IMPERATIVE OF TOTAL NEWSPAPERING FOR SURVIVAL IN NIGERIAN NEWSPAPER INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT.

The paper examined the survival of newspapers in the Nigerian newspaper industry. It traces the history of newspapers in Nigeria and noted that it was only those papers that were able to adopt total newspapering as survival strategy that are still on the news stand. This policy, however, bears negative consequences for professionalism and public service journalism. The paper concluded that while total newspapering as a survival strategy is inevitable, journalism regulatory authorities in the country must ensure adherence to professionalism in the industry.
INTRODUCTION

Traditionally newspapers as mass media inform, educate, entertain and play their part in the transmission of cultural heritage. Newspapering in Nigeria, which can be said to have effectively begun in 1859 with the establishment of Iwe-Iroyin by the Reverend Henry Townsend in Abeokuta, is about a hundred and fifty years old. Along the line, however, there has been a mushrooming of titles on the news stand and conversely, a great deal of harvesting of most of these titles.

While they lasted, these papers saw it as obligatory to adequately inform their readers. News were largely defined and determined by professionals in the newsroom. They existed to basically serve ‘public interest’. This view is attested to by Hallin in Curran and Gurevitch (2000:222) that:

*Traditional newspaper owners wanted to make money, of course. But they were often satisfied with profit margins of 5-7 per cent, and were strongly oriented towards the prestige and public standing of their papers. It was in that economic context...that journalistic professionalism thrived.*

The orientation of founding fathers of the first set of newspapers in colonial days and up to the 70s in Nigeria was no doubt similar. However, these were in the days of sufficient funding for the one-man owned newspapers and adequate subvention by government for its newspapers. Economic realities of the mid 20th century and early 21st century have put many newspapers in financial straits that compelled the search for fund from other sources, a search that often bear implications for professionalism and ‘traditional’ media practice.

Suddenly, profit generation has shot up as an essential ingredient in the media houses, including newspapers. Government owned media are not spared. This dilemma, or is it reality, is put succinctly by Hallin (2000) when he stated that there “is a change in the
economics of the news media, which has shifted the balance between business and journalism”, a balance skewed in favour of business.

Gannet (1979) was even more forthright on newspapers as profit making ventures when he stated that they (newspapers) are a “dependable profit machines in good times and bad”.

This new reality of the prominence of market forces impacting even government owned media is made by Picard (1989:14) when he wrote that:

> Media in the United States are for the most part capitalist ventures operated private parties for the purpose of generating profit. Even not for-profit media – such as public broadcasting or organization operated media – are influenced by the principles of the market system and are thus affected by its operation.

He further stated that the media, newspaper inclusive, operate within an economic system and try to meet the need of four clearly distinct groups. These are:

- Media owners who are concerned with the preservation of the firm and its assets (both public and private), high rate of return on investment and company growth.
- Audience (readers) who desire high quality media products and services.
- Advertisers who desire access to their target audience at a relatively low price and
- Employees that expects good compensation and general wellness attendant to their being employed by the firm.

This scenario is evident in the operation of government owned media in Nigeria. From inception, government – owned print media had always been in the forefront of the struggle for advertisement. So successful in this respect was the defunct Daily Times newspaper that it was, while it lasted, the prime choice print medium for advertisers. Even electronic media, Radio Nigeria and Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) have had to go partially commercial in order to augment fund allocated to them by the Federal Government. Indeed, the NTA has
taken this to another level by allocating prime time or hours to transmit live events as mundane as chieftaincy titles conferment or wedding ceremonies for huge sums of money. One such transmission took place sometime in January, 2009 when the wedding programme of a prominent chief in South Western Nigeria was transmitted between 10 am and 5 p.m.

The focus of this paper is an examination of how this paradigm shift is reflected in newspapering in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two major schools of thoughts on this subject are examined. One is the ‘readership theory’ and the other ‘stockholder theory’. Hallin (2000:222) wrote concerning the readership theory that:

*Newspapers are doing what they must to respond to a dangerous decline in readership, becoming more responsive in an effort to hold on to ‘customers’ who can choose between a number of sources of information...newspaper readership is indeed declining...Given these facts, newspapers had no choice but to find out what modern readers wanted and give it to them.*

The implication of ‘serving news that fit’ or market-driven news has given American print media a colouration. This includes shorter stories, colour and graphics and a shift in the agenda away from traditional ‘public affairs’ and towards lifestyle features and ‘news you can use’. (ibid: 221)

In course of this paper, it shall be examined whether or not these traits also characterize Nigerian newspapers.

