



Research Article

THE NIGERIAN MEDIA AND OWNERSHIP STRUCTURE: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The media has been described by both scholars and practitioners as the Third Estate of the Realm” suggesting that media plays an important role in the administration of democratic system of government. However, often the media become enmeshed in activities that compromise their expected role in the society. This paper is an appraisal of the extent to which the media in Nigeria has been compromised particularly focusing on the ownership structure and its implications for national development. The objective of the study is to examine the contemporary Nigerian media in the light of its expected responsibility in the development of Nigeria’s socio-political and economic system. Data for the study is generated from secondary qualitative sources while analysis is descriptive. Structural-functionalism theory constitutes the framework for our analysis. Among others, the paper concludes that the Nigerian media has failed in its responsibility given the unreasonable influence of proprietors of both private and public media outfits on their activities and to that extent constituted a set-back to her national development. It recommends among others, that government should make laws that forbids and punishes media organizations and individuals who on account of compromise falsify information in an attempt to realize a political advantage for a contending party or individuals.

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INTRODUCTION

The media has been variously viewed by scholars of politics and communication as a collective means through which information is disseminated to a wider audience within a given society as well as to a much larger global audience. For Inuwa I.M (2007), “it is an aggregation of all communication channels that use techniques of making a lot of direct personal communication between the communicator and the public,” Its main concern is the day-to-day activities of public organs and/or agencies as well as those of individuals and groups whose activities impact on the socio-political and economic system of a given society. In democracies, the media has historically played a vital role not only of informing but also of molding of character and shaping of the societal norms and values. To this extent, the media occupies and plays a vital role in national development. This notion may have informed the suggestion attributed to Edmond Burke, the Irish-born philosopher and politician in a debate at the British House of Commons in 1787 that the media is the “Fourth Estate of the Realm” of governance. In looking at the Media as one of the foundational structures of democracy, a leading American

statesman, Thomas Jefferson was quoted to have once declared that: “were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate for a moment to prefer the latter.” And for a one time Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru: “I would rather have a completely free press with all the danger involved in the use of that freedom, than a suppressed or regulated press” (pointblanknews.com/pbn/article...). s the *fourth estate of the realm*, the media supports the essential tripod of government in any democracy. This tripod includes the *legislature*, the *judiciary* and the *executive*, all working interdependently to realize the developmental goals of the system under which they operate.

Objective and Scope of the Study

This paper is therefore aimed at assessing the role of the media in contemporary Nigeria with special focus on its real and potential implication(s) for national development. By media here we mean both the print and electronic. The print media here includes newspapers and periodicals while the electronic media will include the radio, television, and the social media. This study is anchored on the following two major assumptions that:

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- The media influences policy directions and outcomes in democracies and therefore can, if not compromised, contribute positively to national development.
- The Nigerian media are compromised hence abdicating their functional roles in Nigeria's democracy and to that extent facilitates in her under-development.

Our discussion will be revolving around the following research questions:

- Does ownership structure compromise the role of the media in national development?
- What are the implications of compromised media for Nigeria's national development?

Theoretical Framework

To properly analyze and comprehend the phenomenon under study, we have elected to employ the *Structural-Functionalism theory* as employed by Talcott Parson (1951), Robert Merton (1957), and Herbert Spenser.

Structural-Functionalism Theory

This study also adopts the Structural-Functionalist theory which was initiated by scientists to explain the workings of an organism like the human biological system in which every organ has a particular function it performs to sustain the organism. In social sciences, *structuralists* like Talcott Parsons, Herbert Spenser, Robert Merton see the political system as an entity with different structures interdependently performing different and specific functional roles in order to realize certain goals for which such systems are set up. In other words, the utility of any structure is a measure of its ability to realize those ends for which it was designed in a given system. Simply stated, structural functionalism "is a framework for building theory that sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. This theory looks at society through a macro-level orientation, which is broad focus on the social structures that shape society as a whole, and believes that society has evolved like organisms. It looks at both social structure and social functions and addresses society as a whole in terms of the function of its constituent elements... A common analogy popularized by Spenser presents these parts of society as "organs" that work toward the proper functioning of the "body" as a whole (Structural-functionalism, 2016).

