

**COMMERCIALISATION OF NEWS CONTENT IN NIGERIAN BROADCAST
MEDIA INDUSTRY**

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Introduction

Ideally, broadcast media organizations should exist to serve public interest. However, recent journalism practice in Nigeria seems to be plagued with the malady of news commercialization. What this portends is that only the rich will get their ideas communicated to the public thus relegating the common to the background. Media organizations are undeniably expected to protect the public interest of their audiences. Although Azeez (2009) posits that news organization in our contemporary capitalist time are established on profit making motive; perhaps, unarguably, less on the motive of serving the interest of the public for which they are institutionalized. This negates public interest. Napoli (2001, P.1), explains that within the United States it has long been recognized that the Mass Media industries have an ethical obligation to make positive contributions in terms of public service and democratic processes. Within the context of broadcasting "this public service dimension of mass media industries has been taken a step further, with broadcasters operating under a government imposed mandate to serve the public interest, convenience, or necessity" (communications Act of 1934).

According to Asogwa and Asemah (2012, P.3) news is increasingly becoming a commodity valued for its role in informing or persuading the public on political, social, cultural and economic issues. Thus, in modern journalism practice, news is commercialized to the extent that only the rich get their ideas communicated to the members of the public. They further explained in succinct terms that:

News commercialization means that news has become a commodity, which can be bought by those who have the money so that their voices can be heard. News has automatically become a commercial product to the detriment of important developments.

Puhringer et al (2008) posits that, mass media are normatively expected to provide relevant, diverse, pluralistic and carefully investigated information to the public. Furthermore, the media should place relevant information within a broader context, within diverse perspectives, and should provide commentary about its various characteristics. In this respect, media play a vital role in the functioning of democratic societies, as they substantively inform citizens about politics (Picard 1998; Croteau and Hoynes 2001; Puhringer et al 2008). However, media – especially privately owned media – are also economically driven institutions and need to behave in an economically rational manner. These two conflicting tasks – contributing to the functioning of democracy and being commercially successful challenge media companies to find a balance “between the public interest and their own financial self interest” (Picard 1998:337). These two tasks are inextricably linked with each other, only financially strong companies have the resources to act independently and to offer a wide range of information.

As Croteau and Hoynes (2001, P.31) put it, commercialization of the media industry is not a new phenomenon, but it is one that has accelerated. In the scientific debate, there is a broad consensus that media are increasingly oriented towards economic goals, rather than on their contribution to the function of democracy.

In his own contribution, Baym (2008, P.2) says "Media conglomeration has been driven by the interest of increasing shareholder value, conglomeration has been accompanied by widespread commercialization of all media forms not as a public service, but as for profit products (commercialization of the media)."

Market Theory of News production.

The Frankfurt school, in the 1940s, had condemned the commoditization of art, in their pessimistic and elite critique of popular culture. Adorno and Horkheimer (1947), who were the prominent members of the school, expressed their resentment in the way popular culture had been turned into commodities, in which the primary motive is not only to manipulate the masses, but also to make profit from the products they were being given by the cultural industry (Azeez, 2009; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1947 pp. 72-123). Nobody could have envisaged that such blatant commodification of art would soon extend to news production and delivery. It all started in the United States during the first third of the 19th century when rising literacy and the invention of the steam engine made possible the mass or ‘penny’ press (McManus, 1994). Just as it did with the art, the commodification of news then, according to Moth (1962:234), brought in “bad taste; coarseness which sometimes became indecency; overemphasis on crime and sex; and disreputable advertising were outstanding sins of these papers”. What started then has now become the order of the day, and it has been variously theorized to understand the phenomenon better. The phenomenon has been placed within the context of the political economy theory, which, according to Murdock and Golding (1974), “the operation of media organizations [in today’s world of business drive] is circumscribed by the general economy and political contexts within which they are embedded with the result that the range of information, imagery and interpretative frame works they relay tends to be restricted, repetitive and ultimately consonant with the interests of dominant group”.

MaManus (1994) simplifies this theoretical framework set out by Murdock and Golding by specifying it with the news production. Thus, according to

For MaManus (1994:85), the market theory of news production entails that “to the extent that the business goal of maximizing profit dominates, news department1 should [will] compete with each other to offer the least expensive mix of content that protects the interests of sponsors and investors while garnering the largest audience advertisers will pay to reach”. The foregoing theoretical outline has clearly exposed the mechanics of the commercial imperatives or pressures under which news organization operate, leaving nobody in the dark about resultant effects of such imperatives on not only on the news organization, but also the public they serve (Azeez, 2009).

Conceptualisation of Commercialization of News in the Nigerian Broadcast Media Industry.

