

ECONOMIC INFLUENCES ON MEDIA PRACTICES IN NIGERIA: A CLASSICAL MARXIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The present economic challenges in Nigeria has worsened media struggle for survival. Nigerian mass media are constantly engaging on unnecessary praising of members of the political class and propagating campaign of calumny and negative media coverage on perceived opposition members of the political structure. This elitist dominance and hegemony of media contents in Nigeria has continued unabated without recourse to their watchdog role as members of the fourth estate of the realm. This has resulted in having the mass media working and serving only the interest of the members of the ruling class in the society while the interest of the common man are being jeopardised, neglected and ignored. This paper adopted the political economic theory which indicts the mass media in the production, reproduction and legitimating ideas of the members of the ruling class who in most cases have the economic capacity to own, control, sponsor advertisement and foot the bills needed for the production and distribution of media to its consumers. This paper concluded that economic influences are greatly responsible for the distorted media contents we get in our mass media today and as such, advice media consumers to exercise due care in the course of consumption. The paper recommended government intervention in the media sector by injecting funds to help reduced these economic influences and encourage an independent media.

Keyword: *Media, Economic Influences, Ownership, Political Economy, Content Distortion.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The present economic hardship and recession in Nigeria is biting so hard even in the media sector. The competitive environment coupled with the struggle for survival worsened the elitists' dominance and control of the media. There clearly is an unending relationship between the economy and the media.

Udoakah (1993) observed that the media in Nigeria cannot survive without the economy.

Huge funds are required for the procurement of raw materials, production expenses, hiring personnel, administrative costs, maintenance and distribution of media contents to its final consumers. These funds are largely generated through revenue from advertising and subvention from interest groups which is why the mass media often produce protective rather than critical analysis about the current situation of the economy, because those who own the mass media at the same time control the economy.

The Nigerian environment is not economically friendly for media practice, and therefore making an independent media free from external controls obviously becomes impossible. No doubts to Olusanjo (2012) observation that the nature of the society determines to a large extent the kind of media systems they will have. The economic realities of media operation in Nigeria had subjected it to pervasive influences and control. Altschull (1984) posited that the media operators tended to serve the selfish interests of their paymasters (the elites) and, at the same time, portraying a deceiving image of being at the service of its consumers.

Due to these elitists influence, Altschull (1984) insisted that an independent media is impossible because the media are "agents of the people who exercise political and economic control" (p. 299). That is to say that, no matter the benevolence of the government, or the democratic principles of the society and advancement, the mass media are usually subjected to some form of economic control from the Elites and those who hold and operate the power apparatus. A resultant effect in Nigeria according to Udoakah (1993) is eminent on media products concentrating on the speeches

of the public officers, seminars and conferences organised by members of the ruling class as well as scandals involving rival political camps. There's no wonder why Sir Frank Cooper, a member of British Defence Department genuinely admitted:

We do not produce the full truth and the full truth and the full story. And you, as a politician, know as well as anyone else that on many occasions the news is handled by everybody in the politics in a way that redounds to their advantage (The Listener 1982 cited in Udoakah, 1993)

These influences by the political class were demonstrated in the findings of Altschull (1984). He states that:

- In all press systems, the news media are agents of the people who exercise political and economic power.
- The content of the news media always reflects the interests of those who finance the press.
- The schools of Journalism transmit ideologies and value systems of the society in which they exist and inevitably assist the people in power in maintaining their control over the news media.
- Media practices always differ from theory.

This political control over the media lingers in Nigeria due to the media's proven ability to serve as an instrument in order to gain power and maintain the political power. This impression belonging to political power brokers led to an increased use of the media in order to advance their political interests and aggrandisement in the society. Ibraheem, Ogwezzy-Ndisika and Tejumaiye (2015, p.1) observed that the political situation in Nigeria looks like this:

those who hold sway of political power and authority are always conscious of the fact that information management and control is central to the capturing, retention and exercise of political power. The larger implication of this is that the ownership, control and accessibility to the media are considered to be critical to the wielding and sustenance of political power.

