

INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF MEDIA OWNERSHIP STRUCTURES ON EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE AND NEWS REPORTING IN DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

The influence of media ownership on editorial independence remains an argument in communication scholarship. While many believe that ownership largely influences news reportage, others say the degree of such influence is minimal or conditional. With the rise of the digital age, it becomes imperative to re-examine the influence media ownership on news reporting and editorial contents. Therefore, this study investigates if media ownership in Nigeria still has an impact on editorial independence and news reportage in the digital age. The study adopted the qualitative research approach using interview for data collection. The study was anchored on the social responsibility theory and the propaganda model. The findings from the study show that even in digital age, media ownership and control still has an impact on editorial contents and news reporting in Nigeria. Also, respondents revealed that editorial independence may be jeopardized for personal remuneration and welfare. It is recommended that media owners should grant media practitioners the liberty to exercise their duties without fear while media practitioners should deliberately balance their reports.

Key Words: Media Ownership, editorial independence, digital age.

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INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, media ownership and control (either by the government or private individuals and organizations) influence the activities of the media, majority of which have made the people believe that some of the media outlets are incompetent, not fair and reliable when it comes to issues of national concerns through their news reports, features and editorials. But with the introduction of digitization, questions are being raised to verify if the same influence media ownership have on traditional media will be replicated on the digital media.

Binark (2007), described digital media as the adoption of digitalized technologies like social media platforms, internet and mobile applications to share and interact with contents. This has generally changed the pattern at which information is produced, consumed and distributed and also promotes instant connectivity, communication and engagement across social and geographical boundaries due to its unprecedented reach and speed, in addition to its cost effectiveness.

However, since their inception in the digital era, digital media have, refused to submit to the control over information production and dissemination that the traditional media outlets—broadcast and print media—were put under (Schapals et al. 2019; Heinrich, 2019).

Media ownership as explained by Ann (2016), means an act of owning a means of communication that may be partially or entirely supported by people, groups, or governments. The motives for ownership might be political or economic, making the media agents of propaganda. It is reported that in Nigeria, criminalization of press reports, threats of arrest, detention, harassment, license revocation, extrajudicial killings, and the enactment of onerous laws and decrees that will restrict journalists' freedom of expression are some of the calculated tactics used by the government to control the media. Private citizens are also involved in the problems surrounding media ownership and control in Nigeria, particularly

when commercial interests—such as wealthy advertisers or politically inclined politicians—come into play and demand unethical treatment from their audience (Ojo 2001; Omu 2000; Okafor 2014).

Despite being inextricably linked, owning a media outlet has grown to be a significant obstacle for journalists and media managers who want to increase the value of the profession by ensuring that the goal of journalism is fulfilled. Manzu (2013) reports on Kenya, shows that one of the biggest threat to Kenya's media independence is media ownership with many media houses being run as business empires having hierarchical system

of administration. Also, in Uganda, Kazibwe (2018), revealed that advertisement and political meddling have influenced news programming on all Ugandan television channels, irrespective of ownership structure.

However, in Nigeria with the awakening of this digital age, one wonders if media ownership still influences the media editorial independence and news reporting, and if it does, to what extent?. This forms the basis of this study which seeks to investigate the impact of media ownership structures on editorial independence and news reporting in digital age.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives are to:

- investigate the attitude of journalists towards media ownership and control in the digital age.
- Examine the perception of journalists towards media ownership structures on editorial independence and news reporting in this digital age.
- ascertain the impact of media ownership structures on editorial independence and news reporting in digital age

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is the attitude of journalists towards media ownership and control in the digital age?
- How do journalists perceive media ownership structures on editorial independence and news reporting in the digital age?
- Do media ownership structures have any impact on editorial independence and news reporting in the digital age?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ownership of media refers to the act of owning a medium of communication, which can be partially or fully funded by individuals, organizations, or governments. It can also be referred to as the right to own a medium of broadcasting, such as radio or television stations. The reasons for ownership may be political or economic goals, making the media agents of propaganda. (Raufu, 2003:Kanyiwedo, 2013:Ann, 2016).

