



ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN THE PROMOTION OF NATIONAL UNITY AND IDENTITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria has often been referred to by some political analysts as a contraption that is bound to fail. This is anchored on the obvious diversity in ethnicity, culture, and religion that pervade the country. This pessimism has been echoed loudly through the mass-media to a near convincing level. Interestingly, the same media has been deployed to canvass unity for the country. This contrasting role confers on the media, the responsibility of promoting the unity and identity of Nigeria. The essay touched on the voting patterns in Nigeria: Of great significance are the annulled elections of 1993, and of how Nigerians rose above ethnic divide to rally behind the candidacy of Moshood Abiola. The 2015 elections, regrettably took on some ethnic coloration, with the Ibos, almost shunning completely the candidacy of Muhammadu Buhari, whom they see as personifying the North's desperation to get power. The issues thrown up by some military coups from the 1966 coup to the Gideon Okar coup of 1990 also served to corroborate the media's culpability. The social responsibility, Alternative Media Theory and the Gate keeping theory were cited to explain the media's role in some of the national events in the country.

Keywords: Media, Unity, Nigeria, Election, Government, Ethnicity

Introduction

Nigeria became an independent nation on October 1st 1960. Prior to this time, it had existed as a colony of the old British Empire since 1900. The composition of what is now Nigeria had started with the amalgamation of Southern and Northern Nigeria in 1914. Yongo, (2015) noted that the amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria through constitutional means invariably set the stage for a continuous rancour between the regions as the North is seen to, at all cost, seek to consolidate on the political advantage the arrangement conferred on them, while the South constantly seeks to extricate itself from the perceived marginalization on the account of that marriage. However, in a bid to reconcile the growing tension between the regions based on ethnic and religious grounds, contends, Babalola, (2012), a federal system was initiated in 1947 under a new Nigerian constitution by the colonial authorities. This new order was based on three regions: Eastern, Western and Northern. The East catered mainly to the Ibos, the West to the Yorubas and finally, the North to the Hausa/Fulanis. Essentially the country continued to exist on a dichotomy between the North and the South with

natives from each of the divide harbouring malicious reservations against each other. The Northerners particularly considered the Southerners as being paganistic and materialistic.

The Southerners on the other hand thought the Northerners, naïve, feudalistic, and uneducated. It must be noted though that a significant percentage of the Nigerian population according to the 1963 census is constituted by large minorities like the Tiv Edo, Ibibio, Nupe, Ijaw, Kanuri and others, making up about 27.9% of the population (Afolayan, 1978). This dichotomy as induced by the imperialist has endured as a fundamental factor in the power balance that characterized the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Traces of this always manifest in every national contest, especially during election for either the office of Prime minister or for President of the country (Babalola, 2012). The predilection for minority groups to identify politically, linguistically and culturally with the individual three dominant ethnic entities portends a tri-polar ethnic structure for the country. Religiously, however, the nation seem divided between Christianity and Islam with the later prominent more in the Northern part of the country while Christianity is embraced more in the South (Mustapha, 2002).

At independence, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa was elected Prime minister while Nnamdi Azikiwe functioned as the Governor General until 1963 when Nigeria went on to become a republic and Azikiwe was re-designated president (though in actual sense, the position was only ceremonial). The rivalry that had characterized the coexistence of the three regions played on until it degenerated into a rancorous state, leading to the first bloody coup in 1966 as led by Major Kaduna Nzeogwu and a subsequent establishment of a unitary system to pave way for total dictatorship. Major General Aguiyi Ironsi's regime was toppled six months later by General Yakubu Gowon. One of the immediate fallout of these military adventures was a secession attempt spearheaded by Colonel Emeka Ojukwu, a Nigerian army officer of Igbo extraction. He sought to establish Biafra as a sovereign state. The consequence was a bloody civil war that lasted three years. Nigeria was able to eventually return to civilian rule in 1979 when General Olusegun Obasanjo formally handed over the reins of governance to Alhaji Usman Aliu Shehu Shagari as president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

