

Selling For Survival: Effect of News Commercialization on Public Service Broadcasting in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper assessed the impact of commercialization of news and its effect on the credibility of public service broadcasting in Nigeria with particular reference to the Rivers State Broadcasting Corporation (RSBC). The study was underpinned by the social responsibility theory and the ethical theory of egoism. Data used for meeting the study objectives were gathered using in-depth interviews and analysed qualitatively in this paper. The study found that news commercialization has become a practice in Public Service Broadcast stations in Nigeria due to the withdrawal of subventions from the government that established them. This has negatively affected the image of broadcast media organizations in the country. Public service broadcasting which was supposed to serve public interest has been turned into a powerful instrument for perpetual colonization of the masses by the rich. The study recommends that relevant regulatory agencies should ensure that enforcement of laws and ethics is rigorously pursued to compel media houses to comply with the ethics of the profession and revert to non-commercialization of news for the interest of the masses.

Keywords: *News Commercialization .Public Service Broadcasting .Social Responsibility*

INTRODUCTION

News commercialization has become a major trend in news treatment globally and an ethical concern in the mass media. It is a tactful strategy through which the media relegates its responsibility of surveying the society – disseminating information on the event and people of social interest aside for financial gains. In some media organisations, reporters are officially made to function as marketing officers in addition to main reportorial duties. Oso (2000) demonstrates some of the ways that news commercialisation manifests in the media: producers of “specialised pages or columns are made to source for adverts or supplements to support ‘their’ pages or the pages are dropped and probably with the reporter. Broadcast producers scout for sponsors for ‘their’ programmes with a promise of commission” (p. 30)

In many cases the journalists are invited to events by well-to-do members of society and they are so well-taken care of that they go home with ‘news’ often written by the people who invited them. It is not surprising that Akinfeleye’s study (as cited in Oso, 2000, p. 4) actually classified journalism practice in Nigeria as ‘cocktail journalism’, ‘journalism of next-of-kin’ and ‘journalism of the general order’.

News commercialization as an anomaly is highlighted when we consider the role of the media as the ‘Fourth Estate of the Realm,’ coming after such realms or institutions as the executive, the legislative and the judiciary. The principal duty of the media is to inform people and check the excesses of the three arms of the people, and not to make money. That is why the press is one of the professions having its obligations clearly expressed and stipulated in the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended. This constitutional responsibility as outlined in chapter 2 of the 1999 Nigerian constitution as amended 2011 specified in section 22 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 often feared that when news is commercialised, journalists would not only forget that their priority is to inform people first before trying to make money but also public service broadcasting would suffer. Public service broadcasting is intended for public benefit rather than to serve purely commercial interests. It is non-commercialised. According to UNESCO (2010), it is a kind of broadcasting that is made, financed and controlled by the public, for the public; it ensures that citizens are primarily informed, educated and also entertained – that is the emphasis of public service broadcasting.

Statement of Problem

In public service broadcasting, broadcast journalists are expected to give 'equal time' to all parties in the educational, informative, and entertainment programmes. It is a duty they owe their general public. They serve the public and owe them the duty to first of all inform them. Obviously, therefore, the idea of news commercialisation goes against the tenets of public service broadcasting.

On that note, it becomes necessary to examine the impact of news commercialisation on the credibility of public service broadcasting in Nigeria with particular reference to the Rivers State Broadcasting Corporation (RSBC). Has news commercialization negatively influenced the social responsibility duties of broadcast journalists in Nigeria, particularly in the Rivers State Broadcasting Corporation (RSBC)?

Research Questions

Summarily, the questions that guided this study are:

1. In what ways has news been institutionally commercialised in Radio Rivers?
2. Has news commercialization affected public service broadcasting in Radio Rivers?
3. What is the impact of news commercialization to the social responsibility function of Radio Rivers?
4. To what extent has Radio Rivers achieved its primary objective of taking broadcasting to the grassroots in the face of the competition arising from news commercialization?

Review of Concepts/Opinions

News Commercialization

News commercialization as defined by McManus (2009, pp. 219 - 220), is 'any action intended to boost profit that interferes with a journalist's or news organization's best effort to maximize public understanding of those issues and events that shape the community they claim to serve'. Also, Nwodu (2006) defines news commercialization as the deliberate presentation of sponsored information to unsuspecting media audience who perceive these information as conventional public interest-oriented news.

