

Regulatory and Political Influence on Mass Media Operation in Nigeria

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Abstract: The media in Nigeria developed in different stages. The print media set the stage while the broadcast media followed after some years. The psychology and modus operandi of the print media at the time was transferred to the broadcast media. At the initial stage, the colonial government had little interest in the media; hence no government regulation was put in place. However, the print media from inception was influenced by politics. Ever since the *Iwe Irohin* was out of circulation after the *Egba* uprising, subsequent media outlets were influenced in one way or the other by politics. The selfish political interest of the newspaper proprietors then forced the colonial government to establish what can be regarded as the first media regulation; the newspaper ordinance of 1903. This sets the stage for media regulation and political influence in Nigeria. This paper explores the origin of political influence and government regulation of mass media in Nigeria, paying attention to how privatization and commercialization influence the nature of media operation in the country.

Keywords: Regulation, Influence, Control, Operation

INTRODUCTION

Mass media in Nigeria evolved over the years. This is because from the establishment of the first newspaper *Iwe Irohin* by Reverend Henry Townsend in 1859 to the stage of media commercialization in the 1990s, management and operation of media organizations in Nigeria have been topsy-turvy.

At the initial stage of the missionary dominated era, the operation and objective of the first media was to propagate the gospel and instill the culture of reading in the Yoruba community [1]. The management and operation of *Iwe Irohin* was solely private. The missionary determines the operation, content, pricing, circulation, and language of the newspaper. The colonial government had little or no interest in the ownership or establishment of any media organization. *Iwe Irohin* was nonpartisan at the initial stage, and this protected it from the political interest coupled with lack of interest in the media operation by the colonial government. Later on, Rev. Henry Townsend dabbled into politics and subjected the paper to political coloration. Expectedly, the paper was punished heavily as it wended off during the *Egba* political uprising [2, 3, 1].

The seed of Henry Townsend germinated in multiple folds as numerous newspapers hit the newsstand between 1880s and 1930s. Majority of these newspapers were privately owned. Their operation and modus operandi were dictated by their owners. For example, the nationalist movement established newspapers to promote their voice and garner support from the local and international environments. Also, different political parties owned media organizations to

promote and propagate their political ideology. This set the stage for political influence on media operation in Nigeria [4]. Mass media are a creation of technology. They have moved on for ages spurred by technology. New media technology heralds each age in human history ever since man perfected the art of writing. As creations of technology, mass media have become an integral and indispensable aspect of human society. A society without the mass media is unthinkable. The world owes the mass media great gratitude for making social, worldwide interactions possible. The place of mass media in modern society is obvious.

Interestingly, most societies have spent huge amount of time and resources to work out effective systems for using the mass media. However, some societies have left the media at the whims of rulers as they come and go. The mass media remain useless unless there is an effective system to harness and use them as instruments of social communication. The study of broadcasting regulation has started to creep into the edges of the media studies curriculum. This wind of change should be welcomed because it will aid the apprehension of the major forces that shape the communication environment. It has been noted that literature on media regulation were predominantly

produced by legal scholars following Eric Barendt's comparative study on law [5].

Globalization in the face of specialization necessitated probes in sections of the society by scholars in different areas. This is why media scholars cannot do without looking at issues as they concern media practices. An appraisal of the statutes of regulation of the Nigerian media industry is pertinent at this period when the whole world is talking about digitization of broadcasting. According to the deadline by International Telecommunication Union, (ITU), every broadcast station in the world would have switched over from analogue to digital broadcasting. Against this backdrop, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) (the regulatory body for broadcasting in Nigeria) set June 2012 as the switchover date for Nigeria [5]. However, this target was not achieved; hence another date had been set for the digital switchover.

Several issues have arisen from scholars and stakeholders since the announcement. But there are several advantages in the digitization policy, including the expected shoot up in the number of broadcast stations and the competitions that will follow. This circumstance and other bugging issues bring to the fore the paramount need to delve into the regulation realm of the Nigerian broadcast industry. The quest will no doubt engender comprehensibility on the populace and guide the regulators and stakeholders for effective broadcasting in the digital age.

