

**MEDIA SYSTEMS AND JOURNALISM PRACTICE IN A DEMOCRACY:
THE NIGERIA PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT

The mass media, often referred to as the fourth estate of the realm have important role to play in the society especially in a democracy. While practitioners which are journalists are, to a large extent, permitted by law to perform this role, the environment under which they practice often limits them when one considers the forces at play. These forces are components of the media systems in place within the country. The study, therefore, was an attempt to identify the media system in Nigeria and how journalism practice is carried out under the identified system in a democracy. Anchoring on the structural functionalism and social responsibility theories, it adopted the qualitative research design, using the secondary research approach. The study found out that the capitalist and third world media systems (mixed system) is operational in the country and that practice is based on the proposition of the system. It observed that journalists operate almost freely though with caution bearing in mind the outcome of working against proprietors' interest which could cause dismissal, harassment and suspension. It concluded that journalism practice under the system in Nigeria thrives but with self restrain and ownership control while government regulates it.

Key words: *Media Systems, Journalism Practice and Democracy.*

INTRODUCTION

Media systems are a set of media institutions and practices that interact with and shape one another while journalism practice, on the other hand, underscores the activities of collection, collation, treatment and production of news and information for public consumption in a certain media system. There is, therefore, a nexus between both concepts. As a component of a social system, media system interacts with other systems such as politics, economic, etc. to influence journalism practice. Media systems are measured by ownership, control, funding, content and technology.

Every society, especially human, has set goals and these cannot be met if the society itself does not put measures in place for their attainment, Udoakah (1990, P. 228) sees media system as "part of a grand design adopted by society for the attainment of its goals, noting that "they closely follow the political and economic systems of their societies.... "In other words, political and economic systems determine the nature of media system".

Democracy is seen as a system of government in which sovereignty rests on the people rather than a powerful minority. It is often referred to as the government of the people by the people and for the people although this is not the actual practice. It therefore presupposes that journalism practice would thrive in such environment, but again the nature of the media system would define the practice when one considers the entanglements occasioned by political, economic and other forces at play.

Often, people question the manner and approach the press operates in a security without bothering on the nature of the government of the day. they fail to recognize the fact the press is more or less a function of the society it operates, meaning that it is not a standalone institution. It was on this premise that this work become expedient.

To have a very clear picture of the study, an attempt would be made to identify and briefly discuss the various types of media systems, media practice in a democracy, functions of the media

in a democracy and other such issues. The scope of the study is however limited to democracy in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The structural functionalism and social responsibility theories were used as the theoretical foundation for the study.

On the surface, the structural functionalism theory does not seem to fit into mass communication study but when viewed critically, it becomes relevant especially as there is often an inter-relationship between the mass media and the society where they are practised.

The theory, according to Haralambo and Heald (1980) establishes the interplay among sub structures of society. Otherwise referred to as social systems theory, it holds that a society is like a system which is made of many parts, with each of the parts contributing to the maintenance of the overall. In the cause of their interaction, the parts inevitably affect one another. It is on such note that Ijwo (2017) believes that by implication, therefore, the institutions of mass media and other institutions within the society can help in affecting one another, either positively or negatively.

The forgoing, therefore forms the basis for evaluation and analysis of media systems and performances of journalists in a society such as a democratic Nigeria.

For the social responsibility theory, according to McQuail (2000), it is concerned with responsible reporting and perceived media ownership and operations as a form of public trust or stewardship rather than as an unlimited private franchise. McQuail (2000) who captures the principles of the theory argues that;

- The media have obligations to the society and media ownership is public trust.
- News media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant.
- The media should be free but self regulated.
- The media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct.
- Under source circumstances, government may intervene to safeguard society.

This theory however emanated from the moral philosophy that is directed at protecting the small, the poor, the helpless and under-privileged against the powerful and the mighty, including government. The theory supports this study since journalism practice under a democracy should take care of all manner of persons as well as making government accountable to the people, even as people are informed of government activities.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research design using the secondary research approach. This involved the review of and analysis of existing data from texts, journals, periodicals and the library.