This too was short-lived as the military again intervened on 31st December, 1983. Major General Muhammadu Buhari became the new head of state; he too lost out to another military officer, General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida in 1985. This self-styled military president was able to hold on to power till 1993. General Sani Abacha continued the military adventure, having pushed aside the interim regime of Chief Earnest Sonekan. He died in office in 1998 and was succeeded by General Abdulsalam Abubakar who held on for about nine months before returning Nigeria to civilian rule, its fourth republic in 1999. Chief Olusegun Obasanjo became the president and ran his two terms of four years each consecutively. Alhaji Umaru Yar adua succeeded Chief Obasanjo but his reign was characterized by an un-abating failing health. He eventually died in office and was succeeded by Dr. Goodluck Jonathan who was his vice president. Jonathan completed the tenure and went on to contest afresh at the next election which he won. He was however defeated at the next election by Major General Muhammadu Buhari who ran on the platform of the APC. Nigeria runs a mono economy based on crude oil and it is currently ranked as the 6th largest producer of oil in the world. The country is reputed to be the most populous country in Africa with about 250 recognized ethnic groups. Pundits and some political analyst however continue to think of the Nigerian entity as being built on a faulty foundation.

The Media and Nigeria's Entity

The term media, particularly Mass Media, refers to channels of communications for the dissemination of information to the general public. The primary responsibility of the media, according to Okwuchukwu et al (2014) remains:

- Binding society together.
- Giving leadership to the public.
- Helping to establish the 'public sphere'.
- Linking the masses with the leaders
- Satisfying needs for information.
- Providing society with a mirror of itself and
- Acting as the conscience of society amongst others

As suggested above, the media played significant roles in Nigeria's attainment of independence and have continued to set the agenda for our national discourse and development. The Media industry in Nigeria can be traced to Reverend Henry Townsend's establishment of Nigeria's first Newspaper, *Iwe Iroyin* in 1859. The paper printed in Yoruba language was to

help educate and convert the natives to Christianity (Barton 1979:21). This and subsequent publications also served to promote imperialism in Nigeria for the colonialists. Interestingly, nationalists such as Herbert Macaulay and Nnamdi Azikiwe, who fought for Nigeria's independence, also used this as a weapon to agitate for independence and self-rule (Uko, 2012). Herbert Macaulay is reputed to have established the first party inclined Newspaper in Nigeria—the *Lagos Daily News*—in 1925, to promote the philosophy of his party, the Nigerian National Democratic Party. Nnamdi Azikiwe, being a journalist and politician, is also reported to have owned several newspaper titles including the famous *West African Pilot* (Ukonu, 2005).

Given that many of these Newspapers served to antagonize the then colonial government, it was only a matter of time before the colonial authorities set up their own publications to counter the incessant attacks. Upon attaining independence, Nigerian politicians borrowed the authoritarian style with regards to curtailment of press freedom from regimes of Eastern and central Europe. This according to Becker and Lower, (1976) brought about the culture of one voice. This idea entailed that there should be only one official press. This amounted to authoritarianism which eventually settled as conformist press style.

While the colonial struggle ensued, indigenous newspapers became a rallying dissent point against colonial iniquities and platforms to further political ideas, combat colonial injustices, and canvas or demand freedom, protect the people's interests, and to educate them about the present and the future (Dare, 1985). The reverse however, became the case on attainment of political independence. The authorities soon began to use the media to further their selfish ambitions and other uncomplimentary agendas. An interesting event played out during the colonial era, when in 1953 the motion for self-governance was made by the Action Group. Sir John Macpherson, the ruling colonial Governor, made a radio broadcast castigating the party. Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the leader of the party, sought a "right of reply" to the broadcast, but he was denied by the management of the radio service on the directive of the colonial government. Some people attribute this action to the signaling of the culture of imbalance and partisanship.