According to Ramos (1982), the elites of a particular society who have the economic power and control over the media diffuses what he calls the organic ideology throughout civil society by

promoting and protecting class interests and practices into a unified system of socioeconomic relations. Payne (2008) observed that the media uses gate-keeping and agenda-setting processes to reflect and protect the interest of the elites who often own and provide resources used to run these media. The economic power that these elites enjoys over the media degenerated a situation in which the mass media are dominated by political, economic and social elites who adversely contribute to information deprivation and homogenization of news content in mainstream media and limiting dialogic options, critical to democracy. Hence, the resultant effects of these economic control in the mainstream news media is "homogenization of content, justifying the status quo, and marginalizing minorities, curtailing expression of dissident viewpoints, naturalizing a distorted reality, and restricting dialectical possibilities available for public discourse" (p.55). McChesney (2002) also argued that these homogenizing forces exerted on the media content in democracies could also abridge the realization of the right and are similar in hegemonic effect to those operating upon media artefacts of authoritarian regimes.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted the Political economy theory to drive it towards a theoretical framework. As defined in Mosco (1995), "political economy is the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources". This theory has a certain practical value because it calls attention on how the media operates, for example, how media products move through a chain of producers, to wholesalers, retailers, and, finally consumers (MOSCO, 1996).

The first application of the political economy approach in the field of communications can be traced to the work of Harold Innis, when he introduced the idea of "knowledge monopolies," to describe how overtime certain powerful social groups enjoyed excessive control of various types of information made available through the media. Innis explained how media could affect

social dynamics based on the type of media used to maintain knowledge monopolies.

The term “political economy” in the media, according to Boyd-Barrett (2010), questions the issue of media ownership and control, which brings about interlocking directorship and other factors that link the media with political economic and social elites. This theory considers the processes of consolidation, diversification, commercialisation, internationalisation, profit motive, hunt for audiences and advertising on the one hand and its inherent consequences for media practices and media contents.

The first appeared in media research in a study by Murdock and Golding (1973). The political economy theory focuses on the ways in which the media content is produced, distributed and consumed, rather than on analysing the interpretations of the signs and symbols found within texts. Media contents are often produced contingent to systems which are not merely an ideologically neutral form of exchange, but are conditioned by a range of complex interactions and economic pressures.

Consequently, Kellner and Durham (2001, p.19) contended that the political economic theory is one which emphasizes the way capitalist societies are being organised and help investigate the “constraints and structuring influence of the dominant capitalist economic system and a commercialised system of culture. Inserting texts into the system of culture in which they are produced and distributed can help elucidate features and effects of the texts that textual analysis alone might miss or downplay”. Political Economy focuses on the ways and manner in which media content are being produced, distributed and consumed, rather than on a mere analysis and interpretations of the signs and symbols found within texts.

3. MEDIA OWNERSHIP INFLUENCE

Print or broadcast media are usually owned and controlled by individuals, government, group of individuals, etc. Ownership of the media is the paternity or possession of a medium of communication. This paternity may evolve as a result of partial or total financing of a medium

either by an individual, an organization or a government. As observed by Edeani (1985), the pattern of ownership of the mass media is crucial in determining the strength or weakness of the press. The reasons for ownership and control of the media may be to achieve and maintain political power and control of the masses. The media thus serves as a propaganda agent that will not publish something against its owners. It could also aim to achieve economic goals (RAUFU, 2003; KANYIWEDO, 2013).

Marxists believe that media owners (who are chiefly members of the capitalist elite) use their media outlets to transmit ruling class ideology. **Miliband** (1973) argued that the media deviated from its role, shaping what and how the people think about the world around them. But instead the audiences are malnourished of vital information on issues such as inequalities in wealth or why poverty still persists. All the media does is to protect the interest of their paymasters. Therefore, they can rarely criticise or challenge capitalist system. Instead, Marxists suggest that owners shape media content so that only the ‘approved’ and conformist views are heard.

Media ownership by huge corporations in a capitalist economy limits and alters the form of mass culture distributed through those media. Marxists strongly disagree with the ownership and economic realities of the media. There is an understanding that ‘he who pays the piper detects the tune’. The mass media were controlled by the dominant class in the society and are used in exerting the control of that class over the rest of the society.

