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## News Commercialization in Nigeria: Undermining Issues in Public Interest for Financial Gains

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### **Abstract:**

*The sanctity of the news is gradually being infiltrated by commercial messages of propaganda in the interest of government, private organizations, and elite individuals. The news which ought not to be tampered with because of its importance to fulfilling the social responsibility function of the media to the society, in reality seems to be slowly and steadily losing focus in Nigeria. Broadcast organizations commercialize the news broadcast in exchange of financial gains; raising concerns as to in whose interest the news is? This paper discusses the two levels of news commercialization identified to be in practice in Nigeria which are: the institutional, and the individual journalist levels of news commercialization. It further examines the implications of news commercialization on the social responsibility function of the media, as well as the ability of broadcast audience to receive adequate and relevance messages of social importance.*

**Key words:** News, News Commercialization, Social Responsibility, Media, Broadcast Audience

### **1. Introduction**

News commercialization has become a major trend in news treatment globally, and an issue of 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. Firstly there is need to establish the concept of news in the context of which it is regarded in this paper.

News is regarded as any report of current events which are of public interest and social significance. The concept of news was in existence long before the advent of newspapers and electronic media. For instance, Before the advent of the print and electronic media in Africa, people shared important information by word of mouth, and through traditional channels such as: the town crier, venue-oriented communication i.e. The village square, market, stream, beer parlour, the palace, and through signs and symbols.

These traditional channels of communication had a major limitation of the inability to disseminate information to a heterogeneous audience, and this gave rise to the advent of mass media channels of communication such as: newspaper, radio, television, and the internet. The news thereby took a different coloration – providing an avenue through which individuals keep abreast with significant occurrences within one's immediate environment, as well as monitor the international scene.

There is no better way of fueling 'the need to know' interest and yarn for information than through the mass media which presents news from around the world to a vast heterogeneous audience. Hartley (1982, p. 5) opine that the codes and conventions of news enables media audience become 'news-literate' which is the ability to interpret the world at large in terms of the codes we have learnt from the news. This paper therefore considers news from the broadcast perspective.

The National Broadcasting Code of Nigeria in Section 5.0.2 defines broadcast news as the most potent of all forms of news which ideally should be seen to promote a:

- Truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of each day's local, national and international events;
- Forum for the exchange of views, representing every stratum of society, for national consensus; and
- Presentation and clarification of the goals and values of society.

(NBC, 2010 p.43)

No doubt, the expectation of the NBC is that broadcast news in Nigeria will be a socially constructed product of the media. Tuchman (1978) as cited in Shoemaker and Cohen (2006 Pp. 3&4), exploring the news-making process opined that the structure and labour division of news organizations largely influence the definition of news. The expected by product of this production process is news packages that mirrors the society in all ramifications and adequately reflect the surveillance otherwise regarded as the watchdog function of the media as is encapsulated by the social responsibility theory of the press.

The Social responsibility theory of the press largely justifies its surveillance function. It sanctions the media (both the organization and individual journalists) as surveyor of the society, hence; while the masses tend to survey the world for ideas, people, and events of personal interest, the media concentrates on the public sphere; relaying information for which the masses ought to pay attention but do not ordinarily have access to (Shoemaker and Cohen, 2006 p. 30).

In bringing value to bear on information, the media sensitize the masses on issues of shared concern thereby setting the agenda for public debate through the news. It is from the media that the society gains information about the political process and other vital information of social interest.

According to McQuail (2000 p.150) as cited in (Omenugha and Oji 2008 p.18), summarized the basic tenet of the social responsibility theory by stating that the basic obligation of the media to the society is that the “news media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant” in its dissemination of news. This raises a pertinent question of what information should be considered newsworthy?

## 2. Elements of News

In order to adequately identify and evaluate events as it occurs, journalists should apply ‘news sense’ which is the ability to identify that which is newsworthy (Shrivastava, 1991 p. 3). The classic elements of news provide the guidelines to determine what is newsworthy. Ferguson, Pattern, and Wilson (1998 p.58), identified the classic elements of news as:

