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An Appraisal of Mass Media Role in Consolidating Democracy in Nigeria

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Abstract

The Nigerian media has been playing an active role in instituting democratic structures since the inception of the country as a nation state. The newspapers that were established during the early years of colonialism were used as potent tools of propagating the ideas of democracy in Nigeria. The various titles that appeared on Nigerian newsstands then were deployed to fight the colonial government. And through the instrumentality of the press, Nigeria achieved her independence in 1960. This study therefore critically assessed the performance of Nigerian mass media in consolidating

democracy. The study is of the view that the mass contributed immensely to the return of democracy in Nigeria. This the media did through their critical criticism of the military juntas, mobilization of the citizens to participate in entrenching democratic values, exposing cases of corruption, and making public officers accountable to the people. Despite Nigerian media great performance in promoting democracy, they are faced with challenges which borders on issues of ethnicity, Lack of adequate modern communication gadgets, pressure from pressure groups and the government, ownership question, corruption, poor welfare and security issues among several others. For Nigerian media to serve as instrument for stabilizing democracy, they need to ensure that they live up to the ideals of the profession and deal with all cases of unethical practices among its members. The government on the other hand should truly support the noble profession by creating the right atmosphere for media men to operate without friction.

Keywords: Communication, Democracy, Mass Media and Nigeria

Introduction

The Nigerian mass media have come a long way in the struggle for the enthronement of democracy in the country. The mass media has been playing this active role since the inception of the first newspaper established by Reverend Henry Townsend in 1859 in Abeokuta. The other newspapers that were established after Iwe-Irohin took a radical stand against the subjugation of the Nigerian people by the colonial government. The nationalist's that founded these newspapers deployed them as tools for political agitations and demanded for outright independence and democracy for the country. Some notable Nigerians who used the mass media as a vehicle to actualized this noble objective included the following: Dr, Nnamdi Azikiwe who established the West African Pilot, Herbert Macaulay founded the Lagos Daily News, Chief M.K.O Abiola established the National Concord, The Nigerian Tribune was owned by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, and the Nigerian Pioneer was established by Kitoye Ajasa among other several newspapers established by Nigerians. The struggle to entrench democracy in Nigeria was and is strongly been shouldered by the mass media. This is evident in the attainment of the country's independence in 1960. Even after independence, the mass media did not relent in their efforts to enthrone democracy. Despite the truncations of democracy by various military juntas, the mass media were not deterring in their responsibility of mobilizing the people to seek for the return of democracy in the country. The determination and resilience exhibited by the mass media eventually yielded positive result when on the 29th of May 1999 the country again returned to democratic rule after a prolong period of military dictatorship.

It is an incontrovertible fact that Nigerian nationalists were able to bring the colonial government to its knees through the instrumentality of the mass media. In this

regard Iwokwagh (2011), citing Jibo (2003:3) noted that the Nigerian media has been a major political actor long before the country was fashioned as a unified political entity and has continued to play a central role in national politics since then. The mass media is the driven force that facilitates the entrenchment of democracy in any political system. This is because democracy depends on a knowledgeable citizenry, whose access to broad range of information enables them to participate fully in public life and the governance of the society (Galadima & Asemah, 2012).

Since the return of the country to democratic rule, the mass media has continued to play active roles in nurturing the new born democracy. It is therefore the trust of this article to examine through qualitative approach the roles that the Nigerian media has been playing in consolidating democracy in the country.

Conceptualization of Mass Media and Democracy

The mass media refers to all the avenue through which information can be passed from one person to numerous, scattered and heterogeneous audiences. They also mean the vehicles through which messages, information, ideas, knowledge and culture are transmitted to a large audience. According to Nwosu (1996:11), cited in Afamuefuna (2007), mass media are a technical communication concept which refers to the devices employed by anyone involved in a mass mediated communication situation for moving messages across distance or time. Thus, the mass media are the major modern means of communicating simultaneously and sometime instantaneously with a large scattered heterogeneous and anonymous audience. These include radio, television, newspaper, magazine, and the internet.