According to Adedeji (1991) in 1961 the same government media were used to announce landslide victories for the ruling political parties in the regional elections. The same tendencies have continued to this day where the cost of media space is made very prohibitive so as to limit access to it by the opposition. Private broadcasting in Nigeria can be said to represent a serious landmark in the history of the country and it brought about so many possibilities. Particularly, the earliest private broadcast station in Nigeria, Ray power fm, owned by Daar Communication plc, came on board in 1993. Clapperboard Television followed in 1993 as the first private television station. Presently there exist over 400 private radio and television stations in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The Social Responsibility theory propounded by Robert Hutchins in 1947 emphasizes the equilibrium between the two basic fronts of private interest and public good. It is an ethical framework which suggests that an entity, be it an organization or individual, has an obligation to act for the benefit of society at large. The Social Responsibility Theory, according to Copyright regulations (1969) is one response to the perceived impasse of classical liberalism in the 20th century coalescing in the report of the Hutchins Commission in 1947. It takes seriously many of the accusation by critics from both left and right from the Laissez-faire media system. It targets tendencies towards monopolization that the public are inattentive to and which may bring about a debased culture and dangerous politics. Social Responsibility Theory therefore requires the media to elevate standards by providing the public with a disinterested guidelines and viewpoint that they will need to govern themselves. It is urgent that the media does this to forestall a revolution. This however remains an ideal that is always subject to prevailing circumstances.

The general idea is that the community triumph over the lone individual and the common good over the selfish cause. Supposedly, the media still holds their place in the society because it is believed that ultimately this responsibility is attainable despite the odds and the time it takes. Social responsibility is a duty every individual has to perform so as to maintain a balance between the economy and the ecosystems. This theory is actually part of the normative theory and it is also attributed to Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm who proposed it as a formal theory from the report of Robert Hutchins in 1956. In relation to the unity of Nigeria, many believe it is the consciousness to act with a sense of caution that has helped Nigeria survive the many dangerous precipices it has experienced over the years.

The Normative Research Theory is concerned with issues on the expectations of the society towards the media as against the actual activities of the Media. Normative media theory explains that the press and other related media will portray the belief and values of their indigenous association in relating with the society. The theory is explored in line with this study to evaluate the role of the media in the promotion of National Unity and Identity in Nigeria.

Nerone (1995) expresses concern for the state of the media as being uncertain. It established that changes in the system of reporting and the introduction of the news media will negatively influence the public's perception of the information processed through the old media, such as the print media. Notwithstanding, the old and the new media are used in recent times to process and convey information between individuals. Normative media theory is credited with variants which includes; authoritarian theory, free press theory, social responsibility theory, development theory and the Alternative media theory. This study is evaluated based on the social responsibility theory and the alternative media theory. Alternative media theory assumes that when the media is influenced by a number of interest groups such as the state, elites and other stakeholders it may lead to being unprofessional in the delivery of service to the society due to its allegiance to such interest groups. In this wise it can be said that the choices available to Nigerians by way of alternative sources of information help restore hope in the same measure it encourages abuse.

In this study, the role of the media is examined in relations to the alternative media theory. The control of the state on media report through her agents places a limitation to the freedom of the press. Also, elites with interest in media houses can use the media to portray their views thereby disrupting the media from carrying out professional reporting on issues affecting national unity in the country. The other central theory to this situation is the Gate-keeping theory: propounded by Kurt Lewin, in 1947. This theory assumes that the media acts as a gate keeper who allows and disallows certain contents according to its discretion. They act supposedly in the interest of the public. This function had more bite when the press was largely analogue and limited in size and ownership. These days however, with the advent of the social media, the control of what gets to the public is a lot more difficult now. For the very formal platforms this still subsists. This Gate-keeping nature of the media has been exploited greatly by authorities and other media owners with special interest to keep some information away from the public while also letting out those that will further their cause.