Review of Related Literature Media Systems

Siebert, et al., (1976) cited in Udoakah (1990) have analysed the political theories behind the different media systems in the world and four of them could be identified from there to include; the authoritarian, communist, libertarian and social responsibility systems. In view of the peculiarity of the Third World, another system, developmental journalism system, has come into practice. It is however worthy of mention that these systems have been re-classified into three categories, possibly, based on the prevailing economic and political divisions and these are the capitalist, the communist, and the Third World media systems. All these are discussed briefly.

Authoritarian Media System

The purpose of the media in this system is that they must support the state and leadership in every respect and advance its programmes. The media in this system are assigned definite roles

which are considered desirable for the goal expected by such societies. William (1976) cited in Udoakah (1990, P. 289) has identified dissemination of “instructions, ideas, and attitudes of the ruling group” as the role performed by the media in such a system. This system was practiced in Britain, France, Germany, Spain and Italy from the sixties to the eighties.

The control of the media in the authoritarian system takes the forms of economic sanctions, direct appointment of editorial staff, enforcement of codes of practice, taxation and legislations. It is worthy to note that the British colonialists brought some of the repressive laws to Nigeria through the Newspaper proclamation of 1903, stamp duty, advertisement, taxes, laws of libel and sedition, among others. Udoakah (1999) notes that where outright censorship is not employed, administrative and political controls are ready options. Administratively, key members of the editorial staff of the media are appointed directly by the government in this system. This infers total control of the media.

Communist System

Often referred to as the soviet communist system, the media system arose in the early twentieth century USSR. The Russian press and other media were recognized after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. The assumption, according to Ndolo (2005), is that the media should support the Marxist system to serve the people positively through socialization to desired norms, education, information, and mobilization. Power in their society belongs to the working class – the proletariat. The media must be controlled by the party to serve the interest of the middle class. The Soviet media system is often seen as an extension of the authoritarian system.

Libertarian System

The system believes that man is a rational being, capable of thinking and taking decisions which will advance his interest, thus he should be allowed a certain level of freedom to develop his interest different from other members of society. Udoakah (1999) notes that the implications of the liberation doctrine for the media are obvious to the extent that the media must be left alone to constitute a free market place of diverse opinions. He further goes on to say that rather than the government to check the media, the media should check the government by providing information on the basis of which the public can decide whether to receive or reject a particular government. The system originated in the seventeenth century England and spread to America. In this system, the media are controlled by private owners in a free market place of idea and publication is free from any form of press censorship by any third party.

Media ownership here is opened to everybody, but truly only a few can afford it because of the heavy capital investment involved.

Social Responsibility System

This owes its origin to an American initiative – the 1947 Hutchins Commission on the freedom of the press. The idea arose from the fears expressed that the free market of idea, the liberation notion, was being threatened by ownership restriction to only rich individuals or large corporate organizations which would cause total extinction of alternative views. It is the view of the theory that media should reflect all shades of opinion but demands that they should act responsibly by realizing that they have obligations to the public. It further believes that ownership should not impede access to the media. The ways governments have to achieve this are through subventions, and press subsidies. Example abound in Iceland, Norway, Finland, etc.

Development Journalism System

The system owes its origin to the UNESCO's McBride Commission set up in 1979. The system opposes dependency and foreign domination and to arbitrary authoritarianism. It believes economic development and nation building is the key to helping the Third World out of their present predicament. Udoakah (1990) citing McQuail (1983) observes that the assumption of the

system is predicated on the developmental needs of the Third World states which he says economic, social and political development are primary national tasks to which every other institution should submit to.

Development media system which is another name for development journalism system assumes that the principal instrument for economic development is effective communication. Other reason for the system was the belief that the young states are too fragile and lag behind in literacy level and established institutions. The media should be used in highlighting efforts being made by communities in building development facilities like feeder roads, civic centres, self help projects, etc. Media ownership in this system is heavily controlled by government which should be used to mobilize people for economic, political and social development.