**Stockholder Theory**

Essentially this theory argues that “public service notions of journalism have been pushed aside” (ibid:222) Its proponents argue about its inevitability given low circulation
figures being recorded by newspapers and high cost of production partly attendant to this. Of course, these twin problems no doubt afflict newspaper houses in Nigeria and hence make te stockholder theory a proper peg on which to partly hang our discuss in this paper.

BRIEF ON THE NEWSPAPER INDUSTRY IN NIGERIA

Between 1859 when the first newspaper, Iwe Irohin, was published in Abeokuta and 2009, Nigeria had on its newsstand, in the intervening period of a hundred and fifty years, 103 newspapers and 59 magazines. (Aina: 2002:244-250). Of course, the figure is not static. While some of the titles are still surviving and indeed thriving many more have been rested. Prominent among the titles that have weathered the storm are The Tribune, The Punch, The Guardian and The Vanguard group of newspapers.

However, a notable feature of newspaper publication in Nigeria is the relative ease with which many of the titles go into oblivion. For instance, of the 103 newspapers listed by Aina (2002), less than ten survived for more than two decades. A combination factors no doubt account for this. Prominent among these are nature of ownership, economic, political, social and even technological developments.

OWNERSHIP PATTERN

From the days of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe’s West African Pilot that was banned by the colonialist in 1945 and Obafemi Awolowo’s The Nigerian Tribune founded in 1949, Nigerian politicians have always been involved in the newspaper industry in Nigeria, apparently to propagate their views and ideals.

Taking a cue from the nationalists, post independent politicians in Nigeria like Chief M.K.O. Abiola, founder of the Concord Group of newspapers, used papers in his Concord
Group stable, National and Sunday Concord, not only to fight the opposition Unity Party of Nigeria, but also to promote him politically.

Irrespective of the actual owner, political party newspapers or one that is overtly partisan, have a common history. From the West African Pilot, the National Concord to The Champion group, they hardly outlive their founders or their political interests.

Yet another clearly identifiable category of ownership structure in Nigeria newspaper industry is the business man-owner. Papers that clearly fall into this category are Alex Ibru’s the Guardian group of newspapers, Nduka Obiagbena’s This Day newspaper, Olu Abodunrin’s The Punch newspapers and Sam Amuka pemus’s Vanguard Group of newspapers. The pursuit of profit and survival instincts occasioned by environmental factors like closure of newspaper houses by government or confiscation of copies, need to acquire modern printing machines and inflation occasioned by high cost of production and sharp drop in copies sold have at one point or another made the newspapers to either jettison journalistic principles or diversity into ventures that compromise journalistic ideals.

TOTAL NEWSPAPERING TO THE RESCUE

In order to survive, Nigerian newspapers have embraced the concept of ‘total newspapering’. According to Towles (1984):

*The separation between journalism and business so dear to the heart of the ‘traditional’ journalist is increasingly giving way to the concept of ‘total newspapering’: the idea that circulation, sales and editorial efforts must be integrated, all directed towards the projected marketing news-information.*

To this end, Underwood (1993) observes that:

*Editors are increasingly expected to have business training, and market research increasingly influences editorial*
decisions. Often there is considerable tension between the cultures of journalism and marketing.

This Day newspaper is well known for its “This Day Award”. Through this annual event the paper presents award for “good performance” mostly to state chief executives. The subjectivity of the criteria for selection and the hobnob with state chief executives ensure good financial returns, but no doubt bears negative implications for editorial independence on issues affecting such awardees.

The above notwithstanding, this category of business-driven newspapers have succeeded in surviving in the turbulent Nigerian newspaper industry. The colourations of newspapers defined by the readership theory are all evident in these papers. News stories are shorter, colour and graphics are generously used on the sports pages and business pages which feature abundance of graphs dealing with issues that affect the economy. Features articles on ‘celebrities’ are common place.