In 1986, Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) was introduced in Nigeria. Ugande (2011) says, this was in consonance with the deregulation of the economy. Consequently, government subvention to public enterprises dropped. A number of enterprises both private and public, but particularly public, began to experience the hard knocks of economic hardship. The Mass Media particularly public service Radio and Television which had hitherto relied on solely government subventions, were the first to receive the shocking effects of S.A.P. The government reduction in subvention at once led them to many difficulties. Among those were:

- Inability to payoff salaries.
- Inability to procure equipment
- They could no longer service their equipment.

Thus, NTA and FRCN were left with no alternative than to devise several other means of making money to cope with stringent economic measures embarked upon by the government. One such means was the commercialization of news in the broadcast media. This is now being practiced throughout the country. News commercialization in the broadcast media is "A phenomenon whereby electronic media report as news or news analysis a commercial message by an unidentified or unidentifiable sponsor, giving the audience the impression that the news is fair, objective and socially responsible (all couched in journalistic ethics" (Ekwo, 1996; Ugande 2011).

Furthermore, Ugande says news commercialization refers to a situation where individuals, communities, private and public enterprises, non-profit making organizations, local governments, state governments and ministries gain access to the mass media during news time for a prescribed fee. The message they want to put across is then couched in a news form and included in the news bulletin. Also news analysis, news commentary can be bought by prospective customers who remain unidentified. (Ekwo, 1996).

Arguments for and against News Commercialization.

Advocates of news commercialization adduce some reasons for such a gesture. They say:

- That news commercialization generates revenue for stations to enable the management run them on a day to day basis and even beyond.
- That it serves to checkmate unnecessary demands by individuals or even organizations of the media to publish what is not in the interest of the public.
- That it gives the station some form of autonomy since less reliance on the government.
- That it earns legitimate income to journalists who take 10% of any money they attract to the station.

Critics of this gesture disagree with the above reasons and contend that the negative effects of news commercialization far outweigh such reasons advanced above by proponents. In this present discourse, the researcher aligns himself with critics of news commercialization because of its negative impacts on many planes which Ekwo (1996) in Uganda (2011) has identified as follows:

- Ethical plane
- Media credibility
- News commercialization leads to censorship and gate keeping problem for the editor.
- Another danger of news commercialization is its effects on the flow of information.
- National Development
- Definition of news rendered useless – news becomes what money can buy.

This underscores the reason why the National Broadcasting Commission in exercise of its powers wrote to all Broadcast media organizations on September 10, 2013 to put a halt to recent trends on our airwaves where broadcast stations take paid or sponsored announcements as news items within the news especially political and other related advertisements. This is clearly a breach of the general guidelines on news as encapsulated in section 5.1.3 of the Nigerian Broadcasting code which states that:

As news, in all its forms, is universally accepted as sacred, sponsorship of news casts, commentaries, analysis, current affair programmes and editorials detract from the integrity and predispose a bias in favour of the sponsors. Therefore, news programmes shall not be sponsored in any manner including the use of commercial backdrops.

In addition, section 5.1.18 of the code stipulates that: “commercial in news and current affairs programmes shall be clearly identified and presented in a manner that shall make them clearly distinguishable”. Despite the stand of National Broadcasting Commission on this issue, Nigerian Broadcast Stations are finding it difficult to comply with this directive because of the enormous challenges they are facing to keep their stations running. One major challenge is that of advertisers who insist that whatever they are sponsoring must be presented within the news belt.

Empirical Review of Literature.

Empirical review of literature refers to all information gathered from empirical works especially journal article. Lwanga (2002) set out to determine the extent to which commercialization, in the era of liberalization and commercialization of media services, in Uganda, has affected Radio Uganda's programming. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods of investigation, it was established that while Radio Uganda still maintains certain public service principles and values, programming policy has increasingly been changed by commercial considerations. This is shown by the recent rise of commercial programmes and a fall in education and development programmes. Limitations of finance and other resources have compromised the roles and character of public service radio programming. The majority of programmes currently on Radio Uganda are evidently geared to attract advertisers rather than serve the public interest. The study recommends that license fee be developed as a source of revenue for Radio Uganda. Secondly, government should inject more funding into public service broadcasting institution to supplement other sources of income, before granting them autonomy. Thirdly, while advertising and sponsoring brings in considerable amount of revenue, it should not take place in such a manner as to that undermines the listener's interest in Radio programming. The broadcasting council should therefore map out solid policies that will systematically guide Radio Uganda in its programming in the new order.

In the same vein Chernov (2010) employed a two – phase study which deals with phenomenon of “stealth advertising” in Canada. This phenomenon refers to encroachment of commercially timed messages in broadcast news segment. Different theories of commercial speech were used as a theoretical framework. The study combined mixed methods, content analysis and in-depth interviews. The first phase concentrated on the frequency and actual time spent airing commercially influenced messages in television newscast segments.