Because the mass media are the only source of news for most individuals, the presence of democratic or special bias in the media may have profound effect. Public dependence on the media also gives them the power to set political or democratic agenda and determine which issues will be the subject of public debate. Through the mass media, the citizens are educated on their rights and privileges so as to participate meaningfully in the democratic process (Mile, 2009).

On the other hand, the concept of democracy has become a popular concept in every contemporary discourse. It is now a word that resonates in people's minds and springs from their lips as they struggle for freedom and better conditions of service. In its Greek understanding, the word "democracy" has a remote origin from the word *demokratia* (*demos* – the people, plus *kratia* (from *kartos*) – sway, authority) meaning the rule by the people. The impression this conveys is that it is a form of government where the people directly takes decisions by themselves without representation as we presently have today in most states of the world (Aguda: n.d :17 cited in Ezonbi & Jonah, 2013).

Democracy is adjudged as the most popular system of government in the world. It is popularly seen as the government of the people, by the people and for the people. As a concept, according to Obasanjo and Mabgunje (1992) cited in Ogah & Ogeyni (2014:55), democracy as an ideology is the philosophy of governance which sets a high premium on the basic freedom or fundamental human rights of the citizens, rule of law, the right to property, the free flow of information and the right of choice between alternative political positions. Simply put, democracy is that system of politics in which sovereignty is vested on the people rather than in a small clique or an oligarchy, where the rule of law, majority rule and constitutionalism are basic guiding principles of governance. It is in this context that Ramaswamy (2007:377) posited that democracy means the rule by the people as contrasted with the rule by one person or a group. He went further to say that it is the people who are both rulers and rule unlike other systems like monarchy, dictatorship or oligarchy where a distinction between the ruler and the ruled exists. But a cursory examination of the scenario in Nigeria negates this basic ingredient of democracy. In the context of Nigeria, instead of majority having their way in the process of governance, a few cabals have hijacked the state of affairs in the state. And any attempt to challenge the powers that be would amount to the brutal maltreatment of the fundamental rights of the innocent and suffering masses.

Theoretical Underpinning

The Social Responsibility theory which had its beginnings from the Hutchins Commission of 1947 on the Commission of Freedom of the press has one of its basic postulations that freedom carries a concomitant obligation. In it the press is to be responsible to the society by carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication (Ojobor 2002:11).

While the theory emphasizes the need for an independent press that scrutinizes other social institutions and provide objective, accurate news reports, the most innovative feature of social responsibility theory was the call for media to be responsible for fostering productive and creative great Communities (Baran and Davis: 109). The media is responsible to the society no doubt in its functions of reporting news. Here it infers again not just news as it is but truthful and objective representation of the society. Therefore the press has the right to hold the government accountable for the people. They press does this through investigating reporting to unearth hidden information about corruption in government activities. The basic assumption of the theory as stipulated by McQuail (2005) is a clarion call on the mass media to be guided by the principles of fairness objectivity and accuracy in working assiduously hard to ensure the stability and sustenance of democracy.

The Agenda setting theory as a second construct for this study posit that “the media predetermine what issues are regarded as important at a given time in a given society”. The mass media institution is seen as a responsible one for raising issues they

consider vital, to the platform of public discourse and draw public attention to it. The media successfully do this through the quantity and frequency of reporting; prominence given to reports through headlines displays, pictures, adverts, layouts in newspapers, magazines, films, graphics or prime timing on radio and television (Folarin, 1998: 68, cited in Ojete, 2008). Through agenda setting the media monitor events and report to the members of the society. That is, the media are the “watch dog of the society”. Thus, the theory is relevant to the study because it lays emphasis on using the mass media to draw attention of the people to salient events that happen in our society, so that they will reflect such issues. The media can therefore be used to educate the audiences on the things happening in the society, so that they can reflect on them.

