fields have been incorporated into Mass Communication to make it a coherent field of study. Such fields include mechanics, electronics, mathematics, economics, psychology, sociology, just to mention a few. Whatever evolutions that have transpired in these fields have had great impact on Mass Communication. From the early 1900s, the rise of Mass Communication followed a pattern of industrial revolution following every subsequent revolution in media technology. The media were among the many technologies that shaped the world and were shaped by other as well. From the oral tradition, the print, the rise of the electronic media and ultimately to the digital-networked communication, Mass Communication has undergone changes from diverse paradigms. The field of Mass Communication is an ever-changing field with notable changes taking place almost on a daily basis. In this paper, we focus on a number of economic factors that shaped, (and still continue to shape) the epochs and annals of Mass Communication in Nigeria. This paper identifies the political climate, advertising, news commercialization, and entertainment as some of the identifiable socio-economic factors.

Key words: Socio-economic factors; Mass media evolution; Technology

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1. INTRODUCTION

Various defined by different scholars in the field, mass communication is viewed as a process whereby professional communicators use the mass media to disseminate messages widely, rapidly and continuously, to arouse intended meanings in large and diverse audience, in attempts to influence them in a variety of ways (DeFleur and Denis, 1994). It is similarly seen as the process of creating shared meaning between mass media and their audiences (Baran and Davis, 2012). Mass communication is also a process by which a complex organization, with aid of one or more machines, produces and transmits public messages that are directed to large, heterogeneous, and scattered audiences (Dominick, 2009).

Mass media are believed to be central to the overall development of the society. This perception which has become accepted by different authorities of mass communication is derived from the age-long traditional roles of the media as agents of change. Without the media which, according to Okunna (2000) maintain constant flow of vital information for economic progress and national development, the society is bound to be stagnated or at best be retarded. Owolabi (2008, p. 287) also corroborated this position by adding that “decisions are made on the basis of the quality of available information at ones disposal”. To policy makers and entrepreneurs, information and knowledge are the basic ingredients they need to respond to opportunities and challenges in their economic domain. For example, the mass media can be used to propagate the government’s policies and expectations.

1.1 Mass communication versus socio-economic factors

Mass media evolution has continued to be influenced by a number of factors. These factors range from the social to the economic.

According to Baran and Davis (2012, p. 49),

The rise of mass media in the 1900s followed a pattern of industrial development that has been duplicated following every subsequent *revolution* in media technology. Whenever important new media technologies appear, they *destabilize* existing media industries, forcing large-scale and often very rapid restructuring. Large corporations based on old technologies go into precipitous decline while a handful of the upstart companies reap enormous profits. We are witnessing another repetition of this cycle with the rise of Microsoft, Google, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, just a few of the new media giants challenging older media companies whose income is derived from television, radio, and newspapers. To survive, older media corporations are forced into cutthroat competition with each other and with the companies that use new technology to deliver content to audiences.

Many tools of communication began with quite limited ownership. For the centuries when books were hand-produced by monks and booksellers, most people lived out their lives not knowing that such a thing as a book existed, let alone ever seeing a book. For a half century after its invention, the still camera was a complicated piece of equipment for both the serious hobbyist and the professional. Eventhough ordinary people aspired to own photographs, they did not think of owning a camera. The videotape recorder and the video camera were not initially designed for untrained hands. Scientists alone worked with the first computers (Fang, 1997). This is because each of these tools were very expensive to produce and even more expensive for the ordinary citizen to afford.

The field of Mass Communication entails the interplay of many factors to be regarded as successful. This is because it incorporates the work of both machines and human beings. Maintaining both humans and machines with a bid to striking a balance between the two has been the age-long challenge of mass communication. As a result, media establishments have always sought for ways to balance the weight of producing media content, maintaining their machinery and paying remunerations of workers.

In the mid-and late nineteenth century, large and urban populations' rising demand for cheap media content drove the development of several new media including: the penny press, the nickel magazine and the dime novel. High speed printing presses and Linotype machines made it practical to mass produce the printed word at very low cost. As a result, intense competition broke out among many small scale-circulation and more specialized print media (Baran and Davis, 2012). By increasing accessibility through lower prices, the new mass newspapers were able to serve people who had never had easy access to the mass media.

1.2 Evolution and Development of the Mass Media in Nigeria

The Nigerian mass media have been described as a product of nationalist struggle (Oso, Odunlami, and Adaja, 2011). While this is believed to a certain extent, Omu (1978, p. 6) on the other hand, opined that "the missionary activities in West African coast, beginning from Freetown, were actually the bedrock of media evolution in Nigeria". Tador (1996) however classifies the development of the Nigerian media into three phases as follows: The early press (1800-1920); nationalist press (1929-1960); and contemporary press (1960-till date). In the opinion of Ogunsiji (1989), the history of the Nigerian media can be classified into four eras. These are the era of missionary journalism (1846-1863), the era of alien-dominated press (1863-1914), the emergence of indigenous press (1914-1960) and the new era (1960-till date).

The concern of this paper however is not much with the classification as it is with identifying the significant socio-economic landmarks and their implications to the media history of the press in Nigeria. A deeper look at what happened towards the latter part of the 19th century reveals that the missionaries actually played significant roles in the evolution of the media, particularly in Nigeria. The way for the emergence of newspapers in Nigeria was paved by an Anglican Missionary, Rev. Henry Townsend who established the first newspaper, *Iwe Irohin* in 1859 at Abeokuta. His motives were a combination of religion, education, economic, social and cultural with a view to penetrate and influence the Yoruba speaking community of Nigeria with Christian religion. Other factors that later contributed to the evolution and growth of the press in Nigeria include the increased literacy level and the later consciousness of some African intellectuals whose awakened interests in social, political and economic matters fuelled a renewed zeal to contribute to national discourse through the mass media (Sobowale, 1985).