Harrison (2006, p.100) captured news commercialization as an economic process of 'commodification' whereby media audience are primarily seen as consumers. Lacy cited in McManus (2009, p.221) states that "the growth of alternative information and advertising sources in the form of cable television and the internet", and "the growth of public (stock) ownership of news media" are factors that have boosted commercialization of news. Hence the primary determinant of news worthiness becomes the ability to pay a media organization a certain amount of money rather than the presence of the classic elements of the news.

UNESCO (1980) alludes to the commercialization of news when it wrote that "The news has become commercial product... important developments in the countryside are pushed aside by unimportant, even trivial news items, concerning urban events and the activities of personalities" (p. 152)

Though nearly three decades old, UNESCO's assertion certainly has currency in Nigerian media scene as news items have to be paid for by those who want to be heard. News is no longer about reporting timely occurrences or events, it is now about packaged broadcast or reports sponsored or paid for by interested parties. By this practice individuals, communities, private and public organizations, local governments, state governments and ministries, gain access to the mass media during news time for a prescribed fee, except of course something negative happens to them or in most cases if there is a protest such as that of Pro Biafra agitators.

Advent of News Commercialization in Nigerian Media

News commercialization in Nigeria is traced back to the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986. SAP was an economic policy aimed at encouraging self-reliance and reduction of over dependence on government for financial subventions in business. Hence, government withdrew subsidies which were provided to federal and state owned media organizations.

Wilson (2005) observes that "with the commercialization and privatization policy of government, several government-run papers and other media organizations, like radio and television, have had their subventions drastically reduced and the organizations directed to make their money through more vigorous commercial activities". (p. 148). According to Ekwo (1996, p.63), faced with the inability to pay salaries of workers and myriad of other problems occasioned by the decline in government subvention, the various government owned Radio and TV stations in Nigeria devised several other means to make money. One of such means is the commercialization of news in the broadcast media, now being practiced throughout the country.

Oso (1991) argues that the concept "commercialization" in Nigeria dates far back as the media itself, and has always been an allowance for advertising, which is considered part of the media content. The capitalization of the Nigerian press and its subsequent commercialization is said to have started with the arrival of the *Daily Times* in 1926. The paper was established by European financial interests represented in the Lagos Chamber of Commerce in alliance with some wealthy Nigerians. The *Daily Times* started off as any modern business concern, with a board of Directors and some shareholders. It could be argued that because the *Daily Times* was established by hard-nosed businessmen with their minds and eyes set on financial success and profit-making, the paper could not afford to be political like its contemporaries.

Nature of News Commercialization in Nigerian Media

It is worthy to note that news commercialization operates at two levels in Nigeria:

The Institutional level: this is where charges are 'officially' placed for sponsored news programmes. This commercialization at the institutional level is thriving because editors, publishers and owners of the broadcast stations see the organizations, or their investment, as a profit making venture that should yield the required financial return. But the question is do they really meet the stipulated obligations to the masses. Increasingly, commercial-oriented news stories are taking the place of hard news reports. Hanson (2005) in his observation noted that: "reporters and editors are supposed to be concerned not with profits but rather with reporting the news as best they can. But that barrier is coming down, and editors are increasingly looking at their newspaper as a product that should appeal to advertisers as well as reader." (p. 140)

The individual level: News commercialization also operates at the level of individual journalists. This occurs when a journalist or group of journalists make monetary demands to cover an event or report the event. In most cases as soon as Journalists arrive an event, the first thing they do is look for the "Press list" to enter their names. At the end of the event they are given some token no matter how small and if that is not done, the stories will not be aired depending on the event. In some other cases when interviews are carried out by Journalists on important persons on topical issues in society, they also expect some monetary reward "transport fare" for your views to be heard, if that is not done there would be a "mutual blackout" by implication all of them involved would agree not to use the story.