The government is responsible for funding media organizations or controlling their shares, which can come from direct funding, loans, or overdrafts from banks. Government-owned broadcast media, such as television, are often less exciting and investigative due to this nature of ownership. Government-employed journalists are bound to follow the government's dictates. Investigating

fraud or atrocities perpetuated by the government is likely to result in their termination (Nwosu, 1995 cited in Ann 2016).

This could be a chain or corporate ownership. The owner or body involved owns a bigger portion of the funds, or it is entirely held by the person or entity in question. Since 1992, the National Broadcasting Commission has been established under National Assembly Act No. 38 of 1992 to grant private people licenses to own electronic media. Private ownership offers the advantage of allowing the media to criticize the evils of the government, as opposed to government-owned media. Nwosu (1995) cited in Ann 2016, notes that this form of ownership offers several benefits, including complete control over the business, the ability to make decisions at any time, consistent

operational policies, and proximity to staff.

Media and information control has been a significant issue for governments worldwide, often associated with owners' interests and punitive laws that hinder the media's ability to perform its statutory functions. The government is unwilling to let go of its characteristic dominance of the media, exerting choking control through the regulation of both private and public broadcast media. Laws and decrees against the media have given government officials legal backing to persecute, fine, detain, and imprison journalists, and to proscribe media houses. Government also uses certain preferential treatment to buy the most influential journalists in the media to top posts within the government (Ann 2016). Unfortunately, private owners also contribute to the problem surrounding media ownership and control in Nigeria, especially when commercial interests through wealthy advertisers or politically inclined politicians, demands for unethical treatment in return for huge capital investments or political benefits, this at times disempowers editors and reporters from carrying out their journalistic responsibilities (Schapals et al. 2019; Heinrich, 2019).

During the colonial rule in Nigeria, newspapers that were pro-government received most government advertisements. Government control measures include criminalizing press reports and proscribed written statements that exposed military officers to ridicule. The Offensive Publications (Proscription) Decree 35 1993 allowed the government to clamp down on six media houses across the nation, closing down 17 newspapers and magazines and one broadcasting station in a single day. This suppression also took place after the failed coup d'état in 1990 (Ojo 2001).

The era of military dictatorships in Nigeria witnessed the worst forms of media emasculation in the history of the media in Nigeria. The period was marked by arbitrary arrests, detentions, extrajudicial killings, corruption, excessive use of force, torture of detainees, harassment of journalists and democratic activists, and arson attacks on media houses. Family members of targeted journalists were arrested, detained, brutalized, and harassed, while those who refused to acquiesce were disgraced and sacked with

ignominy (Ojo 2001). Another tactics of control during the military dictatorship in Nigeria was through a means known as "co-opting," where the government uses preferential treatments to buy the most influential journalists in the country, appointing them to top posts within the government. (Okafor, 2014).

Regulatory bodies set up by the government can be a source of negative or positive control of the media, with defects or loopholes in the Decree that set up such regulatory bodies being used to repress freedom of expression. One pitfall in the Decree that set up the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) is the power given to the commission to revoke the license of stations which do not operate in accordance with the code and in the public interest.

In October 2005, the premises of African Independent Television (AIT) were 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 Bell view plane. In May 2006, the federal government cancelled the network license of AIT and gave the media house a 21-day ultimatum to dismantle its transmitters and relocate its operational from Asokoro, Abuja, Nigeria (Ann 2016).

Also, the federal government revoked AIT's network license in May 2006 and given the media outlet a 21-day window to remove its transmitters and move its operations out of Asokoro, Abuja, Nigeria. This is the first time that a major TV station, AIT, has been harassed and intimidated for carrying out its constitutional duty of remaining impartial and professional in its coverage of all activities related to the ongoing third term controversy, according to Aziken and Ayodele (2006). Senator Uche Chukwumerije, noted the growing intimidation of those opposed to the proposal for a third term. AIT's transgression was airing live coverage of the House of Representatives' discussion of the third term agenda. Proceedings from the discussion on May 9, 2006, may have irritated the government, since more members opposed the government's third term (on day one, May 9, 18 members opposed, and 11 supported).