As earlier noted, the five discussed above had been further classified into three categories based on world's prevailing economic and political order, and they are explained below.

The Capitalist Media System

The system presupposes that anybody is at liberty to go into the media business provided that he can meet up the competition. It is the case of survival of the fittest, the main idea of the system is competition and profits. In the capitalist system, media is big business, thus Udoakah (1990, P 293) notes;

It is interesting to note that the trend in 1980s showed that Hearst empire in America have twelve newspapers, fourteen Magazines, three television stations, six radio station, news Service, a phone service, a feature syndicate and Avon paper Backs. Similarly the Time inc. was said to have, in addition to magazines, radio and television stations, a book club, paper mills, timber land, oil wells, and real estates...

Media in some countries are appendages of political parties and governments of the day and, most times, those who own them also control the economy of such societies and often dictate policies to their media, even government. Media here survive through advertising revenue and the advertisers are big time business people and industrialists. Udoakah (1999) citing Milliband notes one salient points about the capitalist societies that the media strive to legitimates their societies to make the people conform to the social and economic status quo. While there is freedom of expression, it is set in the real economic and political context of these societies. The media accept only ideas helpful to the system only, but sternly hostile to those opposed to their ideology. Thus pluralism and alternative views in the capitalist media are expressed within the framework of capitalist norms and values.

The ownership structure of media mostly favours the power groups, everything about them is the elite while the lower class structures are often left out of access to the media.

The Communist Media System

The main trust of this system is state control of means of production for everyone's good where the means of production is in the hands of workers organized as the ruling class. The belief is that the workers themselves prescribe what is the general good not the elites as in the case of the capitalist, but the workers also work toward achieving that good. The media in this system are within the party who are the sole proprietors but citizens can express their views through letters to the press which must be published.

It is obvious that the media in this system are hostile to anything right, infact, right wing publications are not even allowed to exist. To say the least, the media in the communist system are subservient to the communist party. What is interesting is the fact that citizens regard their media as the most effective means of all official or legal channels available for promoting their interest.

The Third World Media System

The Third World is often seen as a society of problem; weak economy, low political attainment, backwardness in education, and indeed a place of lack in all ramifications of life. The economy which is dependent on others is mixed, both the capitalist and the communist characteristics. Since there is a quest to get the people out of so many problems, the media cannot be solely left in the hands of few money bags who can own them, therefore government must intervene by involving in media ownership. This would enable government guide communication for purposeful future by ensuring national consciousness and mobilizing the people for self rediscovery and development.

This perhaps explains why in some countries, radio and television even newspaper are in the hands of the state, although private ownership can be seen in few countries but must operate within a given framework of national unity. The system does not permit publication of anything capable of provoking any section of the societies, even in Nigeria, for instance, broadcasts are made to reflect the unity of the country as a federation and at the same time give adequate expression to the culture, and affairs of the areas of their operation and the country generally. Infact, they are megaphones of government of the day. It is obvious that the few private ones are divided into ethnic, culture and religious lines. They support owners' kith and kin and oppose the political or religious ideology of their opponents. Among the measures of control are arrests, detention, brutal treatment or dismissal from work. Examples of such were proscription of media in the past. Infact, the media system in the Third World is mixed just as the economy.

Concepts of Mass Media and Democracy

The mass media are channels of information dissemination from a source to a large, scattered and diversified audience. They are also vehicles which messages, information, ideas, knowledge and culture are transmitted to a large audience (Santas and Ogoshi 2016). In a broad sense, Afamuefuna (2007) sees the media as technical communication concept which refers to devices employed by anyone involved in a mass mediated communication situation for moving messages across distance or time, such include radio, television, newspaper, magazine and the internet.