Curran (2003) cited in Revisionworld.com (2017) noted that the ownership of British newspapers has been concentrated in the hands of a few powerful ‘press barons’. However, Marxists suggest that media owners, wealth holders and the political elite are united in some sort of ideological conspiracy to brainwash the general population, taking advantage of the economic powers they have over the media. Marxists argued that those in control of the infrastructure will definitely control the superstructure (media). **Tunstall and Palmer** (1991) cited in Revisionworld.com (2017) suggested that governments are no longer interested in controlling the activities of media owners because

they need their support to either gain power or hang onto it.

Media ownership in Nigeria started in private hands ever before government got interested in mass media. Reverend Henry Townsend, an Anglican missionary, established the first newspaper in Nigeria, *Iwe Irohin* in 1859. Other newspapers followed suit to tap the gains of the growing interest in reading and western education. Additionally, the urge for self-government spurred Nigerians to organize mass movements to challenge colonial repression. Mass media appeared as a second tool used to challenge colonialism. However, before 1992, media ownership was under the government until Babangida took over as the president (Apuke, 2016). Successive governments according to the way in which they control what gets to the masses made unfavourable laws to limit the powers of the media. According to Nwachukwu (1998, p.46), "these pernicious laws and decrees against the media gave government officials legal backing to persecute, fine, detain, and imprison journalists, and to proscribe media houses".

The mass media in Nigeria have, no doubt, gone through trying times and has become very strong and audacious and has built itself a great name. The success of achieving independence in Nigeria is greatly attributed to the persuasive power of the media. The media had in the past fought hard to liberate the Nigerian society from the shackles of colonialism and oppressive leaders. It is believed that the media served a great force and constitute a potent opposition to government in power in Nigeria (UKONU, 2005).

However, politicians and other power brokers who control the economic sector have in a great way succeeded in using their economic might and power to influence mass media contents. Economic institutions now shape the media to suit their selfish interests and purposes (BARAN, 2002).

According to Jika (1990) the mass media in any given society is controlled and influenced by the ruling class and that the ruling class uses the media to entrench and disseminate its own values and ideas. Conversely, the dominant class utilizes the instrument of communication to

subordinate the values and ideas of the subordinated class. The capitalist system is rarely criticised or challenged. Instead, Marxists suggested that owners shape media content so that only 'approved' and conformist views are heard.

Marxists in Revisionworld (2017) argued tenaciously that:

The economic system of Britain, i.e. capitalism, is characterised by great inequalities in wealth and income which have been brought about by the exploitation of the labour power of the working classes. Marxists believe that in order to legitimate and reproduce this system of inequality, the capitalist class uses its **cultural power** to dominate institutions like education and the mass media and transmit **ruling class** ideology. The function of these agencies is to socialise the working class into accepting the legitimacy of the capitalist system and capitalist ideas. Consequently, Marxists argue working class people experience **false class-consciousness** – they come to accept that capitalism is a just system that benefits all social groups equally. They fail to see the reality of their situation that they are being exploited by a system that only benefits a powerful minority.

Marx and Engels (1976, p. 44) argued that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production".

4. ADVERTISEMENT AND SUBVENTION INFLUENCE

Another way the elites exert economic control over the media is through advert placement. This is because advertisement is the primary source of revenue and life wire of media existence and practise, without which its activities are grounded for paucity of funds. To survive, the media depends on advertising and the sponsorship of elites in the form of subvention and subscription.

The media need advertisers' patronage so much to keep their business going. The media are often controlled directly or indirectly by the activities of the advertisers who the media could readily suppress the news content in their favour in order to sustain their patronage. Special preferences in most cases are given to the advertisers for obvious economic benefits and to ensure that the money continues to stay in the business (Kanyiwedo, 2013).

A study belonging to Axhami and Mersini (2015) attributed the inability of the media to gain complete independence of its contents on the influence of advertising used by the government and other large corporations. Innis (1991) added that those who control knowledge have the power to define reality.

Another study by Gal-or, Geylani and Yildirim (2011), observed that "when advertising supplements subscription fees, it may serve as a polarizing or moderating force, contingent upon the extent of heterogeneity among advertisers in appealing to readers having different political preferences" (p.1). Advertisers often threaten to pull out of a particular media outfit where their interests are not being protected in order to enforce compliance. With the current economic recession and the competitive media survival especially among the private media sector, losing a big advertiser is the worst that can happen at this time and everything humanly possible has to be done in order to maintain existing advertisers and attract potential ones.