Government and private ownership control of the

media obstructs freedom of expression. The influence of government is seen in the unflinching support government media organizations give the government of the day, with officials removing anyone in charge who fails to offer unquestioned support. The result of governments' hostile stance is that the media are forced to remain government stooges, especially government media. Private media proprietors also exert significant control over their media organizations, demanding self-censorship by their editors with that the private press finds itself in the same trouble when owners have political interest. Such owners may force their workers to do the wish of the government to curry political favor from the government (Okafor 2014).

Ownership dominance of traditional media by making journalists to focus on the political and economic interests of their owners, have led to mistrust in the information-producing process. With users attempting to subvert control over information dissemination, digital social media seems to provide a chance to correct this imbalance. With the help of shaky sources and conspiracy theories, social media and public blogs try to plug the gaps in news coverage.

Digital media as described by Binark (2007), is the adoption of digitalized technologies like social media platforms, internet and mobile applications to share and interact with contents. The social media sites online, have become participatory thanks to the Internet and it is addressed by many as an alternative to news. The Internet's speed, reach, and cost-effectiveness enabled a broader range of information inputs, including eyewitness reports and investigative journalism. Independent media outlets such as the social media, helps provide true and useful information, conspiracy theories, and counter information, proving that it this digital age could become a threat to democracy and also add to the information problem. The materiality of information flows demonstrates their capacity to reach a large audience.

However, it is important to know that information generation and diffusion are influenced by socioeconomic factors. Therefore, with the introduction of this new age (digital age), and with media houses joining the trend of having social media handles, there are questions regarding the

impact media ownership has on the editorial independence and news reports of the media in this digital age in a Nigeria.

The introduction of digital media in this digital age has brought about changes in almost every sectors and journalism is not excluded. Some of the innovations brought by the digital age that has impacted journalism particularly news reporting and editorial independence are;

The digital age has changed journalism by removing gatekeepers and allowing individuals to access unfiltered information. This transition has provided more ways for the public to acquire content without being restricted to certain locations or restrictions. The digital age, with the introduction of internet has also altered the nature of journalism by allowing journalists to disseminate news information in real time, fostering worldwide information sharing via platforms such as YouTube and Skype. This has resulted in an increase in the quality and diversity of news items, and journalists can now regulate the standards of their work by comparing it to other worldwide media. Overall, the internet has changed the way journalism functions and continues to do so.

Journalism is vital in this day and age since it must properly handle information. People might post news articles and images that are biased toward particular causes, making it impossible to trust the quality of the material due to information overload on the internet. Audiences must continue to double-check information from reliable journalists in order to safeguard themselves from information exploitation. Journalism was formerly only a vehicle for disseminating ideas to the public; however, the internet has changed that and made it a potent instrument for sharing information (IvyPanda, 2023).

By enabling users to select the material they wish to read, the internet has had a huge influence on journalism. Global barriers have been shattered by this, allowing viewers to pick what to watch or listen to on sites like YouTube and facilitating the real-time sharing of news from distant countries. Reporters have the ability to connect with their readers around-the-clock, which encourages the open exchange of ideas and opinions as well as

contributions to media items (Bruns, 2005; IvyPanda, 2023).

By enabling journalists to continuously update information and deliver filtered news information whenever they want it, the digital media such as the internet and social media has also increased the currency of information available to the general public. Conventional bureaucracy, which regulated news output to benefit particular groups, has been upended as a result.

Bird (2009), claims that users of mobile phones with internet access may use them to search the internet for pertinent news articles. A constant flow of information from the sender to the recipient and vice versa is made possible by because of the introduction of the digital media. The public has access to unaltered material before it is adjusted to suit specific viewpoints, even as more newsrooms become more political in nature.

Some media outlets have had to slow down and discredit conventional bureaucracies that oversaw news output as a result of the internet upending their policies and preferences. With new technical gadgets boosting the speed, frequency, and quality of information received, the internet has transformed one-way communication in traditional journalism. These days, journalists may convey material over great distances by compressing vast amounts of data into little files.

The ability of viewers to directly contribute to media material and counter news via the internet has had a profound influence on journalism. Journalists may reach a larger audience by staying up to speed on world events thanks to this quick communication tool. Social media sites like Facebook are also updated with news, giving younger people and others who are unable to watch television during news hour's additional access to news content.