Since the mass media are the only sources of news for most individuals, the presence of democratic or special bias in the media may have profound effect. Public dependence on the media also gives them the power to set political or democratic agenda and determine which issues will be the subject of public debate. It is through the mass media that the citizens are educated on their rights and privileges so as to participate meaningfully in democratic process (Mile, 2009). This is seen during election and other such activities.

The concept of democracy has become a very popular one in every current discourse. This is so because it is regarded as a form of government where people directly take decisions by themselves. Democracy is believed to be the most popular system of government in the world, and regarded as the government of the people by the people and for the people. Ogenyi (2014) notes that democracy as an ideology is the philosophy of government which sets high premium on the basic freedom or fundamental human rights of the citizens, rule of law, the right to property, the free flow of information and right of choice between alternative political positions.

In other words, democracy is the system of politics in which sovereignty is vested on the people rather than in a small clique or an oligarchy, where the rule of law, majority rule and constitutionalism are basic guiding principles of governance. This perhaps informed Rumaswamy's (2007, P. 377) position that democracy is "the rule by people as contrasted with the rule by one person or a group... it is the people who are both rulers and ruled unlike other systems like monarchy, dictatorship or oligarchy where a distinction between the ruler and the ruled exists". It is a different story in Nigeria where a small cabal hijacks states affairs instead of the majority running the affairs of government. This is in practice.

Functions of the Media in Democracy

There is no contention that the mass media perform some important functions in the society ranging from information, education and entertainment to opinion formation. These, ofcourse, are the basic ones. But in democracy, the functions of the media are much more profound and varied. This is so because democracy being the people's government can only thrive when people participate actively in the process leading to elections and actual governance, thus in between these are the mass media which must enlighten, sensitize and mobilize citizens, even as they at as the watch dog of society. The functions, therefore, include but not limited to the following:

- (a) **Mobilization:** This is one major role of the mass media is mobilizing citizen to participate in democratic processes. This has always been the case in Nigeria. Prior to any election, the media perform this function during voters' registration, campaigns, actual and post elections. To achieve this, the media help people define, sort out complexities and participate meaningfully in the democratic processes as informed participants (Cibo 2010).
- (b) **Surveillance:** Through their surveillance function, the media monitor and report infringements of human rights by agents of the state just as they make people aware o their rights in the society. The society is protected when the media report activities of bad elements for security agencies to act.
- (c) **Formation and Moulding of Public Opinions:** The media do this by setting agenda for public discussion which is done through debates on topical issues, thus making people have informed opinions on government policies and actions. The issues of state police, state and local government joint account, national conference, security concerns, climate changes ethnics and religious issues among others are cases in point.
- (d) **Market Place of Ideas:** The mass media in a democracy operate as a market place of ideas for political thought, informing people about political processes and development in the society. This, in fact, is political reporting which is necessary for the sustenance of democracy where the system of checks and balances is required for good governance (Santas and Ogoshi 2016). This kind of open forum can be seen in broadest programmes and newspaper/magazine commentaries.
- (e) **Acting as watchdog:** Through investigative journalism, the media hold government accountable to the people. Lwahas (2004, p. 27) notes that the media act as watchdogs by uncovering political, economic and corporate corruption, alongside other forms of abuses of power or inept policies". Some of the abuses include: the Minagate, Faruk Lawangate, the Arms deal, the President's certificate scandal, the Senate Mace Saga, an attempt to use public funds to establish a Fulani radio station and most recently, the Federal Accountant General's embezzlement of public funds. Whether these cases have been fully dealt with is a different issue.

Issues in Media System and Journalism Practice in Democratic Nigeria

It is difficult to identify the type of media system practiced in Nigeria, but suffice it to say that the mixed-system bests qualifies and defines the practice here when one views the propositions of the capitalist and Third World media systems which centre on government control, function of market forces (economic interest), and development, among others.

As has been note earlier, the capitalist system which comes to be as a result of the re-classification of earliest systems incorporates some of the positions of authoritarian, libertarian, and social responsibilities systems, while the Third World, though with little of the former, is majorly the development journalism (development media) system which interest is furthering the development of the Third World Countries.