This influence of advertising leads to the distortion and fine-tuning of media contents in favour of the members of the ruling class. The resultant effect is this homogeneity of media contents as posited in Payne (2008). We shall have a media with an impoverished ideological diversity favouring only the elites to the detriments of the common man and significantly abridging interpretations of the reality that can be reasonably assigned and debated by the media content consumers. This confirms the earlier position of Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) that the powerful interest groups in the society use mass media to exercise social control. They observed that the economic powers in the society seem to have reduced direct the exploitation of the masses to a more modified way of using the mass media as a tool for disseminating propaganda

and the institutional advertisement serve in place of intimidation and coercion. It is a pity that the "media have taken on the job of rendering mass publics confirmative to the social and economic status quo" (pp. 96-97). Social objectives are in most cases abandoned by commercial media when those objectives interfere with profits and that this economic pressure results in conformity by omitting sensitive issues (LAZARFELD & MERTON, 1948).

5. PROCUREMENT OF RAW MATERIALS AND PAYMENT OF PERSONNEL

Economic influences and limitations are indispensable in the operation of the media given the fact that the media operates in the society depending on material and human resources which has a lot to do with the economy in order to succeed. Media organizations as a matter of fact require huge amounts of money to achieve its goals of disseminating periodic information to the public. These economic constraints can be seen in the production and the distribution of media content to the end users.

They must also provide monthly salaries to their reporters, editors and other administrative staff in order to maintain the active working atmosphere. Media outlets rely on the subscription and subvention by elites in order to fulfil the needs of their workers and to procure the raw materials and other running expenses. Udoakah (1993) asserted that media operators rely on the government for favourable exchange rates, for the importation and procurement of raw materials used for production and distribution of media contents to its consumers.

It is obvious that the elites have developed various economic means in order -to remain in perpetual control of what the masses get through the media. This confirmed the earlier argument of Max and Engels (1848) that "the class which has the means of material production at its disposal has the control at the same time over the means of mental production" (p. 25). This makes it impossible to get a true public sphere because most media texts come from people with vested economic interests. As such, there is no neutral space for discussion in the media (Fordyce, 2013).

6. DISTRIBUTION OF MEDIA CONTENTS

This appears to be another way in which the economy exerts influence on media. The unfriendliness and economic hardship in Nigeria today is a thing of worry for media organisations. Media practitioners are confronted with the current economic realities of operating in an environment with over 300 % inflation rate. Hence, this makes the cost of the maintenance and payment of utility bills (especially electricity bills or generating set) needed for extremely difficult.

To successfully distribute media contents or reach target audiences is getting tougher by the day. The price of premium motor spirits and other fuels needed for the transportation and fuelling electricity generating sets is continually increasing. In Nigeria today, a litre of petrol goes for 145 naira as against 89 naira it was few months ago. This poses a serious economic challenge, therefore, making it difficult for media products to move from the point of production to the end users (especially the print medium), while the electronic media (Radio and Television) could reduce the hours the go on air due to this challenge.

7. CONCLUSION

The relationship between the economy and the media cannot be over emphasised. The economy is the life wire of the media. Because the media also depends on the economy in several ways: the purchase of raw materials, equipment, payment of internet bandwidth, fuel for the generators, ink for printing, payment of staff, distribution and circulation of contents etc. The elites have capitalised on this economic condition in order to exercise control over the operation and to regulate media contents.

Media contents have been construed, motivated and distorted to suit the interest of the ruling class. Created realities have been imposed on the masses by powerful individuals who want to keep the masses permanently under their control. The larger implication of this is having the media to distort and fine-tune their messages in order to protect the interest of their paymasters, who in most cases owned and induce the. The innocent masses are advised to exercise caution

in their daily consumption of media contents, as the content may be completely different from what it seems.

Recommendations

1. The government should inject more money in order to boost the private media sector to ameliorate the economic condition on the media.
2. The Nigerian Union of Journalists should live up to the expectations by enforcing ethical breaches on some media outlets.
3. There should be an appropriate legal mechanism to checkmate the activities of the media.

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