As a result of this change in the media landscape, markets are now fragmented, with marketers trailing viewers to alternative, faster-growing, and free media outlets. As a result, a large number of audiences have shifted to the digital media, drastically altering media outlets. Media outlets need to recruit experienced and capable internet and social media journalists if they want to stay competitive. Nowadays, businesses concentrate on

co-creating goods with their clients, gathering information about their interests and inclinations online (IvyPanda, 2023; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

The communication sector has seen significant changes as a result of social networking sites and blogs replacing conventional media jobs. Consumers of information have constant access to any information they choose, and news update channels are always monitoring developments but journalists are still relevant.

Manzu (2013) did a study on the influence media ownership has on editorial independence in Kenya. To gather data from three editors from three different media houses, the paper adopted the descriptive research method and in-depth interview. The study was anchored on the media ownership theory and the propaganda model. The result from the findings show that one of the biggest threat to media independence is media ownership with many media houses being run as business empires having hierarchical system of administration. Media contents are in most cases dictated by media owners to serve their own interests. Due to the elitist hierarchical system of administration, editors are disempowered. The researcher recommends that for the independence to return to the media, media control needs to be broken with journalists and media practitioners given the freedom to carryout their duties.

A study by Kazibwe (2018) titled "A television study on the influence of media ownership on news content in Uganda: a comparison of Wavah Broadcasting Services (WBS) and Nation Television (NTV)", sought to examine the influence media ownership has on the news content Ugandan television stations. The study adopted quantitative content analysis and in-depth interview to collect data for the study. The study showed that during the period of study, the news content on NTV and WBS were influenced by media ownership. Advertisement and political meddling influenced the news programming on all Ugandan television channels, irrespective of ownership structure. NTV, controlled by a media conglomerate offers a wider range of news reports than WBS, an independently owned station. It was also found that NTV journalists were more editorially independent than WBS journalists.

Okwuchukwu (2014), in his work on the influence of media ownership and control on media agenda setting in Nigeria, adopted the in-depth interview in gathering data for the study. The study was anchored on the Agenda Setting Theory of the media. The findings showed that the Nigeria

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on two theories, namely: the Propaganda Model and the Social Responsibility Theory.

According to Herman & Chomsky's (2002) Propaganda model, there has been a change in how the media operates. These days, affluent people and organizations own and run the media, viewing it primarily as a profit-driven enterprise supported by profit-seeking advertisers who demand that their advertisements run in conducive environments. The propaganda models depict a decentralized, non-conspiratorial market system of processing and control, however occasionally the government or a few private players may take the lead and organize coordinated elite treatment of a problem. Due to the dependent of the media on the government and major business firms for information, there seem to be a strong bond of solidarity that prevails among major media, government and other corporate business which exposes the media to external ownership and control. Also, with threats such as the withdrawal of licenses, indirect or direct attacks, libel suits etc., the media can be pressured or forced to be under the control of the government and other corporate businesses. This explains that there is a direct correlation between those who finance the press and the content of the press. That is, media activities have always been in accordance with their owners' interest.

Therefore, if the media activities are mostly commercial-driven or commercially owned, then commercialized contents will be more. Also, a news organizations, owned by a public organization is profit-oriented and objectivity is just a means to attract the attention of the readers (or viewers) (Muhammed, 2006). The Propaganda Model gives emphasis on the idea that the powerful force behind media organization operations is ownership whether public media or private media.

media's Independency in setting the society's agenda is largely hindered by the level of media control and media ownership in the country. It was also revealed that the ruling elite are the major new maker in the country whose opinions and views forms the majority of contents disseminated and discussed in the Nigeria media.

Also, the owners' practical belief and interests can be reflected through columns, editorials, commentary, news coverage and features. Therefore, the rationale for the choice of the Propaganda Model for this study is due to the fact that it helps to explain the idea that media houses in Nigeria equally seem to promote the ideology and propaganda of their owners while trying to carry out their responsibilities. With reasons bent on the fact that the owners are responsible for the financial funding. For that reason, a link between this model and the study under investigation could be seen, which makes the model important for this study.