ROLE OF ADVERTISERS

Yet another clear evidence of the practice of ‘total newspapering’ in Nigerian media in general and print media in particular, is the issue of advertisers and advertisement. In this regard professional sanctity is violated with impunity. Front pages of newspapers are now frequently surrendered to advertisement. Also prime time on radio and television are conveniently taken over by sponsored programmes that rake in millions of naira. This is evident from the number of programmes on our airwaves produced by the so called independent producers, programmes which in the main are of questionable quality.

The longest surviving and most thriving newspapers in Nigeria today, except one (The Tribune) are located in Lagos, the acknowledged business and commercial hub of the
nation. Their survival is largely tied to their ability to attract advertisers. These newspapers are The Guardian group, The Punch group, Vanguard group, This Days.

The influence of advertisers on newspapers cannot be over emphasized. Bettig and Hall (2003:5) highlighted relationship between the mass media and advertisement when they stated that “the history of the mass media is intimately bound up with the history of advertising”. Indeed it is common saying that “news sell the paper, adverts sustain it”.

Advertisers exercise both subtle and direct influence on the media. First, they determine media structure through determining where to spend their money and support media outlets that reach the right demographics group (Ibid, 2003:5).

Second, they exercise direct effect on media content by threatening to withdraw their adverts from hostile media. The wrap around advert invades the sanctity of the front and back pages of newspapers. (Oso, 2012). An example of this was in the Monday, February 2, 2009 edition of The Nation Newspaper. It carried the advertisement of Global Fleet Oil and Gas. Yet another example can be found on the front page of Nigeria Tribune of Tuesday, 15th December, 2009. On Friday August 10, 2012, The Punch newspaper surrendered its front and back pages to the advertisement of Star beer as a ‘wrap-around’. The influence of the advertiser on media contents is emphasized by Tony Momoh,(2007) a onetime editor of the Daily Times, thus:

>This is the influence which advertisers bring to bear on editorial decisions. It is not unusual for the proprietor to tell the editor that he does not want a particular material published in his paper at the prompting an advert patron. There is hardly any editor or anyone in position to make editorial judgement who has not been confronted with embarrassing decision to pull out of the press what the owner had to remove.

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Indeed, the influence of advertisers is so overwhelming on our newspapers that they take up desired spaces such that news are only “shovelled” into “the news hole” left.

These practices bear implications for the newspaper industry. On the positive side, enough revenue is generated to keep the business going. This bent for survival is in tune with the thinking of Murdock in Gurevich, et al (1983:118) that:

*The communication/industry produces peculiar commodities. Given this fact, the media have to operate within the basic tenets of industrial production of which the capitalist variant appears the only thriving survivor; pursuit of profit thus becomes a “sin qua non” for survival.*

This point was emphasized by Ige and Ajijola (2009) when they wrote that “realization of the profit objective is vital for the media outfit”. They stated further that the objective is relentlessly pursued, many at times to the detriment of higher professional standards. The content components of these papers are such as serve “desirable audience only “Bettig and Hall (2003:84). Oso (2012), Abati(2000) and Allern (2002) all contend that news is literally for sale occasioned by the need for survival by newspaper outfits.

As a critical factor in Nigeria newspaper industry, advertisers will always remain important determinants of the survival or otherwise of newspapers especially in the face of the glaring failure of governments to complete or survive in the industry. However, the management of the influence of advertisers such that the basic responsibility of newspapers as media for information, education, entertainment and socialization (and) motivation of both the society and individual within it, (Sobowale, 1995:37) will not be sacrificed on the altar of profit expediency will remain a great task for professionals. How this can be done should be of serious concern to Nigerian media scholars and practitioners.
CONCLUSION

Faced with a readership that is increasingly inclining more towards aural and visual messages due to demographic changes and economic realities, the inclination of Nigerian newspapers towards ‘total newspapering’ would appear inevitable. This has two important implications. Journalism training has to be reoriented to accommodate more training in economics, the arts and the economy in general. Also, the Nigerian Union of Journalists, The Guild of Editors and The Nigerian Press Council have a lot to do in ensuring that professionalism is not completely sacrificed on the altar of economic survival expediency by Nigerian Newspaper.
1. REFERENCES