The Nexus between Mass Media and Democracy

It is an indisputable fact that mass media is the watchdog of any society. It is this enormous responsibility that the Nigeria Constitution (1999) in Chapter iv, Section 39, Sub-section 2 like all modern constitutions across the globe, provided that people be free to own, establish and operate any medium for the dissemination of information, ideas and opinions. Over and above this provision, the 1999 Constitution gives a charge in Chapter ii, Section 22 which categorically states that “The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this Chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people”. It is against the backdrop of this provisions that the mass media could monitor governance in a democracy.

Taken together, the mass media and democracy are inextricably linked. The Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM, 2007) clearly understands this link when it avers that modern democracy and the mass media are vital, indispensable link between those who govern and those who are governed. If the mass media do not inform the citizens thoroughly and impartially about government policies and their consequences as well as about the alternatives of government policy proposed by opposition parties and civil society, the people’s democratic choice is severely limited (Ugande, 2010). Umaru and Abdullahi (2012:33) equally confirm that the mass media are very important and centrally located in the lives of the people and the democratic process. They when further to establish that because of this centrality, the media justifiably focus their attention and accord high priority to government programmes. Lending credence to this Ende (2013:33) citing Balkin (1998:1) argued that the mass media stimulate political transparency for “without the mass media”, openness and accountability is impossible in contemporary democracies. He further contend that transparency would entails the assistance mass media give to citizens to understand the operations of government; participate in political decisions; and hold government accountable to the people.

In addition, Ojo (2015) pointed out that the media and political system “are involved in an intricate nexus of relationship, cooperation and complimentary activities, all geared at promoting individual and collective interest of the society”. He equally notes that in the performance of these roles, both estates exert considerable influence on one another. Not only do they exert considerable influence on each other, both the media and the political system work towards the same end in the society; ensuring good governance, providing a sense of direction and exercising control over the affairs of a state, protecting the rights of citizens and defending the rule of law.

Mass Media Role in Consolidating Democracy in Nigeria

The media, throughout the history of Nigeria have always been in the forefront of the struggle to establish democracy in the country. Lending credence to this assertion, Obilade (1999:235), opined that the “press in Africa constitutes an active force in the realization of the goal of the evolution of sustainable democracy in the continent of Africa. He also observed That the press in Africa is playing a prominent role in the democratization process in African states which have non-democratic governments” Going back to the history of the country, during colonial period, it is an establish fact that the media is the main agent with which the Nigerian nationalists used to struggle for independence, and by extension the enthronement of democracy in Nigeria. Nigeria nationalist leaders like Chief Anthony Enahoro and Chief M.C.K Ajuluchuku used their newspapers as veritable weapons to fight against and dethrone colonialism and establish an independent democratic Nigeria. This giant stride by the Nigerian media was carried all through to the first, second, third, and fourth republics respectively. Even during the periods of military rule, Nigerian media fought gallantly for the restoration of democracy. This struggle culminated and usher the nation to a new era of the fourth republic in May 1999 with a former military head of state in the person of president Olusegun Obasanjo as the democratically elected leader of Nigeria.

As part of their constitutional role, the mass media are expected to mobilize the people to participate in the democratic process. This was aptly demonstrated by the Nigerian media during the period under review. For instance, immediately after the Abdulsalami Abubakar led government instituted the transition programme that usher in a new democratic government, the media swung into action by creating awareness on the electoral process. Massive voter’s education was carried out by the media to enlighten Nigerians on the need to participate in the electoral process. Ciboh (2010) in explaining this further noted that for citizens to meaningfully participate in the democratic process, they need to depend on the mass media to help them define, sort out complexities and participate meaningfully in the democratic process as informed participants. He went further to reiterate that even though other means of citizens education exist, the mass media are the most common source of information about elections in democracies and societies in transition around the world. In all the elections held in the country beginning from 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, and the just concluded

2015 elections, the mass media gave a substantial coverage of the elections. Political programmes and articles on newspapers and magazines became a prominent feature before, during and after the elections. The mass media also covered electoral cases that were taken to court by several political candidates who were not satisfied with the outcome of the elections.