The Social Responsibility theory, was introduced by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in 1956. The theory posits that the media has a responsibility in the society which must be carried out. Okunna and Omenugha (2012), explained the principle of the social responsibility theory, revealing that freedom of the press which was given by the libertarian theory should be given to the media but in other for the freedom not to be abused, the freedom should be exercised with responsibility. Moreover, the government is also granted the power to step in and control the media when they fail to comply and fulfil those responsibilities. The social responsibility theory, grants the media the power to checkmate the government and other institutions, preserve democracy and responding to the needs and interests of the society (Dominick, 2009). However, the theory does not grant the press the power to misbehave. There are tenets guiding this theory, which are maintaining high professional standards of accuracy, objectivity, truth, balance and informative; accepting and carrying out certain societal duties; regulating itself in accordance with the law; being accountable to the society, their medium and others; media pluralism – multiplicity of voices – to

represent divergent viewpoints; credibility expectation from the people (McQuail 1987, p. 117, cited in Okunna & Omenugha, 2012). Through this theory, the media is tasked to discharge certain functions that will be beneficial to the general public most especially to a democratic society. Also, the society is granted the power to judge and monitor the activities of the media whether their activities are in line with those social responsibilities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the qualitative research approach using interview to collect data for the study. The population of this research includes journalists and editors from government owned and private owned television media. Convenience sampling technique was adopted to select ten journalists and editors from TVC and LTV, both

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data gathered from question 3 and 4 of the interview guide, indicates that the impact media ownership has on the editorial independence and news reporting still persist even in this digital age. This is evident from the responses of the respondents who disclosed that the digital age does not influence the control media owners have on the editorial contents and news reports of their media company. This supports the work of Okwuchukwu (2014) who revealed that media independence is largely hindered by the level of media control and media ownership in the country with media contents dictated by media owners to serve their own interests. To support this finding, Ann (2016), also noted that media owners wants to be in control.

Data gathered from question 7 of the interview guide on the attitudes of respondents towards media ownership structures and control of their news reports and editorial contents, revealed while trying to avoid stories that will affect their owners' political or economic interests, the respondents try as much as possible to balance their stories to avoid a situation of being one-sided or attract critics from the public. This justifies the application of the social responsibility theory which explains that there are duties entrusted and expected of from the media. One of which is ensuring a high professional standard of accuracy, objectivity,

Therefore, the Social Responsibility Theory was adopted for this study because it helps bring to limelight the responsibilities of the media in Nigeria being a democratic society and the position of the society in ensuring that those responsibilities are carried out. It also serves as a reminder to journalists and media practitioners in Nigeria that while they may be paid to exercise their profession, they have a huge responsibility to the society which should not be abused or ignored.

stations based in Lagos, South-West Nigeria. This consisted of 10 respondents, 5 each from Lagos Television (LTV) and Television Commercial (TVC) for the interview. Respondents selected for this study were resourceful persons with firsthand expertise and relevant perspectives for this study.

truth, balance and informative. The theory further explains that the society is granted the power to judge and monitor the activities of the media whether their activities are in line with those social responsibilities. Therefore, it can be said that despite the level of control in the media, the media still strives to ensure a high professional standard of balance between ownership policies and their social responsibilities.

Data gathered from question 5 and 6 of the interview guide, revealed that though, there is a feeling of displeasure among the respondents concerning media ownership and control in this digital age, it is perceived as being okay as long as the owners does not over push or suppress them. The implication of this is that, the respondents believe that there is nothing that can be done and so, whether they like it or not, the owners' interest is their priority and it is okay inasmuch as the owners does not over push them, their substantial remuneration is being given and they tend to keep their jobs. This justifies the application of the propaganda model for this study which asserts that with threats such as the withdrawal of licenses, indirect or direct attacks, libel suits, sack, withdrawal of incentives etc. the media practitioners can be forced to be under the control and do the biddings of the government or other corporate businesses and also change the perception of journalists about journalism.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that media ownership structures and control have a great impact on editorial independence and news reporting even in this digital age. However, efforts to ensure that there is balance in news reporting and editorial contents are made by journalists to avoid critics from the society on the media being one sided. Also, most of the respondents accepts media ownership structures and control over the media editorial contents and news reporting, provided that they keep their jobs and that the owners does not over push them. It is therefore recommended that, media owners should grant media practitioners the liberty to exercise their duties without fear and also, media practitioners should try to create a balance while discharging their duties especially in this digital age.

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