- **Timeliness** –News is a highly perishable commodity as ‘old news is no news’. Timeliness refers to the newness of the fact(s). In the highly competitive world of broadcasting, every medium tries to be first with news because no one is interested in stale information.
- **Proximity** – this is the nearness of the occurrence of an event to the audience. The prime concern of news is to report significant information from the immediate environment as the first concern of the audience is to be updated with news that affect their daily lives.
- **Prominence** – this refers to the news worthiness of an individual or event. The element of prominence explains a great deal about how news is handled. Shrivastava (1991 p.5), explains prominence in news as the ‘involvement of eminent personalities’ such as government officials, artists, and other public figures.
- **Consequence** –this refers to the importance of the event. For example, ‘dog bites man’ is not considered as news, but it will readily become news if a man chases after a dog and bites it.
- **Human Interest** – this is the emotional context of news events. Anything that appeals to everybody not because of interest in the subject but because everybody shares human experience has news value. For example, issues of cultural, political, and economic value
- **Conflict** – this is an element of news that is found in most news. It involves: tension, surprise, and suspense. According to Nelson (1989) in Shoemaker and Cohen (2006, p.11), Psychologists have found that media audience pay more attention to novel things than routine events. This reinforces the school of thought that the mass media considers bad news as ‘good’ news.

Not only do these elements of news determine the news worthiness of events, it also guide the ombudsman (news editors) to prioritize the news in order of importance, i.e what news will constitute headline. The basic tenet of the classic elements of news can be summarized to be that for an event to be considered news worthy; it should be in the interest of the people. Unfortunately, commercialization of the news has become a major factor militating against this in Nigeria. Not only has it undeniably affected the ability of the Nigerian broadcast media to adequately execute its social responsibility to the society, it largely undermines the credibility of the news.

According to Idowu (2001 p.4), for news to be useful it has to be credible, for it to be trusted it must measure up to some exacting standard of assessment such as: accuracy (when in doubt leave out), balance (reflect all sides of the story), fairness (impartiality to all parties involved), human angle (people minded), depth (well researched/investigated), presentation (telling the story rightly), and reward (be of social relevance to audience).

Therefore, this paper examines the state of broadcast news commercialization in Nigeria, as well as its implications on discuss of issues in public interest, and the audience.

## 3. The Concept of 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) in National Open University of Nigeria (nd p.28) defines news commercialization as the deliberate presentation of sponsored information to unsuspecting media audience who perceive these information as conventional public interest-oriented news.

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (1980 p.152) as cited in Omenugha and Oji (2008 p.13), expressing concern over news commercialization globally stated 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”

Harrison (2006 p.100), captured news commercialization as an economic process of ‘commodification’ whereby media audience are primarily seen as consumers. This economic rationalization of journalism has been aggravated by the fragmentation of the mass

audiences as consumers. Lacy 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.

As competition for readers and advertisers on the internet has intensified, commercial interference appears to be rising, especially in American news media where news has been produced by business enterprises for more than a century and a half, and where almost all news is produced to earn a profit. On the other hand, in Eastern Europe, where the state once controlled media, commercialization is a new concern.

European scholars puzzled over why poor and working class people would support leaders whose policies kept them down. Political economist pointed to the media as a prime suspect. Murdock and Golding (1971 Pp. 228, 230) opined that “the part played by the media in cementing the consensus in capitalist society is only occasionally characterized by overt suppression or deliberate distortion...The routines of news work lead to systematic distortions that label anything threatening to the status quo as illegitimate or ephemeral. According to Agbaje (2001 p. 45), one basic global reality is that the news is largely about prominent names and personalities. It takes the marginalized, weak and vulnerable majority of the society far more time and resources than it takes the powerful and privileged minority to get heard in the media. They (lower class) would often have to ‘commit an offence, constitute public nuisance, become an odd ball, be in unusually unfortunate circumstances or hook up to the powerful to be noticed by the media’.

#### 4. News Commercialization in Nigeria

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.

It is important at this point to note that broadcast news commercialization in Nigeria is not peculiar to privately owned broadcast media alone. According to Ekwu (1996 p.63) as cited in NOUN (nd, p.30), faced with the inability to pay salaries of workers, produce or service available equipment and myriad of other problems occasioned by the decline in government subvention, the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) devised several other means to make money.

He further explained that for a prescribed fee, news broadcast become a media relations platform for individuals, communities, private and public organizations, government, and ministries to send messages to its various audience. These messages are presented as part of the news bulletin in the forms of straight news reports, news analysis, or commentary after the news.