Mass Media and Political Influence

Many media experts in Nigeria, Africa and indeed around the world agree that mass media have an influence on their audiences. However, the direction, nature and extent of this influence remain a source of disagreement. Thompson [6] noted that the mass media all over the world have established themselves as a new channel – a third channel for political, social, and economic influence – and in many aspects also as an independent power broker. The author believes that the media played a central role in the development of modern institutions. In contrast, Kupe [7] claims that in the African scenario the media have always been peripheral to the lives of most people in the continent. But Tetey [8] argues strongly that the media are among the forces that have shaped and continue to define the establishment of democracy in Africa.

On daily basis, Nigerians are constantly exposed to information, ideas, news, advertisements, messages, and ideologies from different media sources in the cause of their daily activities. Citizens have access to all sorts of information from the media such as radio, television, cable and satellite broadcast, broadband and mobile internet, social networks, smart and ordinary mobile phones, digital audio or video devices, newspapers, magazines, periodicals, journals,

books, and cinemas. One may ask why humans of all ages willingly expose themselves to this almost overload of information? One may equally answer that by its very nature, the media help members of the society to make some of their world. In addition, the media have functional roles in the political, social and cultural structures of the society including surveillance by acting as society's watchdog and directing members of the society to important societal issues [9].

Olayiwola [10] explains that the media provides news and sets the agenda for political, social and cultural discourse. It is important to note at this point that the sourcing of news and information in the Nigerian media has its peculiarities. These peculiarities render it incorrect to argue that issues canvassed in the Nigerian media and discussed in the Nigerian public sphere are the agenda of the media. Much of the local news and/or information disseminated in the Nigerian media originate from the ruling class who are referred to in the Nigerian media parlance as "news sources". News sources in Nigeria are dominated by the ruling class or petty bourgeois who are tagged "news makers". This class of individuals includes politicians, business executives, captains of industry, top civil servants, and other influential members of the ruling elite whose views and opinions dominate the daily news and public information in the country.

Interestingly, much of the news content and other media information in Nigeria are mostly dominated by the views and opinions of the ruling class tagged "news makers". Consequently, the commercialization of the media and news content, media control by the ruling elite, and political affiliations have become strong determining factors of media operation, which consequently result in politics having strong influence on the media in the country.

Media Ownership in Nigeria

There are basically two types of media ownership in Nigeria: public and private. The third form of ownership which is community radio is not fully available. In most cases, state owned radio stations are regarded as community radio in Nigeria. For example, some key local governments in Jigawa state have what they call community radio, which is an affiliate of Jigawa Broadcasting Corporation. It is pertinent to note that media ownership in Nigeria at inception is strictly private. Government involvement was at the later stage when the need for government owned and control media platform arose. Though the early government publication cannot be regarded as a conventional newspaper, it was argued that the government had to establish a formidable media organization to counter the narrative of the privately owned media organizations about the government [4].

Print Media Ownership in Nigeria

As stated earlier, media ownership in Nigeria started in private hands ever before the 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. In addition, the urge for self-government spurred Nigerians to organize mass movements to challenge colonial repression. Mass media appeared as the second tool used to challenge colonialism. In British colonies of the East, West and South Africa, the promise of eventual independence led the people to organize nationalist movements. The growth of these movements led directly to the birth of small newspapers [11].

It was the media that engineered the achievement of Nigeria's independence [12]. Before any media ownership laws were enacted, colonialism and the struggle for self-governance initiated private ownership of the mass media. It is believed that colonialism, Christianity, and nationalism worked together in shaping the nature of the media in Nigeria. Early press owners were Christian missionaries. The British government also went into publishing, though it did not float a full-fledge newspaper. Part of their communication structure in Nigeria was a form of colonial information handouts. In southern Nigeria, the colonial administration effectively used its periodical, the *Nigerian Gazette*, which was established in Lagos immediately the government took shape as from 1900 during which such publication became popular [13]. The *Gazette* was published in bond volumes like weekly or monthly magazines. Therefore, it was not a conventional publication.

While the British government wanted to spread information about its administration using its publication, mercantilist and nationalistic motives propelled the private press. Thus, the pungency of the early private press earned it the haughty eyes of government. The latter quickly responded with gagging laws. The Newspaper Ordinance of 1903 and the Seditious Offences Ordinance of 1909 were among such early laws. To date, the driving force of private press remains opposition to government misrule, ensuring the accountability and responsibility of government to the people. As such, countless laws of sorts have been churned out to terrify the press in Nigeria, in addition to innumerable cases of assault on pressmen and press freedom. The quest for independence led many nationalists like Herbert Macaulay, Ernest Ikoli, Nnamdi Azikiwe into establishing newspapers. Macaulay formed the first party paper, the *Lagos Daily News*, in 1925 to champion the cause of his party, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) [11].