In holding government accountable to the people, the Nigerian media through investigative journalism held so many politicians to account. According to Lwahas (2004:27) the media acts as a watchdog by uncovering political, economic and corporate corruption, alongside other forms of abuses of power or inept policies. This was exemplified in the series of senate gate scandals that were uncovered by the investigative prowess of the Nigerian media. Jibo and Okoosi-Simbine (2003) reported the speaker gate scandal that involved Alh. Salihu Buhari, the first speaker of House of Representatives in the Obasanjo presidency. *The News* magazine professionally pursued the allegations of certificates forgery until Buhari was forced to resign and was subsequently tried and convicted for perjury.

On the protection of the fundamental human rights of the people, the Nigerian Media fought vehemently well to ensure that those whose rights are violated are brought to face the wrath of the law. It is the duty of investigative journalists to search and uncover the truth regarding human rights abuses perpetrated by the government or its actors. Through investigative reporting the journalist can uncover hidden facts in relation to human rights violations, since the public has the right to know the truth concerning any event that goes on in the society. The mass media through their surveillance responsibility can monitor and report human rights violation. Through constant vigilance on infringement of human rights and by exposing police brutality and repression, the media would cause a significant members of the public to be aware of their fundamental human rights and seek justice when the need arise (Asemah *et al*, 2012). For instance, the Nigerian Tribune of Tuesday, 16 April, 2013 in its editorial captioned “still on police brutality” reported the killing of a pregnant woman in Akure, Ondo state, by a police man who had allegedly demanded a bribe from a commercial driver in whose vehicle the pregnant woman was killed. Reporting human rights abuses of this nature by the media will make the public know their rights and privileges as well as draw public attention to the issue.

One fundamental role of the mass media in a democracy is the formation and molding of public opinion. The mass media do this through setting agenda for public discussion. Umechukwu (2001:35) explains that for the mass media to sustain democracy there must be agenda setting for public debate on topical political issues. This would create participatory democracy and thus go a long way to guide citizens to either accept or reject policies initiated by the government. For instance, this was clearly exemplified during the third term debate of the former president Olusegun Obasanjo. The mass media through feature articles and broadcast media programmes

engaged Nigerians by educating them on the need to reject the president ambition to vie for another third term in office. Through media campaign, the people resisted the move and the inordinate ambition of the president die a natural death.

Furthermore, the mass media are the fulcrum of all forms of democracy. This submission is on the premise that in a democratic society, the media operate as the market place of ideas for political thought. They likewise ensure that the citizens are well informed about political process and developments in the society. In doing this, the media are generally engaged in political reporting. Political reporting is necessary for the sustenance of democracy where the system of check and balances is required for good governance and democratic sustainability. It affords the media the opportunity to provide an open forum for “legitimated interest groups” to participate in public affairs (Umaru & Abdullahi, 2012:34). In order to keep the people current on political issues the Nigerian media came up with series of political programmes to sensitize the people and awoken political consciousness in them. For example, the broadcast media design programmes like “the president explains”, Political platform, inside the Senate, Democracy today, and Radio Link, presidential media chart, and a host of other political programmes fashion out to educate the citizens on political issues. These programmes have succeeded in creating awareness about government policies and programmes.