The Nigerian Media and National Events

According to Aghamelu (2013) the history of elections in Nigeria warrants a reason to assess the divergent roles of the media in the country's political process within the framework of our national political goal. As it concerns education, information, mobilization and monitoring, the processes that have characterized various elections raises serious questions. The many ugly incidences of electoral malpractices which have repeatedly threatened the realization of credible elections and national integration in Nigeria attest abundantly to this claim. Several occasions have arisen that required the media to soothe or escalate the situation. After Nigeria's independence in 1960, the mass media orientation unfortunately gravitated towards reinforcing tribal and sectional sentiments in preference to national unity, identity and integration. The media became parochial in their reporting of events. They dedicated themselves to the articulation of particular ethnic interest (Udoudo and Asak 2008). Media accounts during this period significantly raised tension, which created suspicion among the citizenry and almost led to the disintegration of the corporate existence of the country.

For instance, besides the role played by the media in helping Nigeria attain independence, which was mainly agitation against the aberration that the system represented, many people attribute the first bloody coup of 1966 to the sensational slant, reporting took. The actions of the media, particularly the print was replete with tribal sentiments, a situation many believed served to encourage the mutineers that attempted the overthrow of the civilian administration of Sir Ahmadu Bello. Though, the coup was botched, it still served to truncate Nigeria's first republic. Regrettably, the same press did too little to assuage the ethnic upset brought about by that action. Indeed, it was an uphill task for anyone to attempt explaining the imbalance in the pattern of assassination that characterized the coup. A counter coup was inevitable, especially, given that the head of the new military government was of the Ibo extraction. It did happen and the ethnic divide became further deepened more because the killings again were slanted in a vengeful fashion. The civil war that ensued required so much of propaganda and the media inevitably became enmeshed extensively in it, with heavy ethnic biases that manifested significantly in the various reports. The 1967-1970 war revealed the level of distrust that existed between the various ethnic groups in Nigeria, with the attendant conflicting interests and divisions (Okwuchukwu et al, 2014).

When the war ended in 1970, Nigeria relied again, heavily on the media to attain what the then Head of state, General Yakubu Gowon, called the 3Rs (Reconstruction, Reconciliation and Rehabilitation). The Onus was on the media to preach peace and help promote the consciousness of oneness among Nigerians. To a reasonable extent it can be said that the emphasis on the indivisibility of Nigeria has quite been effective. Many also believe that the subsequent coups experienced in Nigeria have, like the first one, relied heavily on the disappointment, disaffection and discontent expressed through the media to justify their actions. The Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria has particularly served as the default broadcast station from where coups are announced. The Nigeria Television Authority often complement, especially if such a coup succeeds or is able to persist till evening of the D-Day. Two attempted coups, the 1973 Dimka adventure, and the 1990 Orkar coup, though bloody, could not be broadcast on the NTA.

This is because they were foiled quite early in the day. Both media houses, however still served as the chief channels through which the authorities reasserted themselves. The 1990 coup was fashioned like a revolution as conveyed by the speech made by Major Gideon Orkar himself. One of the most controversial parts of that broadcast was the resolve by the rebelling soldiers to excise five Northern states from the rest of Nigeria. This action was a direct response to insinuations from the media overtime that that part of Nigeria symbolized the dominance and oppression that the North had come to be associated with. Many other controversial remarks like that were contained in that broadcast. Those remarks signaled danger and raised doubt about the workability of such a blunt approach. Failure was inevitable and many of the implicated officers were tried and summarily executed. Media reports on the aftermath were unanimous on the reality that a disintegration of the country had been averted with the failure of that coup.

The significance of the media especially with regards to matters of election, pre- election, during the election and post-election periods cannot be overemphasized. An event that occurred sometime in the United States further reinforces the relevance of the media to matters of national interest. It is significant to note that it was an investigative report by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward on President Richard Nixon's surreptitious efforts to influence the electoral process in the United States that led to his resignation on 9th August 1974. The president had planned to use stolen documents against his opponents. The discovery sparked general resentment in America and beyond (Oboh, 2007). Prior to the 1993 general elections in Nigeria, the voting pattern during elections had generally followed ethnic lines: basically a North versus South affair. This divide took precedence over everything, a situation that robbed Nigeria of competent leadership. The fate of many competent individuals is sacrificed often on the altar of zoning system or principle of indigene-ship.