The ownership trend sparked off an era of party papers – the *Daily News* in 1925, *Daily Service* in

1933, and the *West African Pilot* in 1937 were active party organs. Party papers continued to exist up to the post-independence era. After independence, three regions – North, West and East had ethnic-based political parties, and the private press aligned with the trend. The *Pilot* and the Zik's chain of papers, the *Nigerian Tribune* and the *Nigerian Citizen* became the mouthpieces of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroon (NCNC) – East; the Action Group – West; and the Northern Peoples Congress – North respectively. And with the creation of 12 states in 1967, each state established its own newspaper. This practice continued as state creation continued [14].

The newspaper industry in Nigeria has, no doubt, gone through trying times and has become very strong and audacious and has built itself a great name. The reason is that newspapers fought hard to liberate society from the shackles of oppressive leaders. It is believed that newspapers constitute the only potent opposition to government in power in Nigeria. However, the influence of government press with government support and monopoly of government information is still noticeable. In 1975, the government acquired 60% of the *Daily Times* shares, making the paper to reflect the spirit of government in its content. *Daily Times*, formerly a very powerful and influential paper, started to dance to the tune of government [14, 1].

Government extends its influence over some media (especially government media) and over the federal and state ministries of information. The audience often alleges that these media organizations and ministries have become government tools of propaganda, official misinformation and deceit.

Broadcast Media Ownership in Nigeria

Broadcasting in Nigeria started strictly as government affairs. This is because it was believed then that broadcasting demands a more complex system and daunting financial involvements. The airways were then seen as public property that should be managed by the government. Perhaps, this is why broadcasting in Nigeria started in the hands of government. As from 1932 when broadcasting reached the Nigerian landscape, it remained the reservation of government until 1992 when former military head of state, General Ibrahim Babangida, liberalized broadcasting via Decree 38 of 1992. However, the 1979 Constitution had allowed individual ownership of mass media of communication. But it took 13 years afterwards for the provision to be effected [11].

Europe's overbearing political posture in Africa, especially since the Berlin Conference (1885), which sanctioned the partitioning of the continent, was especially significant. Without exception, all former British and French colonies and dependencies in Africa modeled their broadcasting systems after their

respective colonial master's metropolitan broadcasting policies. In Nigeria, colonial government pioneered wired-radio system before the radio developed further [15]. The political current of the 1950's also shaped broadcast ownership in Nigeria. In 1954, the Action Group Party (AG) – the opposition in parliament – walked out of parliament protesting the adoption of the McPherson constitution debate, which the AG had termed unworkable [16].

Oso [1] noted that the Governor-General, Sir John McPherson, went on air and poured the vitriol on the AG, charging the party with what he called perfidy of the AG. Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the AG leader, sought airtime on the government-owned radio station (National Broadcasting Service) to reply to the governor's charges. He was turned down. Following this, he established the *Western Nigeria Television* in October 1959. The Western Nigeria venture sparked off a desire for radio-television establishment in the regions. Eastern Nigeria established its own station – the *Eastern Nigeria Television* (ENTV) in 1960, and so did Northern Nigeria in 1962 with the establishment of *Radio-television Kaduna*.

In 1977 and 1979, the federal government established the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) respectively. The government vested them with powers to control television and radio broadcasting. The 1979 constitution removed the exclusive powers. Federal and regional (now states) stations thus operated side by side. State stations maintained appreciable independence, but were required to hook up to the federal (network) stations for network programs such as news. Government's interest in broadcasting in Africa extends well beyond total ownership of the system and management of airwaves to substantial capital investment. In general, the situation is that in developing economies, emphasis has always been placed on the transmitting end and hardly on the receiving end of the system. So far, broadcasting remains essentially a government monopoly [11].

The Game Changer

Protracted economic constraints over the years led to government's inability to continue funding broadcasting. As a result, the government first allowed commercialization of both radio and television services. This helped the financial situation of the stations especially for those operating in large commercial centers such as Lagos, Ibadan, Jos, Kano, Enugu, and Port Harcourt. Although some of these stations were able to raise up to 70 percent of their annual operating cost, commercialization harshly affected programming and public service broadcasting [9].