Structural functional approach is compatible with the trajectory of this study in the sense that based on the notion of the "fourth estate", the media is a structural part of Nigeria's socio-political and economic system. The recognition of its functional role by Nigeria's constitution is suggestive of the fact that it plays a complementary role vis-a-vis other structures of the government like the judiciary, the legislature and the executive. Its role or function is not only that of agenda-setting but as a watchdog against the excesses of the government. Similarly, it serves as a conduit through which the citizenry can keep abreast of the activities of the government so as to make informed decisions that may affect governance as well as development. Thus, if the media fails in this democratic responsibility, the consequence is tantamount to national underdevelopment.

Put differently, since this approach or theory looks at the system's structures as well as its functions, the media in our case represents such component or structural requisite of the Nigeria's democratic political system whose function is needful for the effective operation of her nascent democracy, hence contributing to her national development. This is why Parson opined that: "Some roles are bound up in institutions and social structures, for example, economic, legal, political, and educational, etc. These are functional in the sense that they assist society in operating and fulfilling its needs so that it runs smoothly." (Structural- Functionalism, 2016). The structural functional approach as a macro-sociological analysis with broad focus on social structures that shape society as a whole is therefore appropriate for analysis in this study.

National Development: A Conceptual Clarification

First, the concept of *development* may seem rather imprecise or ambiguous because what constitutes development may vary depending on what the user of the concept has in mind. It may also "refer to a change process geared at improving or making better, the life and environment of man" (Inuwa, 2007). For Dudley Sears (1985), it involves the creation of opportunities for the realization of human potentialities. Looking at development strictly from an economic perspective, Sear, D. (cited in Richard Brinkman, 1995, 1171-1188) further noted that the basic questions that ought to be raised in determining if a country is experiencing development or not are:

What has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality? If all three of these are have declined from high levels then beyond doubt this has been a period of development for the country concerned. If one or two of these central problems have been growing worse, especially if all three have, it would be strange to call the result "development" even if per capita income doubles.

But it should be noted that the phenomenon of development or underdevelopment is not merely a matter of economics in such a manner we would be talking of economic inequality, unemployment and related indices, we are, for the purpose of this study looking at "*national development*" which involves changes or advancement in a nation aimed at improving the political, economic, and social lives of the people. It could relate to that ability of a state to provide for quality welfare needs of its citizens. Granted that human need may vary depending on the level of individual self-development, we hereby mean such needs as education, housing, shelter, and associated infrastructure like roads, clean water, clean and safe environment as well as provision of employment opportunity for those able and willing to work. National development would equally suggest good legal or justice system where none is victimized on account of their race, (tribe), gender, or inability to afford legal representation. A nation can be said to be developed when its citizens can feel safe and secure under the system that requires certain of their obligations and loyalty subsumed under the Lockean *Social Contract*. Thus, the concept of *national development* is all-encompassing. When we refer to the media as "the fourth estate" or *arm* of the government, it therefore means that it is expected to contribute to the realization of some public good for the largest number of

a national citizenry in a manner that reflects a positive development.

The Media-National Development Nexus

In which ways are the media related to development? The role of the media in national development lies in their capacity and capability to educate, manipulate, sensitize, and mobilize people through information dissemination (Ucheanya, 2003). By the same token the media charts a course for the public in line with the agenda-setting role it performs. By this role, it defines the policy thought processes and the disposition of the populace towards issues as well as their significance and priority. If corruptive practices by civic leaders can be said to be retrogressive of national development, the media can *check* such excesses by intensely and critically bringing them to the public domain. Nigerian judiciary is said to lack the independence it needs to perform its constitutional responsibility, for example. The media can checkmate the influence of the executive, particularly, over potential judicial pronouncements. By playing these gate-keeper or watch dog roles, the media undoubtedly can facilitate political, economic, and social development in any democracy.