It has been there at every milestone in Nigeria's march towards independence; during the post-independent era, especially at the critical time of unification and sustenance of the nation during and after the civil war, (July, 1967-January, 1970); and during the different transitional periods from military rule to civilian (1966-1999) (Akinfeleye, 2011).

The electronic press era is witnessing breath-taking improvements in the mode of message gathering, storage, retrieval, packaging and dissemination. The print media are also circulating at electronic speed through the satellite and computer-aided technologies thus making the entire world a global village media (Azegbeni 2006). It is also worthy of note the spread of media houses due to improved literacy level, political awareness and economic advantage of the media business which gave birth to more outfits across the six geo-political zones of Nigeria. Tracing back the history of printing and printing

technology and especially, the pioneer newspapers in various parts of the world, one can equivocally say that the mass media have come of age.

2. THE FACTORS

2.1 Advertising

Most of the media's economic support came from subscription revenue or allocations from the government for the government-owned media. With the rapid rise in population and literacy, advertisers realized that they could reach a large segment of potential buyers by purchasing media space. As a result, advertisers were greatly attracted to the new mass medium and the media came to rely much more on advertising than on any method of fund raising (Dominick, 2009). This trend is still being carried on today where the media heavily relies on funds gotten from advertisement placement in order to have a smooth financial running of the organization.

2.2 Entertainment

The disintegration of traditional communities has unquestionably provided many opportunities for media entrepreneurs. For example, storytelling was an important form of entertainment in many folk communities. As these communities declined, a market opened up for different forms of mediated entertainment such as movies, television, and videos. Baran and Davis (2012) assert that during the era of the penny press, mass newspapers quickly displaced small-circulation specialized papers, and many did so using highly suspect formulas for creating content. These strategies became even more questionable as competition increased for the attention of readers. Therefore, they decided to incorporate lots of entertainment content like the comic strips, cartoons, and many human angle stories with a lot of exaggerations and unconfirmed reports. But they justified their practices by arguing that *everyone else is doing it and the public likes it or else they wouldn't buy it—we're only giving the people what they want*. This trend has spiraled down even to the entertainment-crazed world today where different media compete for audience attention by producing diverse entertainment content for the consumption of the public.

2.3 Commercialization of News Content

UNESCO (1980, p. 152) alluded to the commercialization of news when it wrote that: "The news has become commercial product.... important developments in the countryside are pushed aside by unimportant, even trivial news items, concerning urban events and the activities of personalities". With the high cost of production and maintenance of the media, news has become a commodity whereby the highest bidder or those who can afford to pay some amount of money get to be heard in the news. These include: government ministries, religious

organizations, corporate institutions and business outfits. Nnorom (1994) cited in Ekwo (1996, p.63) defines news commercialization as "a phenomenon whereby the electronic media report as news or news analysis; a commercial message by an unidentified or unidentifiable sponsor, giving the audience the impression that news is fair, objective and socially responsible".

2.4 Political Influence

The political climate of every nation has always had an adverse effect on the economic stance of mass communication. The world has been witness to authoritarian means of control over media by both dictatorial and democratic governments. Today many nations, though, deny practicing authoritarian principles used for expression, but behind the curtain, authoritarian practice is carried out. These practices are used in various forms and techniques. In some countries, particularly in the developing ones like Nigeria, these are used in visible form like *Official Secret Act, National Security Act*, etc. In some instances, control over the press is carried out in form of financial threat. Commercialization of news began in Nigerian media houses as the result of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced in 1986 and the eventual withdrawal of subsidies from government owned-media houses (Ekwo, 1996; Ogbuoshi, 2005). With the increasing rise in production cost and dwindling circulation, the media houses resort to all kinds of tricks including commercialization of the news to make money (Oso, 2000). The situation has led to a lot of compromise, with sensationalization of news stories and half-truths reaching alarming stage.

3. CONCLUSION

The media profession in Nigeria as in most other nations has lost most of its dedicated and talented hands to other professions such as Public relation, Advertising and Marketing Communication. The reason for this can be explained within the context of job insecurity and unattractive welfare package due to economic problem. This reason is also responsible for why most newspapers have remained state papers for long or at best regional medium. This is not a good credential for an institution expected to contribute to national development. If the mass media will live up to its traditional responsibility as agent of change and development, it must be able to recruit and retain seasoned professionals who will be able to dig beyond the surface to ferret out the secret deals among the political and business class, set developmental agenda for the government, reconstruct the mind of the people against deep seated anti-development culture and mobilize them to participate in the development process of their communities.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Nigerian Guild of Editors, Newspaper Proprietors Associations of Nigeria and the Nigerian Union of Journalists must urgently make a move to raise the standard for would-be investors in the media business as well as those who are already in it.

The government must provide an enabling environment for businesses including media to thrive. For example, the problem of moribund infrastructural facilities especially electricity, road and rail network and telecommunication must be urgently addressed.

The government must relax its policies on multiple taxation of the media industry; while exempting them from paying import duties on production equipment, spare parts and raw materials.

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