The deregulation of the broadcast industry in 1997 by the Military government of Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida also contributed to the compromise of the news. Initially, Private owned media relied heavily on commercial advertisers and airtime sale for a bulk of its revenue. As more private broadcast organizations were licensed, the competition became stiff providing advertiser a variety of media to choose from. Commercialization of news broadcast then became an additional life-line for media organizations.

Unfortunately, we find that the Nigerian broadcast media is largely driven by commercial interests. As a result, news broadcast have becomes commoditized. This commodification is seen in Nigerian broadcast media through the indirect advertisement and presentation of public relations messages as part of the news bulletin.

A vivid example of this is the presentation of messages on reality television competitions such as: Nigerian Breweries ‘Guilder Ultimate Search’ and MTN’s ‘Project Fame’ as part of the news bulletin. The presentation of such commercial news speaks volume about the lack of prioritization and editorial rigor given to the news, as not all events attain the level of relevance required to be presented as part of the broadcast news bulletin.

#### 5. Levels of Broadcast News Commercialization in Nigeria

According to Omenugha and Oji (2008 p.18), the commercialization of news broadcast operates at two levels in Nigeria:

- The institutional level
- The individual journalist level

At the institutional level, charges are ‘officially’ placed for sponsored (commercial) news programmes. For example, Ogbuoshi (2005) enlists the commercial news rates of Radio Nigeria Enugu as follows:

- Commercial news – N47, 000
- News commentary/political news – N52, 000
- Special news commentary/political – N60, 000

Commercialization at the institutional level is flourishing because editors, publishers and broadcast media owners perceive their organizations as profit making venture that should yield financial return. When media owners map out commercial news as money-making-avenue, it automatically means that hard news reports might be dropped or postponed in order to accommodate commercial news items on the news bulletin.

Writing on the semantics of commercialization of news by broadcast stations in Nigeria, Tom Adaba, a former Director General of the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), distinguishes between the “*legitimate sales of airtime for paid messages adjacent to or within breaks in the news*” and “*charging news sources for the privilege of covering and relaying their pre-paid views or messages as news*”. According to him:

*in the first case, what the sponsors are buying is “the credibility of the newscast and newscasters to confer status by association on their company’s logo, message or product” while in the latter: What the broadcast station is doing is selling cheaply the integrity of its newscast and newscasters by attesting to the “truth” of the claims of the so called “sponsor”.... (Omenugha and Oji, 2008 p.15)*

At the individual journalist level, journalist or group of journalists makes monetary demands to cover an event or report the event. This is referred to as the ‘brown envelope’ syndrome. According to McManus (2009, p. 219), the economic rationalization of journalism has been aggravated by the ‘splintering of mass audiences as consumers’.

The brown envelope is a metaphor for bribery and corruption in Nigerian journalism. It is popularly referred to as ‘kola’ by some media professionals. Onyisi(1996, p. 80) in NOUN (nd, p.22), defines the brown envelop as the “practice of offering and receiving gratifications in the form of gifts, drinks, food, sex or money – in order to influence the judgment of a journalist”.

In the past, journalists received these gratifications from politicians, government officials, organization, and individuals seeking to influence the journalist sense of news value judgment or let go of certain information. However, in the content of commercialization of news, the opposite is the case as journalists now demand for money, favors, transport fare, gifts etcetera.

There is no doubt that the brown envelope has become an endemic ethical problem confronting journalism profession in Nigeria yet opinions about its moral implication are divided. The practice of journalism for personal gains compromises both ethics and objectivity which are major aspects of the social responsibility function of the media. According to Onyisi (1996, p.24) in NOUN (nd, p.24), there are two basic schools of thought: those who argue that journalists accept the brown envelop when offered as an expression of their consonance with African Culture. On the other hand, are those of the school of thought that the brown envelope is an act of bribery.

Regardless of the circumstance or situation, offering and or receiving brown envelope prevents tarnishes media credibility and creates instability in the society. One of the major reasons why it is difficult to put an end to the brown envelop syndrome in Nigeria is the fact that it is considered to be a meal ticket for numerous journalists who work for media organizations that owe salaries for months. Therefore, journalists are indirectly encouraged to find alternative means of sustaining their families.

On the other hand, some media organizations mandate journalists with marketing responsibilities in addition to their reportorial duties. For example, Omenugha and Oji (2008 p.17) reports that journalists in charge of specialized pages or columns are made to source for adverts to support ‘their’ pages or the pages are dropped and probably with the reporter.