The sample consisted of eight randomly selected English language markets across Canada including news affiliated with Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Canadian Television (CTV) and Global. Seventy –five news cast were recorded and content analysed. The analysis demonstrated that private Television stations used more explicit and aggressive stealth advertising than publicly owned ones. In subsequent interviews, the news directors and sales managers of some of these stations denied that they yield to outside commercial pressure but admitted they may include messages with commercial content if these have public interest value. In the second phase thirty – nine newscasts of a news station affiliated with Global were recorded and content analyzed showing high numbers of commercially influenced messages and corroborating previous research findings. Subsequent interviews showed some news decision – makers accept the inclusion of commercially tinted time segments, thus eroding the wide divide between editorial and commercial contents. The study was intended to contribute to the empirical basis for pursuing the question of corruption of news content.

Relatively, Huang, Davies and Knight (n.d) established that as a result of Post – Mao China's market oriented socio-economic reforms in general and media

commercialization in particular in the past two decades, media structure in China has become increasingly diverse. This has been typically reflected in this sharp rise of the newly commercialized news media sector which represented one of the most significant changes in post – Mao Chinese journalism (Huang, 2001; Zhao, 1998). Generally, current Chinese news media can be divided into two major categories: traditional party news media (consist of party newspapers, main radio and television station, and the party’s key political periodicals that are directly controlled by and to be responsible to, the Chinese communist party’s propaganda departments at various levels), and commercialized news media (normally belong to and are supervised by major party news media, government departments of their sub-units or semi – official civilian organizations such as women associations trade unions, scientific research institutions, or enterprises).

Instead of imposing a homogeneous and monolithic regulation policy on the country’s substantial media industry, post Mao Chinese authority, while generally focusing their controls on party’s news media have significantly revealed their controls over newly commercialized news media (Chan, 1993; Chu 1994). The newly commercialized news outlets are generally no longer required to “carry ideological propaganda”, and censorship standards were to be spelt out in a non – ideological and more specific guidelines to [be] implemented by administrative departments rather than CCP (Chinese Communist Party Chan, 1993: 254). Consequently, they enjoy considerable higher autonomy’ in topic selection and contents than their counterparts in the party news sector.

From the avalanche of literature reviewed it is obvious that the malaise of news commercialization has bedeviled many countries of the world Nigeria not an exception. However, the researcher observed that scholarly contributions on commercialization of news in Nigerian Broadcast Media Industry are few. This then underscores the reason for this modest effort.

Papathanassopoulos (2001) analysed the effects of media commercialization and market expansion in Greek journalism and argues that although journalism appears to be a profession which plays a more active social and political role in Greece, giving the impression that it sets the agenda and represents the ordinary citizen it is heavily influenced by the constraints imposed by the news organizations. The article first discusses to what extent the “professional model” of journalism can be applied to all countries. Second, it provides a brief account of the contemporary media landscape. It then discusses the implications of media commercialization on Greek journalism drawing from original and other research.

Asogwa and Asemah (2012) avers that, in recent journalism practice, news is increasingly becoming a commodity valued for its role in informing or persuading the public on political, social, cultural and economic issues. Thus, in modern journalism practice news is commercialized to the extent that only the rich get their ideas communicated to the public. This in turn, affects objective journalism practice, both in the print and in the electronic media, thereby, negatively impacting or democracy. The survival of democracy depends on the flow of information to the people. Objective journalism practice is needed in democracy. The journalist decides which information will go forward and which will not. Important to realize is that journalists are able to

control the public's knowledge of the actual events by letting some stories pass through the system, while keeping others out.

The paper therefore evaluates the impact of news commercialization on objective journalism practice and how in turn, it affects the sustenance of democracy. That is, whether it has negative or positive impact on democracy in Nigeria. The paper examines the rationale behind news commercialization vis-a-vis its dangers and implications on the sustenance of Nigeria's democracy; it is anchored on gate – keeping theory and the social responsibility theory. In conclusion, the paper proffers solutions on how to better practice journalism that will earn the goodwill and confidence of the people and contributing positively to democracy, not only in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The broadcast media organizations are undeniably expected to protect the public interest of their audiences. However, it is observed that recent journalism practice in Nigeria is plagued with the malaise of news commercialization. The implication being that it is only the rich that can get their ideas communicated to the public. Although commercialization of media industry is not a new phenomenon, but it is one that has accelerated. News commercialization means that news has become a commodity, which can be bought by those who have the money so their voices can be heard. But, commercialization of news is not in the best interest of journalism practice neither is it in the best interest of the people, who are being short changed in the quality of the news information they are provided, the access they are given, the diversity provided. Although there are divergent opinions between those for and against on the issue. It is the contention of the researcher that news commercialization under any guise should be condemned, exposed and curtailed for the interest of the public.

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