Media Compromise: The Role of Ownership Structure

Media ownership structure or what we may refer to as the proprietors of media organizations exert tremendous influence on their editors and operational staff. According to a study carried out of Unique FM, Ilesha and Galaxy TV, Ibadan in (<http://aittosprojectsolution.blogspot.com.nig/2014/03...>), it was observed that “he who pays the piper dictates the tune”. That study also observed that “proprietors expect those working in their media organizations to understand and protect their interests”. Few examples are in order as well as instructive to answer a relevant research questions, viz: Are the Nigerian Media compromised? We can seek for an explanation by looking at the media ownership structure in Nigeria, whether public or private. It was Muhammed Umar Pharook (2014) who in his: *The Nigerian Press and Its Impact on Democratic Development Through Electoral Coverage* noted that:

The remarkable role of the newspapers in the society coincides with the ownership pattern, inferring that most Nigerian dailies which are privately owned have kindled the general notion that newspapers have been influencing the masses on the choice of candidates into political offices ... It should be stated categorically ... that the ownership pattern of the Nigerian press affect coverage of political parties”.

This in turn affects the general image they have created about any candidate considered a friend by owners of such media outfits. In such situations, the unsuspecting mass public vote on the basis of what they have heard or read from the media rather than on the basis of verifiable facts. Pharook further noted that: *A close look at the media ownership pattern in Nigeria indicates a strong affiliation between the so called privately-owned newspapers and those within the corridors of power, who are in turn, politicians, thereby giving them some influence on the nature of the stories portrayed about political parties or candidates.*

Similarly, in its April 2016 edition, *The Economy*, a monthly journal of political economy based in Lagos carried a cover-page portrayal of what it captioned as “*How Governors Looted N1.2 Trillion*”. This was done in an attempt to project an image of the trajectory of the anti-graft war in Nigeria under President Buhari. What was surprising to critical inquirers, however, was that of the thirty former and present governors listed therein, none was of the All Progressive Congress, APC. This, notwithstanding the fact that some of the APC governors not listed in the journal have been indicted by official panels of inquiry in their states as having corruptibly enriched themselves. For example, Rotimi Amaechi is widely known to have allegedly single handedly bankrolled Muhammed Buhari presidential election campaign with Rivers state commonwealth while a governor. What is even more instructive is that *The Economy* is wholly owned by Chief Ikechi Emenike, a well-known Buhari confidant who used the same journal for Buhari image-making during the 2015 presidential election.

Such loftily standing politicians and former governors as Ahmed Bola Tinubu, owner of *The Nation* newspaper, Orji Uzor Kalu, owner of *The Sun*, MKO Abiola, owner of the defunct *Daily Concord*, and the *Guardian*, owned by the Ibrus were known to have used these papers to project their political interests and careers. Crossing the interests of the media owners or proprietors could also result in problems whereby executives of government (public) owned media prefers to have their lead stories carrying big portraits of them on their front pages or on TV screens in order to maintain their positions vis a vis their major opposition. In addition, private media owners often have governors, ministers and high ranking government operatives as friends, such that it would amount to employment risk for an editor or broadcast journalist to write or air any act of dishonesty involving such friends of their employers. Along this thinking as cited by Inuwa (2007), “Ogbeni Lanre had recently approached an editor of one of the...newspapers in Lagos on his article on Gbenga Daniel, governor of Ogun state; the editor out-rightly told Ogbeni Lanre that he would not publish the article because Gbenga Daniel is his friend” over this experience, Odulaye (1996), went on to observe that “journalism in Nigeria has now shifted from its position of the watchdog to collaborator in killing of the nation through misinformation and covering up for dishonest public office holders. It is no more news that editors and publishers call ministers and governors to inform them of stories about them and the possibility of killing them”. By these acts of compromise, often, facts are murdered at the altar of private interests (Inuwa, 2007).

An earlier case of the influence of the ownership structure on the activities of the media which speaks volumes of media compromise and national development goes back to an encounter between Governor-General of pre-independent Nigeria and Chief Obafemi Awolowo. As observed by Ukonu (2005):

The Governor-General, Sir John McPherson went on air and poured the vitriol on the Action Group, (AG), charging the party with what he called perfidy... Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the AG leader sought airtime on the government owned radio station, NBS, to reply to the charges but was turned down. This

action led Awolowo to establish the Western Nigeria Television.