In the early 80s, it became clear that government failed completely in the trusteeship (paternalistic) rule of managing broadcast media in

public interest. Government monopoly became “a major constraint to the rapid development of the nation's media and democratization process” [17]. Politicians used the media at their whims. Members of the audience, disenchanted as they were, turned to foreign stations for succor. Due to the fast changing media climate worldwide (the trend towards free market), government came under intense pressure to private broadcasting. Furthermore, political developments in Nigeria had posed serious challenges to Decree 24 of 1976 and Decree 8 of 1979, which entrusted broadcasting on NTA and FRCN. When the military government of General Olusegun Obasanjo that centralized radio and television handed power to a civilian government in 1979, it became clear that the situation must be reversed to achieve harmony.

The 1979 elections made the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) the ruling party. NPN had seven states out of the then nineteen states. The other twelve states shared by the other four political parties, could not have their programs and policies spread through the electronic media. As a result, the Senate introduced broadcasting into the concurrent legislative list of the 1979 constitution. Consequently, the twelve states in opposition applied for allocation of Ultra High Frequency (UHF) channels for TV broadcasting. The federal-controlled NTA stations existed side-by-side with the state-owned TV stations in such states [4].

Government chose to privatize broadcasting to allow individuals to own broadcast media as profit making venture. To a reasonable extent, this privatization has resuscitated quality programming, responsibility, and professionalism. Privatization as achieved in 1992 via Decree 38 (as amended in Decree 55 of 1999) also led to the creation of National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) to regulate the broadcast industry (both Decrees are now Acts 38 and 55). The federal government through broadcast privatization dumped its paternalistic model of orientation, wherein the airwaves are seen as public property that must be managed by government on behalf of the people [11].

By 1997, NBC had licensed nine independent private television stations, two private radio stations, two direct broadcast satellites, and 40 re-transmission stations. There were 262 government-owned broadcast stations as at 2003, comprising federal radio and television as well as state-owned broadcast stations. They are grouped as: Voice of Nigeria (VON), NTA including satellite outfits, FRCN national stations, FRCN FM stations, State Broadcasting Corporations (Radio & TV, including Aso FM, Abuja) [18]. As at 2003, there were 88 pulsating broadcast organizations that are privately owned. Out of these 88 broadcast organizations, 86 are private transmitting and re-transmitting institutions in Nigeria's electronic web. Four of these are specialized stations, namely: Atlantic

FM, Brilla FM, Sports Spectrum FM, UNILAG FM, BUK FM, and UNILORIN FM [19].

The aforesaid 86 private stations comprise 14 Private Terrestrial TV (PTTV), 80 Private Terrestrial Radio (PTR), 2 private satellites – Global Transmission (PSGTx), 60 Private Cable Satellite Re-Transmission Stations (including sub-stations). In addition to the 262 stations earlier noted, the number of broadcast organizations in Nigeria comes to 350 as at 2003 (federal, state, and private media stations).

Regulatory and Political Influence

At one time or another in the history of most countries, media and information control has been a source of problem for governments. According to Omo (2000), the problem of media control is associated with owners' interests and punitive laws that make it difficult for the media to perform its statutory functions without let or hindrance. These laws most often include laws of libel, sedition, defamation, official secrets, and national security. In Nigeria, three types of government (colonial, civilian and military governments) had been in power at one time or the other and all the three types of government have implemented policies that restrained freedom of the press in the country. To achieve control, media outfits have been deliberately denied advertising revenue while journalists have been killed, maimed, harassed, detained, jailed, and repressive while laws and decrees were enacted to cow the media.

While the few indigenous businesspersons who could advertise in the newspapers at the time gave their advertisements to standard newspaper or other newspapers that represented their nationalistic feeling, presently more government advertisements are found in pro-government newspapers than in any anti-government newspaper. Comparatively, the British colonial administration in Nigeria appears to have been the least repressive. However, it is said to be responsible for setting in motion many of the repressive press laws existing in Nigeria today. Measures of government control include denying journalists access to places and persons for information, refusing to give government advertisements and dubious labeling of documents containing valuable information [2].

All these measures have been used and newspapers that were pro-government during the colonial rule, such as *The Eagle*, *Lagos Critic* and *Record* (for some years of its existence) received most government advertisements. These different measures and obnoxious media laws and decrees give government officials the opportunity and legal backing to prosecute, fine, detain and imprison journalists, as well as proscribe media houses. For instance, Decree No. 4 of 1984 criminalized press reports and proscribed written statements that exposed an officer of the military government to ridicule. Then, the Offensive

Publications (Proscription) Decree 35 of 1993 made it possible for the government to clamp down on six media houses across the nation. Under the same decree, the Nigerian government in July 1993 closed down 17 newspapers and magazines and one broadcast station in a single day [20]. Even government owned media were not spared. This kind of suppression also took place after the 22 April 1990 failed coups d'état when over seven media houses were closed down.