Challenges of Mass Media in Consolidating Democracy in Nigeria

The performance of the Nigerian mass media right from the first Republic to the present one could be described as a combination of both success and failures. This is because in preserving and consolidating the hard earn democracy the media struggled and fought to reestablished, there are a plethora of encumbrances the media is facing which serve as impediments in stabilizing Nigerian democracy. The media is constantly been pressured from the public, political parties, interest groups, and the government respectively. This pressure usually results in a situation where the media is force to take side in reporting national events in order to promote the interest of a particular party or interest group. According to Ogbu (2013:265) these problems render the mass media environment uncondusive for professional and effective media practice. He also notes that mass media practitioners are almost reduced to a zero level of independence. In his view Ende (2013) quoting Adesoji (2010:43) lamented that despite the vibrancy of the Nigerian media, the differentiation of press and its inclinations towards politics have continued to influenced its functionality, perception and disposition by the virtue of the issues surround its ownership and control or its sympathy, the press in Nigeria has remained essentially the stale old wine in new bottle despite all attempts at repackaging. Thus, there is much dependence on external influences such as government control and ownership of the mass media content. This situation is very pronounced in government owned media establishments where news stories are slanted, putting spin on stories, “fiction writing and partisanship has become the norm in contemporary media practice.

Closely related to the above is the dearth of critical and objective analysis on issues especially if it involves the government. Commenting on this issue Ojo (2015) articulates that in assessing the media coverage of the 2011 elections, the UNDP-sponsored study found that the coverage of the election was not issue based; the media was not sufficiently critical in analyzing the various campaign promises made by the political parties or their candidates. He further states that the media demonstrated weakness in investigative journalism; most times the media had failed to distinguish between the official and political campaigns activities of incumbents like governors; generally, government owned media severally and commonly violates the provisions of the electoral act, professional code of ethics and the Nigerian political broadcasting codes. For example, several political candidates from the opposition parties had complained that states government broadcast stations hardly air the jingles and political adverts of the opposition party in their radio and television stations. Even though complains about this situation was directed at the regulatory body that oversee this activities but nothing has been done about it. This clearly negates the principle of democratic values and thus will not promote our democratic culture.

Ethnicity is also another challenge that Nigerian media is grappling with at the present. According to Okpeh (2005:167), “ethnicity has challenged and is still challenging the profession of journalism in Nigeria. The tenacity of this phenomenon has however, compounded the dilemma of journalists, since it puts disrepute to their professional ethics and sense of moral and social responsibility”. The problem of ethnicity has taken deep root in the polity of the nation. A cursory look at the historical development of the media industry will attest to the fact that the issue has been manifested right from the previous republics. Okpeh (2005:165) describes this term as “Axis question” and the “North / South dichotomy which fuel ethnic consideration over and above national interest. According to Galadima and Enighe (2001:67) the mass media in the first republic were not harmonized. The media were tribally and regionally or sectional bias in their coverage of national events. And the aftermath of this posture led to divisions of the press into various geopolitical areas. Jibo (2003:52) cited in Iwokwagh (2011) observes that “when a national issue enters the public domain for debate, the Nigerian media often takes North verses South position on it” He further laments the situation where ethnicity has been used, especially in recent times to excuse excessive of government.

Another example of media sentimentalism was reflected in the coverage of the crisis that precipitated the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election which was acclaimed to be the fairest election ever held in the history of Nigeria which M.K.O Abiola gallantly won the elections. The South – South and the South – Western media were against the annulment. So they went ahead and announced the result. But the Northern media, because of tribal and regional biases, supported the cancellation. The Southern media were in support of chief MKO Abiola of the Social Democratic Party

(SDP), while their Northern counterpart went for Alhaji Bashir Tofa of the National Republic Convention (NRC). The mass media as at that time displayed a high level of lack of unity and oneness, which could help democracy to grow (Ogbu, 2013:267).