Besides the fact that government may attempt and often do compromise the media, its control may degenerate into silencing of fearless reporters through share intimidation, threats, or through other forms of compromise including outright offer of juicy and irresistible governmental position. On this note, Uche (1989), was to observe that:

...government uses certain preferential treatment to buy the most influential journalists in the media to top posts within the government. When Tony Iredia became "notorious", or is it popular, with his POINT BLANK on NTA network, asking his guest (who were mostly government officials) fiery questions, the federal government quickly responded by first appointing him Director General of the National Orientation Agency and the Director-General of NTA. That ended his knack for asking too many questions.

And finally, the government of Olusegun Obasanjo must have been irked by certain broadcasts of AIT that was considered inimical to Obasanjo's Third Term bid. As was noted by Ukonu (p. 150):

In October 2005, the premises of African Independent Television, AIT was arbitrarily sealed off for over 24 hours by NBC officials, who alleged that AIT unethically beamed gory visual signals from the crash site of the Belview plane. But, in fact, prior to the AIT's intervention, Nigerians ...had waited in vain for three days to see if any Nigerian station or government could locate and report the crash. In May 2006, the Federal Government cancelled the network license of AIT and gave the media house of 21-day ultimatum to dismantle its transmitters and relocate its operational from Asokoro, Abuja, Nigeria. ... Noting the intimidation of opponents of a third-term proposal, Senator Uche Chukwumerije said: this is the first harassment and intimidation of a major TV station, AIT, solely on the ground that it is performing its constitutional duty of remaining dispassionate and professional in its coverage of an activity pertaining to the on-going third term controversy. The sin of AIT was that it beamed the coverage of the House of Representatives' debate on the third-term agenda...Proceedings from the debate on May 9, 2006 revealed that more members opposed third-term (on day one May 9) - 18 members were against while 11 were in support.

In what it captioned as "Denial of Access to Government Owned Media", Jibo and Okoosi-Simbine (2003, pp.180-190), observed that:

Under the Obasanjo regime, the opposition has been denied access to the government owned media. In the previous democratic dispensations, it was unheard of the opposition to be denied all access to the government-owned media. In the north, for example, even the hated United Middle Belt Congress, UMBC, was quoted in the region's media that was under the Northern Peoples' Congress, NPC government. The government-owned media played down opposition views and ridiculed them... Today, the opposition is denied any access to government-owned media in states like Benue, Abia, Osun, and Imo. In a meeting with party leaders in Makurdi, the Presidential Adviser on Inter-Party Relations, Senator

Mahmud Waziri told them that out of the four states which he had then visited, the opposition parties had complained against marginalization by the ruling PDP which denied them its mass media outfits. In Benue State, the All Peoples Party, APP, had alleged deliberate effort by the PDP government of governor George Akume to stifle its voice and perpetrate instead, uncomplimentary views about the party using the state government-owned radio station, Radio Benue... only appraisals that eulogize the government of the day are considered news-worthy by the indicted station.

Implications of Compromised Media on Nigeria's National Development

In light of the evidence of compromise with which the media in Nigeria have been associated, we can deduce that such compromises could constitute a clog in the wheel of national development. Similarly, if the media is true to its professional calling, laudable national development is equally in order. President Muhammadu Buhari, for example came to power riding on the mantra of *change* having accused previous administrations as weak in the needed fight against corruption. His government has, since inception, used all the anti-graft agencies like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, EFCC and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission, ICPC to launch, however selective, a massive arrest and indictment of known former public officials of the past administration who in one way or the other illegally enriched themselves in the course of their official duties. The media's role in the fight against corruption can be "hampered by its tendency to prejudice the public against personalities and interests from certain parts of the country" (Jibo and Okoosi-Simbine, 2003, p. 188). It was on this note that Akpan (2001, p. 17) observed that "...journalism practice in Nigeria has been reduced by a good number of practitioners to something akin to *blackmail journalism*."