The era of military dictatorships in Nigeria witnessed the worst forms of media emasculation in the media history. Joseph [21] noted that the period of military dictatorships was marked by arbitrary arrests and detentions, extrajudicial killings, corruption, excessive use of force, torture of detainees, harassment of journalists and democratic activists, and arson attacks on media houses. At times, family members of the targeted journalists were also arrested, detained, brutalized, and constantly harassed. In particular, journalists who refuse to acquiesce are disgraced and sacked with ignominy.

According to Ekpu [22], the Nigerian government pulls all the strings, and the functionaries who run the state-owned newspapers, magazines, and broadcast outlets must either behave like pliant, puppets or lose their places to others. Apart from government control of the media through laws, decrees and the courts, other means of control exist which obstruct freedom of expression. One of such means of control is what Uche[23] referred to as co-opting. The government uses certain preferential treatments to buy the most influential journalists in the country, appointing these influential critics in the media to top posts within the government. Co-opting of journalists ensures that they are reduced to being mere stooges of government officials.

The co-opting tactics were rife during the many years of military dictatorship in Nigeria. Therefore, it is not surprising that the editor of the *Guardian* had to publish an article reassuring his readers that his proprietor's acceptance of a ministerial appointment in the government could not influence the objectivity of the newspaper in handling issues concerning the government [23]. Furthermore, regulatory bodies set up by the government can be the source of media control. Where there are defects or loopholes in the decree that set up such regulatory bodies, these can be used in repressing freedom of expression. It is thought that government may intentionally leave loopholes in laws and decrees so as to exploit such in silencing any opposition. Media experts believe that one pitfall in the decree that set up the NBC is the power given to the commission to revoke the licenses of stations that do not operate in accordance with the code and in the public interest.

The decree did not specify either how to seek redress or what the public interest is, as in the American Federal Communication Commission. Broadcasting is regulated in Nigeria by the NBC. This body is saddled with the responsibility of monitoring, licensing and sanctioning erring broadcast organizations. Thus, the decree allows the NBC to provide licenses in perpetuity only to withdraw them at whim. In addition, Uche [23] pointed out that the influence of government is seen in the unflinching support government media organizations give the government of the day. Government officials do not hesitate to remove anyone in charge who fails to offer unquestioned support. An “erring” official risks being sacked with “immediate effect” or faces other punishments for such “heinous” acts. He observed that within one year of the elected civilian government assuming office in 1990, no less than ten chief executive officers of state-owned broadcast stations were sacked.

Private media proprietors also exert significant control over their media organizations. Proprietors have been known to demand self-censorship by their editors. The proprietors expect those working in their media organizations to understand and protect their interests. Proprietor’s economic and/or political interests are often very influential in how they want their papers to relate to the government of the day. Media practitioners have never failed to denounce these controls, except for journalists who have been co-opted. There have been instances where the government has been taken to court. In 1975, a reporter was arrested, flogged and his hairs and beard shaved on the orders of a military government who found his articles offensive. The reporter instituted a court action and won, and the government was asked to pay him damage [23].

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the regulatory and political influence on mass media operation in Nigeria. It is evident that political class controls and influences the content and operation of broadcast media in the country. First, it is evident that majority of the private media stations in Nigeria are owned by politicians or their cronies. Licensing of broadcast stations had to be signed by the president of the federal republic of Nigeria. People without strong connection with the government hardly get license to operate media. It could be said that still the media are tools in the hands of the political class who continue to dominate and boast their power through the media industry.

A closer look at the media ownership pattern in Nigeria revealed that majority of the private media organizations are owned by politicians or affiliate of political parties. This indicates that the development of media in Nigeria was a product of politics and politicians. The survival of the media organizations are partially connected with the revenue generated from politicians and political parties. Similarly, news is the

primary product of the media, but the political class remained the major source of news. The political class shapes the media operation, content, and what the journalists see as news and even the financial power of the media organizations. Both private and public owned media stations are subject to regulatory and political influence. This influence might be apparent (like in government owned media) or salient (in privately owned media).

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