Democracy presupposes active participation with the mass media as the driver. How the media do this in the midst of contending forces such as political, economic, ethnics, etc which are the components of the media system in Nigeria is the basis of the work.

Since the media is an elite process (owners-elites, workers-elites), it follows that content must, at all times, conform to the aspirations of the elites who have the financial muscle and control the economy of the society, bearing in mind that they must make profit out of their investments. Journalists must always bear this at the back of their minds since going contrary may not only be a way of job loss but intimidation and harassment whether for a government or private concern. This is very common through queries in government media and sacks in the private ones.

Issues of taxation, licensing registration and the likes are other sore points of journalism practice in a democracy. In the recent past, some broadcast organizations and their affiliates have been suspended for alleged breach of the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) code. Among the breaches mentioned was non renewal of license. The accusation, the organizations had denied. This would have been avoided if the media were free to enter and exit the society. The action of government infringes on freedom of the press, which one believes, is aimed at suppressing media practice in the country.

It is the policy trust of the Third World media system that government must guide communication for a purposeful future by ensuring national consciousness and mobilizing people for self discovery and development. Though this sounds reasonable when one considers the peculiarities of the Third World including Nigeria, but what is the rational that government does not hide under this to coerce journalists to writing against their wishes even when their thinking is for the interest of the state. This becomes important because government could think the reporter's motive is at variance with the party's ideology, the case of The Punch newspaper reporter, Haruna Achineje, who was barred from the Akwa Ibom State Government House during the reign of Governor Victor Attah and those expelled from the State House, Abuja during Buhari's first term, come to mind. These kinds of action subsist even till date.

Again, the fact that the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) must sanction programmes before airing is another way of controlling practice. This is the thinking of the third world media system. Some broadcast organizations had been queried in the course of the 2015 election following perceived unacceptable contents of their programmes. Most of the stations affected were privately owned ones who tended to have sympathy for the opposition political parties even when government owned and those sympathetic to her did the same for the ruling party, all in the name of development.

Media in the Third World System, sometimes tilt more towards ethnic/cultural lines where they are located and where the owner has sympathy for. This was very obvious during the last general election. Since the last general election was majorly between the All Progressive Congress (APC) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the media were divided along these two lines, both in content and coverage. One could easily discern by actions and inactions which medium stood for which party. In this situation, media practice is called to question, but this was the reality. The same goes for religious, cultural and ownership affiliations. Just recently, actions of the media have betrayed most of them regarding reportage of security issues, religious and political crises in the country, a bill up to the 2023 elections has exposed the media as not meeting the yearning of the third world media system.

It is therefore safe to say, based on the foregoing, that although the media system prevalent in Nigeria has, to some extent, limit media practice, government must, at some points, put certain measures in place to check excesses since order must be maintained for a peaceful society, just as media owners especially the private ones need to make profit to continue being in business, after all their major motive, in the real sense, is economic.

Conclusion

Media practice can thrive well in a society where there is press freedom – a society where there is free entry and exit from the industry and practitioners are at liberty to publish what they feel is right without any encumbrance. This appears utopian, such society, one is afraid, does not exist. Even the United States which is said to practice press freedom at its best, still maintains some level of checks on the media. Media practice in Nigeria under democracy is a function of the system under which practitioners operate and therefore cannot do otherwise. While practitioners in the communist system are made to toe the prevailing party's line of ensuring the state which is the paramount controller of the media must, by all means, protect the interest and welfare of the citizens, those in the capitalist and third world systems have the liberty but political, economic, ethnic and other ownership affiliations limit practice. This is so because owners must make profits if they must continue to be in business.

Journalism practice under the capitalist and the Third World system which is here referred to as mixed-system, thrive but with self restrain and ownership control, just as government often regulates practice. It is better than what was in the authoritarian system during the military regime.

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