The media is thus, expected to be in the vanguard of highlighting the excesses of public officials regardless of their political and/or ideological orientation, tribal and regional origins, as well as their place in the socio-economic strata of the society. Doing so could be a way of helping define the trajectory of national development.

As was observed by Ogali (2016):

...the media has often been a ready weapon of manipulation and deceit. For instance, Governor Peter Odili of Rivers State arranged a media assessment tour which celebrated him as the "Golden Governor" with report of completed projects all across Rivers State only for the same media to (later) reveal the monumental fraud and deceit characteristic of his administration.

In a similar vein, Njoku, (cited in Ogali, 2013) equally noted that the Governor of Imo State:

Rochas Okorocha was projected by the press as the epitome of good governance in Nigeria until recent crisis involving his Deputy Governor. His myriad crimes as alleged by a pressure group, Save Imo include unauthorized and unlawful use of local government allocation to the tune of N63 billion; unauthorized borrowing of N63 billion from the financial

market contrary to the Imo State Appropriation law; approval for purchase of furniture to the tune of N4 billion for Government House without proper appropriation and contrary to the Imo State Appropriation Law; approval and award of road contracts without design, advertisement, public bidding among other impeachable offences.

These cases are emblematic of typical activities of many public officials in Nigeria which the media ought to be in the forefront of objectively and critically highlighting as well as bringing its emergent discourse to the public domain for purposes of their amelioration. This is why media accountability is said to serve a useful role in a democracy. Accountability is a *sine-qua-non* for good governance which invariably leads to national development. All aspects of good governance which includes accountability can be facilitated through a strong and uncompromised media in any given society. It is only when the media is free to monitor and expose the unethical activities of public office holders as well as expose the violation of the principles under which such society is founded can such media be said to be contributing to national development. In fact, this is why in its World Press Freedom Day 2016, the UNESCO noted that “independent media is like a beacon that should be welcomed when there is nothing to hide and much to improve” in a society (UNESCO 2016).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has undoubtedly shown the significance of the media or the extent to which the media is recognized in a democracy. It has equally demonstrated that like in many democratic societies, the media play important role in governance in Nigeria especially as it relates to agenda setting, opinion molding, watch-dogging, etc. All these tend to suggest that a compromised media is likely to have a telling effect on national democratic development. This view or claim can be vented by considering the media as the fourth estate. Thus the media plays a significant supportive role to the constitutional established tripod of governance in a democracy – the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. Therefore, the inability of any of these mechanisms of governance to perform its constitutional and expected roles is tantamount to the failure of the system from sustaining itself and to that extent an emergence of regime of underdevelopment

Unfortunately, the media has become so compromised in the contemporary Nigeria and hence has been viewed with a lot of cynicism such that such compromise has affected national development in Nigeria.

In the light of the findings in this study, the following recommendations are in order:

- Stricter legal provisions ought to be instituted which forbids media organizations from deliberately falsifying information aimed at misleading the unsuspecting public.
- There should be law that bars overt influence of proprietors of media organization from victimizing their editorial staff who refuse to dilute the objectivity of the information they disseminate for public consumption. This should include laws that safeguard the employment of such staff whose actions may serve public interest

(good) but however, contradictory to the interest of the proprietors and their friends,

- Media personnel should be required to take compulsory course or attend a predetermined number of seminars which encourage application of professional ethics in information gathering and dissemination.
- Laws should be made to empower professional media organizations like the Nigeria Union of Journalists, NUJ, to de-list or withdraw the membership, certification, or licenses of erring media professionals whose track have a semblance of compromise in the discharge of their professional duties.
- Publicly funded broadcasters should be established in a manner which effectively guarantees their independence from political or other partisan influences especially in editorial matters. This was why in consideration of the lopsided media coverage that emanated from media institutions funded from the common till, *The Guardian* of Saturday June 18, 2016 opined in its editorial that there is need for a far reaching reforms in the media coverage of electioneering in Nigeria in such a way that they would (like in the United States of America) be transformed into a genuine public service broadcasters.

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