In the broadcast media, payments are made before the event or in some cases the reporter is asked to demand for the money at the end of the event from the organizers. These acts have been widely condemned in Nigeria as a very unethical practice, as (Ekwo, 1996, p. 65) makes it clear that, "the payment for news stories is approximate to official brown envelope or bribe offered to the media house itself as against the one offered to the individual reporter"

Public Service Broadcasting

What exactly is public service broadcasting? There are many definitions – some running to long checklists of defining characteristics. Public Service Broadcasting refers to broadcasting intended for public benefit rather than to serve purely commercial interests. It is generally

recognised by its non-commercial features. Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) according to The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (2010) defines public service broadcasting as broadcasting made, financed and controlled by the public, for the public. It is neither commercial nor state-owned; free from political interference and pressure from commercial forces. Through PSB, citizens are informed, educated and also entertained. When guaranteed with pluralism, programming diversity, editorial independence, appropriate funding, accountability and transparency, public service broadcasting can serve as a cornerstone of democracy. (<http://www.Unesco.org/webworld/en/psb>)

McQuail, (2000) states that a public service broadcasting station is expected to be funded by the public, and operated as non-profit organisation, aimed at providing education, information, and entertainment to all people within its coverage area. This understanding, McQuail further argues, mandates all public service stations to carry out programmes which may not have outright commercial interests, and therefore, may not be attractive to commercial broadcasters, but are essential for the citizens to be properly informed, educated, and entertained.

Empirical Review

The concept of news commercialisation and the various concerns it has raised has been an age-long subject of enquiry in Nigeria. Lai Oso, in a 1991 paper "the commercialization of the Nigerian Press: development and implications", explores the origin of the process of commercialization of the press and its implications for journalism practice. He argues that commercialization signalled the end of the so-called 'political' press which many commentators still refer to. It also led to some form of professional consciousness and the need for a professional organization among Nigerian journalists.

Similarly, Omenugha and Oji (2008) studied news commercialization, ethics and objectivity in journalism practice in Nigeria as strange bedfellows and emphasized how news commercialization practice in Nigeria media industries adds to this contradiction and deception, creating a continuous dilemma for ethics and objectivity in journalism practice in Nigeria.

Asogwa and Asemah (2012) did a study on news commercialisation, objective journalism practice and the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria decries that news is commercialised to the extent that only the rich get their ideas communicated to the members of the public. This in turn, affects objective journalism practice, both in the print and electronic media, thereby, negatively impacting on democracy.

The common theme in the three reviewed empirical works is that news commercialization is a threat to objective and efficient journalism.

Theoretical Framework

The social responsibility theory of the press and the ethical theory of egoism serve as a framework for this work. Social responsibility is an *ethical* framework which suggests that an *organization* or *individual*, has an obligation to act for the benefit of society at large. It is the responsibility of every individual or institutions such as the media to maintain a balance between the economy and the ecosystems. As summed up in McQuail (2000, p. 150), among others, the media have an obligation to the wider society and media ownership is a public trust; news media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant, and the media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct. By this treatise, media ownership is a form of stewardship rather than unlimited private franchise. In other words, the media are established to serve the intent of the public rather than personal interests. Yet the quest for personal aggrandisement seems to have infiltrated the practice of journalism in Nigeria and beyond.

According to Okunna (2005, p. 87), communication scholars and other stakeholder have continued to raise alarm over the issue of commercialization of news. Sobowale (1998) as cited in Okunna (2005, p. 89) notes that "a trend that some communication scholars and experts consider dangerous has emerged in the commercialization of news by the Nigerian television Authority. If this trend is not checked, it may mean that only those who could pay for their activities, no matter how unimportant or irrelevant these may be, would receive coverage by

the NTA, with the exception of the government which owns it. The consequences of such a situation are better imagined than described". News commercialization by the media is seen as shying away from their social responsibilities to the public.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is a case study of Rivers Radio with regard to the extent to which news commercialisation affects public broadcasting and their social responsibility functions. The paper used various methods to gather data: review of documents from the station and in-depth interview on key staff of the station were both employed. Since most of the data gathered were qualitative, the analysis was mostly explanatory.

Discussion of Findings

First of all, it is important to note that Rivers State Broadcasting Corporation (RSBC) was established as a public service broadcaster by the Rivers State of Nigeria under the Broadcasting Corporation Edict Number 8 of 1973. By this edict, the station is "responsible for providing and maintaining radio, television and other broadcasting services.

As our case study, the question is, has news commercialization affected public service broadcasting in Radio Rivers? According to Nwanze (2003, p. 23), RSBC an offspring of NBC would shift from the character of their pedigree, even her grandparent, the BBC which till date functions as strictly public service media.

In an interview with the General Manager of the Rivers State Broadcasting Corporation (RSBC), Mr. Sampson Fiberesima on the issue of Commercialization of News. In his own words: "Our reason for commercialization is because of the lean resources of the government."