According to Awogbemila (2001 p.50), reporters and correspondents who meet regularly a common beat have found it beneficial to formalize their rendezvous, present a common front for getting and managing aids, grants, or gifts from their sources. Virtually every beat imaginable has a local club of news reporters which registers members and often issue identify cards. These clubs often receive funding for their activities from their news sources. (51)

In an interview with a journalist from Silverbird Television (one of Nigeria’s foremost privately owned television broadcast station), the author found out that the news bulletin of the station is divided into two categories of: commercial and non-commercial news contents. commercial news as the name implies are news stories that have been paid for by an organizations, government, individuals etcetera, while non-commercial news are hard news obtained through the investigative efforts of its journalists or obtained from international news agencies such as Reuters for a fee.

Also, studies have shown an increasing trend in the percentage of commercial to non-commercial news content in Nigeria. Omenugha and Oji (2008 p.16) in an interview with the News Editor of Enugu State Broadcasting Service (EBS) Enugu, East of Nigeria, found a monthly increase in the percentage of commercial news in 2007. Specifically, the statistics revealed that for the months of October, November and December, the percentage of commercial news contents were 40%, 47.8% and 50% respectively.

## **6. Implications of News Commercialization**

The commercialization of news broadcast in Nigeria has numerous effects on both the broadcast industry and its audience. For one, it leads to a disregard of ethical practice in journalism profession. The ethical code for journalism profession prescribes among other things that journalists exhibit high level of responsibility in deciding news contents; be fair and accurate in reporting issues of public interest; respect individuals’ right to privacy; defend the confidentiality of their sources of information; uphold decency in their reportage of issues; shun discrimination of any kind; protect national interest; and shun the act of asking for or accepting bribe and all forms of gratifications as precondition for publishing information (Fab-Ukozor, 2000; Nwodu, 2006, p.165 and Udeze, (2012) in NOUN (nd p.20). It is impossible for journalists and the broadcast media to uphold this ethical standard when it is concerned with profit making.

Secondly, the commercialization of news broadcast is a flout to the stipulation of the 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.

Thirdly, since news items are paid for, it becomes problematic for editors to edit the item based on known professional standards or principles. The saying he who plays the piper dictates the tune comes to bare at this point. Since the media would not like to lose a

major customer, they will do all that is within their reach to satisfy such client that pays enough money. News stories become so sacrosanct to the extent the editor is constrained to edit the purported news item on the basis of what might interest the sponsor, as against public interest (NOUN, nd p. 32).

The watchdog role of the media is also gradually being religated in 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 etcetera. By commercialization, certain issues of social significance are set aside (deliberately or otherwise) in order to accommodate paid-for news messages.

According to Omenugha and Oji (2008 p.25), some other negative implications of commercialization of news broadcast in Nigeria are:

- It has affected information flow tremendously – due to the fact that most news are paid for, hard news is set aside for monetary gains. The greatest flaw in the practice of news commercialization is that “news is narrowly defined against the weight of the news source's purse” (Ekwo, 1996 p.66).
- It makes the news vulnerable to abuse by interest groups who can pay their way into the media to project an idea they want people to accept positive or otherwise.
- Many Nigeria journalists and broadcast organizations have lost the zeal for investigative journalism. Many have also lost their mission turning to praise singing and propaganda, which has dire consequences for the Nigerian society. Hence, the audience is deceived into believing that a piece of advertising and public relations is news.

Finally, 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), Al Jazeera and the like for confirmation.

## 7. Conclusion

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. It should be based on reporting both local and international events of social significance to the society and not treated as a profit-making life-line by broadcast media owners and journalists. Hence, the objectivity, professionally approved criteria for determining news worthiness should be the guiding principle for news gathering and reporting.

## 8. Recommendations

- There is need for NBC intervene in order to mandate the broadcast media to live up to its social responsibility of protecting the publics' right to receive reliable and accurate information.
- Nigerian broadcast media should pay attention to the social sphere in order to adequately understand public opinion and popular interests of the people. This will guide its news gathering and reporting, as well as ensure that hardcore news becomes the focus of the news bulletin.
- The sanctity of the news should not be tampered with. Broadcast owners should be find alternative sources of funding its business such as airtime sale and commercial advertising.
- There is need to educate the audience on the value of news and standards for judging news.
- It is important that the media performs this social responsibility as people derive an understanding of the world from the news media through: news broadcasts, current affairs programmes, commentaries and the likes.

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