A rare occurrence on the political landscape of Nigeria, however remains indelible in the country's history: Nigerians on June, 12th 1993 rose above ethnic divide to rally behind the candidacy of Moshood Abiola, a southerner with an unusual support base from the Northern part of Nigeria and a good enough appeal from the Eastern part of Nigeria. Even though this was attributed to his usual extra ordinary philanthropic tendencies, the role of the media in making him that popular cannot be overemphasized. Interestingly, Chief Abiola, himself was a Media entrepreneur; he owned the famous Newspaper, *Concord*; an advantage he used to the maximum. The Nigerian press has never been more united in their pursuance of a goal as they did in the case of Chief Moshood Abiola's candidacy. The election, despite being adjudged as being very transparent and seamless was annulled by the military authorities. Expectedly, the press responded with all vehemence, a situation that made the General Ibrahim Babangida administration uncomfortable all through till he eventually quit office.

The 2015 elections, regrettably took on some ethnic coloration, with the Ibos, almost shunning completely, the candidacy of Muhammadu Buhari, whom they see as personifying the North's desperation to get power back. These sentiments were expressed freely in reports and articles written in the papers. Political observers are of the opinion that the media had never been more involved in an election like they did with the 2015 general elections. The social media gave it another dimension completely as almost everybody had a voice. Comments flowed freely through platforms like facebook, twitter, instagram, and BBM. Media houses took sides with their candidates of choice and many abandoned decorum and professional ethics. A case in point was AIT's perceived opposition to the candidacy of General Muhammadu Buhari. Several documentaries and jingles ran on that channel, maligning the person of Major General Muhammadu Buhari and his perceived supporters. A few others, notably Channels television however remained very professional as they did creditably well to balance their reportage of the activities of the two major political parties. The Nigerian media established clearly that the 2015 General Elections qualified as the most rancorous, that threatened the country's image, and that the exercise was bereft of ideological content, but was rather fixed on personal abuses and vendetta (Yaqub and Maikudi, 2015).

The Yar'Adua presidency constituted some sort of challenge to the Nigerian people. It was a situation that was predicated on the protracted ill health he had to contend with while presiding over the affairs of the nation. The situation was further complicated by the attitude of members of his kitchen cabinet who decided to shroud the entire episode in secrecy. Things got to a head when it was becoming obvious he was incapacitated, yet his aids would not admit it. The press was unanimous in their position that a cabal had hijacked governance and was merely playing on the intelligence of Nigerians. The media therefore along with the civil society group, notably the Tunde Bakare led *Save Nigeria* group intensified agitation for Goodluck Jonathan, the then vice president to be made acting president. The authorities reluctantly succumbed and the Nigerian senate, citing doctrine of necessity voted as such. President Yar adua eventually died on May 10th 2010 and constitutionally, Goodluck Jonathan was sworn in as president. The entire episode smacked of high level conspiracy to breach the constitution to the benefit of a privileged few. It was one occasion the Nigerian media and indeed the people stood up to insist on the right thing and ultimately they prevailed. The Media has also been largely responsible for what Nigerians know of themselves as a corporate entity, their size, and philosophy and also of what the rest of the world know about them. The Media constantly makes reference to the historical path of the country and how well or how badly it has have fared over the years, while drawing comparison with its contemporaries within and outside the continent.

The entertainment media has also done reasonably well in promoting the cultural identity and ideals of Nigeria. Opeyemi (2008) opines that *Nollywood*, the name the Nigeria's movie industry, is known by has been a huge success. By definition, it is Nigeria's movie industry created by Nigerian movie producers for the Nigerian people. The initial hiccup that characterized this name has since been put aside and it is now generally accepted that Nollywood applies to the Nigerian Movie Industry. In terms of ranking, it comes third in the world after Hollywood (USA) and Bollywood (India). Nollywood movies regularly showcase Nigerian cultural ideals to the rest of the world, earning for her in the process substantial recognition, revenue and also helping to correct many wrong impressions about Nigerians as a people. It is instructive to note that some portrayals of aspects of the country's culture sometimes give the wrong impression about Nigerians as a people.