According to Mr. Fiberesima Radio Rivers news was commercialised in 1991, "we decided to commercialize some of our news to generate revenue and also to be less dependent on government for day - to - day operational needs of the corporation.

Under the partial commercialization, government subventions to RSBC were considerably reduced since the media is expected to generate internally through commercialization. As a result of the partial commercialization the media (RSBC) now charge for certain categories of news items which before 1991 used to be free.

In an interview with an Editor from RSBC, the researchers found out that the news bulletin of the station has a commercial and non-commercial news contents. He stated that the commercial news are news stories that have been paid for by an organizations, government and individuals while non-commercial news are hard news obtained through the investigative or eye witness account efforts of the journalists or monitored from international news agencies as well as National stations.

Implementing the commercialization policy RSBC have drawn a line between what is their social responsibility to the citizens and what should be paid for. Stories such as market fire disaster, an unknown corpse lying in a public place, missing child, items, fatal road accident, outbreak of disease etc. are used free as social obligation to the public, while the rest of the stories are being paid for. Hence, for the station to maintain optimum public service programming, it has to generate additional income from commercial sources - a situation which could potentially lead to changes in its public service values.

The question is how would Radio Rivers achieve its primary objective of taking broadcasting to the grassroots in the face of the competition arising from news commercialization, how *Radio Rivers* ensures the maintenance of its public service broadcast ideals is of interest to this paper.

Again, Mr Fiberesima explained that, "commercialization of news in a way has assisted Radio Rivers to meet its primary objective of grassroots broadcasting. Revenue generated from this income stream ensures seamless operation, as departmental needs are met optimally". It is, therefore, the interest of these researchers to investigate how *Radio Rivers* is reacting to these trends, and to ascertain if the commercialization of news impacts on traditional public service values which the station is under mandate to promote. Mr. Fiberesima reiterates that: "being a public service broadcast station, radio Rivers' target is to ensure value in information dissemination devoid of propaganda. News commercialization in its infertile form would not erode its objectives".

Other individuals also gave their views about the impact of news commercialisation on public service broadcasting: Everyone agrees that all the programmes of government owned broadcast stations should gear towards satisfying the information, entertainment and education desire of the people, particularly and government in its entirety. According to them, due to government inability to justify the purpose(s) of such establishment and due to lack of funds to run the day – to – day activities of the stations, hence the need to look elsewhere for programme promotions, because before now the stations used to rely on government subventions to carry out their activities.

They suggested that since the stations do not have any other option for survival, than news commercialization, they should not get involved in full commercialization, especially on news, in fact they advised that news should be free, while the stations should source for revenue through advertisements.

In his own word, Philip O. Philip, observed "it is not necessarily important for such stations to get involved in full time commercialization of either news or any other programme, but for it to survive like others under the same situation of lack of fund, such is solicited and seen as utmost choice".

On his own part, Mr. Ibituru Pepple states thus: "the present circumstance, yes, since government does not finance them wholly, there is need to resort to a self-help measure which is to be somewhat commercialized," but maintained that it must not be full commercialization. "Some measures of commercialization are expected not complete as some of the programmes need to be allowed commercial free." He further explained that government sets up these stations but management is usually an issue, "so the money that is been collected in this case, is usually incomparable to what the privately owned stations would collect, so it does not amount to double taxation as everybody is not supposed to use the medium to avoid anarchy."

On whether news commercialization can deprive those who cannot afford commercial news charges to use Radio Rivers, some of the respondents observed, "We know that the station has the purpose of generating money for smooth operation, but in doing that they should consider the people who cannot afford their rates, because if their rates are such that we cannot pay, it means we cannot go to them to air our news."

"when my father died, I went to Radio Rivers to place obituary, they told me that it goes for N15, 000 which I could not afford, so I left feeling dejected, I will advise they review their prices to accommodate those of us who do not have money, we are not saying they should not charge, but charge little fees knowing that they are there to serve the public" Mrs. Ibinabo Sokari stated.

"Radio Rivers should know that by charging money, they are reducing their credibility in the eyes of the public and also denying members of public access to them" Mr. Orunene Amachree stated

To the supporters of news commercialisation, totally condemning the trend is tantamount to end of the stations, since they cannot survive with the meagre subvention from government. News commercialisation, they argue: Helps to generate income for the media houses, helping them to function smoothly. Nwokoh (1996) states that the argument that auctioning of news will improve their revenue base does not hold water. He questioned: "Are they telling the public that they are not aware that they are trading their social responsibility role in the said auctioning? They should look at other things to sell. Politics is too sensitive a subject to be sold to the highest bidder".