Furthermore, the current security challenge in the country is posing a huge threat to the practice of journalism and the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria. This situation is particularly heightened by the activities of insurgency in recent times. The activity of the Boko Harm sect is gradually affecting the media industry in the country. The group at various times had issue warnings to media institutions and journalists across the country. For example, On April 26 2012, a suicide bomber hit *ThisDay* Newspaper office in Abuja. Two people were killed while thirteen other people were injured; among them was a twelve year old kid. Shortly after the *ThisDay* incident, another boom blast was reported to have occurred in Kaduna. The blast affected a plaza housing the offices of *ThisDay*, *The Moment*, and *The Sun* Newspaper respectively (*Daily Trust*, April 27, P.5). This attack is a threat to the fundamental obligation of the press in performing their responsibility of reporting and gathering news for public consumption. If this threat is not quickly addressed by the government, it has the tendency of affecting free flow of information in the society.

Corruption is yet another monster that has eaten deep into the activities of the mass media in Nigeria, and which is a threat to the sustenance of democracy. It has been observed that corruption has compromised the capacity of the media to effectively champion social engineering in Nigeria. One of the recurrent problems that have continued to plague Media practice in the context of Nigeria democracy is the issue of corruption among media men. Alemoh (2011) reported that Nigeria media practitioners have been accused on several occasions in regards to issues of bribery, corruption, and a host of other unethical behavior in the discharge of their day to day duties of reporting News events. More often journalists demand “brown envelopes” after undertaken an assignment. Some even sacrifice the ethics of the profession on the altar of bribery and corruption by either killing of news stories or writing fictitious stories just to promote the image of a political figure.

Lastly, it is worthy to mention that Most Nigerian media houses are not well equipped with modern communication equipment. Poor infrastructural facilities and antiquated gadgets are still been used to disseminate information. Hence Nigeria is still battling to meet the deadline set for digital transmission. The factor responsible for this development is largely attributed to government lack of political will to embark on the transformation of the media industry and corruption that is prevalent among government officials. Okpeh (200:635) painfully notes that “in a globalizing world characterized by competition to hook on to the stupendous breakthroughs in information technology and application, it is common sight in Nigeria to see journalist hopelessly relying on equipments acquired several decades ago”. This unfortunate

development has tremendously affected the quality of information the media dish out to the Nigerian public.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Today, we can safely boast that democracy is gradually taken root in Nigeria with the successful transition from one democratically elected government to another on May 29, 2015. However, we can't say Nigeria democracy has developed, as the mass media must work assiduously hard to sustain the democratic successes we have achieved thus far. To further consolidate the success recorded by the mass media so far, the government must take some deliberate and concrete steps in overhauling the entire media industry in the country. First, priority must be given to the welfare of media practitioners. Nigerian media practitioners are among the least paid in the world. The government must look intently into this issue if they would be motivated to give their best to sustain democracy. Better training and timely payments of journalist's salaries will moderate the tendency to be driven by the imperative of "stomach infrastructure" as the play their trade (Adibe, 2015).

Closely related to the above is the provision of modern communication equipments. In today's technology driven world, Nigeria mass media cannot afford to be lacking behind in this respect. We therefore call on the Federal government to be proactive in ensuring that the deadline set for broadcast stations in Nigeria to switch over transmission from analogue to digital service is achievable. To this end, increase funding of allocations to media stations should be encourage as well as be strictly monitored to ensure that the disbursed funds are appropriately utilized.

The media industry needs to properly position itself and put its house in order so as to sustain democracy in Nigeria. The unending cases of corruption and unethical practices perpetrated by media practitioners should be squarely address by journalism regulating bodies like the Nigeria press council (NPC), Nigerian Union of journalist (NUJ), Nigeria Guild of Editors (NGE), and National Broadcasting Commission (NBC). Strict adherence to professional practice should be enforce among members. And all legal frictions inhibiting the prosecution of earring members should be addressed. The ability of these regulatory bodies to sanction media practitioners, especially when done fairly, can moderate the centrifugal pulls of media institutions with irredentist inclinations. When media men discharge their duties with a sense of responsibility to the Nigerian people and in the best professional manner, they will further strengthen and sustain the hard earn democracy they fought to achieve.

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