The most worrisome of these impressions are voodoo scenes and scenes that show people engaging in rituals that require sacrificing human lives. Many people across Africa have as a result been led to believe actual rituals happen randomly across Nigeria. This, in the final analysis does not put the Nigerian people in good light. Many people are also of the opinion that Nigerian movie producers have not done enough to change the world's perception of Nigerians as notoriously corrupt set of people. There is also a concern for the quality of movies churned out regularly from Nigeria. The largely poor quality is attributed to inadequate funding and the involvement of too many untrained professionals. Gladly, there is presently a conscious effort to elevate the standards of the movies as evidenced by top quality productions from the likes of Kunle Afolayan and Tade Ogidan. Somehow, these set of producers are beginning to attract funding from relevant institutions, a factor that has impacted significantly on the recent flicks like *October One*, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and the *CEO*. Furthermore, Nigerians are beginning to attract celebrated Hollywood actors to take an interest in the industry and possibly take on roles in some of the movies. A few of Nollywood stars like Genevive have also started playing roles in international movies.

Nigeria's brand of music including afro beat as typified by the late legend; Fela Anikulapo kuti has also brought in international recognition. His protégé and son, Femi kuti has been nominated severally at the global annual Grammy awards. Many other Nigerians doing contemporary music have also been getting international acclaim. The idea of collaboration with artistes of foreign extraction, especially western countries was for a very long time a fantasy the average young Nigerian musician doing contemporary music dreamt of. Although, there had been numerous collaborations between many Nigerian musicians and their African counterparts, it was Tuface Idibia who first had the opportunity to do a duet with American R n B artiste, R. Kelly. Though that was quite a feat, it must be noted that the collaboration did not culminate into any remarkable measure of commercial success. Since then, other collaborations have been consummated between Nigerian musical artistes and their counterparts from the west and across the world. In general, the music industry has done well in terms of promoting the image of the country abroad and also the commonality of its constituent parts.

The exploits of Nigerians in athletics have also contributed in promoting the Nigerian brand, something the Nigerian press has echoed generously. Most memorable of the achievements in this wise is the gold medal in football from the Atlanta 1996 Olympic tournament. Shortly before then, Nigeria ranked number 5 in world soccer. Indeed, many believe that nothing has united Nigerians better than the game of soccer. The likes of Jay jay Okocha, Rashidi Yekini and kanu Nwankwo have

all become brand icons for Nigeria. The potency of the game of football is a reality that is not lost on the Nigerian media at all as evident from the ample space dedicated to sports.

Conclusion

Nigeria, like many other countries is made up of diverse cultural and social groups. The obligation to keep it united and in prosperity rest heavily on the media, given their ability to mobilize the citizenry with greater ease. This, they have naturally done, though their ethnic biases occasionally get in the way and disaffection from the people ensue instead. The media functions as watchdogs that are in a position to draw attention to special developments as it concerns the nation. This position further emphasizes the role of the media on national security and other issues of national importance. The discretionary power of the media on what the people read, see or hear has never been in doubt. What has been in the centre of controversy is the capacity of those in whose hands reside such enormous powers to use that power judiciously and in public interest. Media professionals have the options to use the power of media instruments in their hands either to serve the nation or indulge in self-propelled interest.

The media ought to be objective as it carries out its functions. Several of the coup d'état in Nigeria are blamed on the press in the sense that their reporting of events prepared the ground for the instability. Similar trends characterized our elections, except for the 1993 exercise. On the whole however, it must be acknowledged that the Nigerian media has done creditably well in promoting the identity of the country as well as keeping the people together. However, much more can still be done and this paper believes that the Nigerian media has the capacity to do more if properly sensitized

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