A Summation of the Probable Effects of News Commercialization on Broadcast Media in Nigeria

From the findings discussed above, it is important to clearly point out, blow by blow, the probable effects of news commercialization on broadcast media in Nigeria. There is a growing concern for news commercialisation, which many Scholars believe negates all fundamental principle of fairness, equity and balance required in journalism practice.

According to Wilson (2005, p. 149), this news policy has led to the distortion of the concept of news. News is no longer a report of the displacement of the routine, but a report of an event that has been paid for. He further explained that some organizations even abandon their

obligations to their loyal audience by allowing the paying organizations to write the news the way it would suit them.

Furthermore, the commercialization of news broadcast is a flout to the stipulation of the NBC code which explicitly distinguishes between advertising in news and commercialization of news broadcast in sections 5.1. 18 & 19. It states that: "commercials in News and Current Affairs programmes shall be clearly identified and presented in a manner that shall make them clearly distinguishable" while "the promotion of an organization, product or a service of commercial interest shall not be treated as news analysis, commentary or editorial" (NBC, 2010, p. 44). In essence, as far as the NBC is concerned, commercial messages during news broadcast should be limited to advertising messages interjected during breaks in a news broadcast, and not treated as part of the news bulletin. By observation most broadcast media have fallen into the temptation of advertising thereby going against the NBC code.

Again, the payment for news items makes it nearly impossible for editors to edit the item based on known professional standards or principles. The saying he who plays the piper dictates the tune comes in handy as the media organization would not want to lose potential customers, they will do all that is within their reach to satisfy such client that pays enough money. The editor is constrained to edit the purported news item on the basis of what might interest the sponsor, as against public interest. Wilson (2004) buttressed this fact when he stated that "News or information has a price tag, because it is perceived of as a commodity rather than the product of a service rendered for the public good in line with the individual's constitutional 'right to know' (p. 149).

The watchdog role of the media is also gradually being neglected and replaced with the pursuit of news stories that will yield financial gains both to the broadcast organization and the journalists. (McManus, 2009, p.220) states that the economic rationalization of the news 'predicts a temporary decline of journalism's expensive but vital watchdog function'. News consumers have a vested interest in the news because it is an avenue through which they are kept informed about important events, government actions and policies, social issues etc.

The commercialization of news erodes the credibility of the broadcast medium. There are Nigerians who do not accept news information hook line and sinker from local broadcast stations. Often times they seek to confirm the authenticity of the information either by viewing the news broadcast from multiple stations, or tuning to international broadcasters such as British Broadcasting Commission (BBC), Cable News Network (CNN), Aljazeera and the like for confirmation.

Finally, commercialization of news has led to the current practice in most media organisations in Nigeria that seem to be encouraging unethical practices where publishers, rather than pay wages to the journalists whom they employed, refer to their identity cards as a meal ticket. In other words, the journalists are encouraged to make money on their own in whatever manner they deem fit, thus encouraging the popular brown envelope syndrome within journalism parlance in Nigeria or negotiation for news items.

Conclusion

There are negative consequences of commercialisation on the public service function of the station. The commercialization of news is a contradiction to the social responsibility function of the mass media. News should be presented as news and not as advertising or public relations. News is now treated as a profit-making life-line by broadcast media owners and journalists.

Commercialization of news erodes the credibility of the broadcast medium. Certain issues of social significance are set aside in order to accommodate paid-for news messages.

Recommendations

Having drawn conclusion on the issue, this paper makes the following recommendations:

1. Nigeria should return to the past when public broadcasting stations depended absolutely on public finance for sustenance, this is because commercialization of news is to short change the people whom their money is used for fund.
2. Radio Rivers and other government broadcast stations should leave commercialization of news to private media organizations and concentrate on public service programming so as to meet their obligation to the people as well as the needs of the people.

3. The sanctity of the news should not be tampered with; government at all levels should be able to finance their own stations through Internally Generated Revenue.
4. Regulatory Bodies should live up to expectation by looking into the issue of Media Owners in Nigeria, who rather than pay attractive wages to the journalists, refer to their identity cards as a meal ticket, therefore encouraging them to make money by whatever means.

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