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INTRODUCTION: MEDIA PRACTICES AND NATIONAL CHALLENGES

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CHAPTER ONE



INTRODUCTION: MEDIA PRACTICES AND NATIONAL CHALLENGES

Oluyinka Esan

This book is an acknowledgement of how central the media are in shaping a nation. The media are as crucial to the existence of nations as they are to communities and individuals. The focus on Nigeria here coincides with the centenary anniversary of the amalgamation of her constituent parts in 1914. Uche (1986) in his potted history of Nigeria gives an insight into the diverse groups of peoples that were brought together and offers reasons why. Likewise, Esan (2009) offers a more recent picture of disparities that occur within the entity called Nigeria. It is a marvel to see how disparate groups of people formally brought together by colonial interests, assailed by variety of challenges and conflicts – not least of which stem from their diversity and experiences within their multicultural base - have survived. Whereas media institutions in Nigeria remain as adjuncts to the political, they have always been viewed as important in the business of nation building. This role of the media is what this book addresses as it focuses on Nigeria.

Media duties cover a wide span from politics to social concerns, public obligations to domestic expectations, in local contexts and across global realms. The media witness and report, they mirror society. They intervene, inspire, even instigate action. They are used to wield influence or shape decisions, and in democratic societies they seek to ensure the accountability of powerful groups. It is only proper that the media themselves are periodically appraised. How are media tasks conducted? These lead to discussions about media institutions - how are they organised and to what end? How does ownership and management affect media operations? What informs media

representations and the meanings that are circulated? How do media portrayals relate with issues of identity? There are also questions regarding audience responses since media texts (content) remain inconsequential without audiences engaging with them. How do audiences respond to the media? In fact what do they regard as media? It is useful to know how well the media fare in relation to these many questions that sum up aspirations for media use – what structures are involved and how do these influence human agencies at work within the different processes?

Responses to media initiatives can be deliberate and desirable; sometimes they are inadvertent and unpleasant. It is not immodest to claim that Nigerian media are party to what the nation has become and will be. From the nationalists' struggle for independence, through to the struggle against a succession of military leaders culminating in the eventual sacking of military rulers, the media have corralled arguments on behalf of the people, and their supporters for the birth of democracy arguably, the hallmark of development. In the Liberal perspective of society, the media are even more important within democratic dispensations, as they help to identify the best "truths" that exist in society in the best interest of all.

"Democracy implies a view of society as one in which there are many competing voices and interests, although news media do not have to take sides or to advance a vested interest of their own. Society is [then] presumed to be fundamentally united, sharing the same basic values and a common interest in survival and prosperity." (McQuail 2013: 109).

Media uphold society, and hold it up to scrutiny whether through serious forms like news or through entertainment forms such as drama, music. In this book we assess the media on a number of scores. For good or ill, how have the media fared? What lessons are to be learnt in their performance? What gaps remain to be addressed? These are the broad strokes with which the chapters are structured. Areas of concern engaged with in the chapters are by no means exhaustive. They are indicative of the priorities in this emerging democracy. They also bring to fore perennial academic debates regarding media processes.

Most authors approached their concerns primarily from a development communication perspective (Moemeka 1994). This was originally rooted in views outlined by Wilbur Schramm in the late 50s and 60s. At that time, many countries in the "Third World" including Nigeria were in their infancy as sovereign states. The modernisation model presumed to have worked for western nations, was the path that nations were urged along. The Mass Society theory advanced at that time explained the transformation of (primitive) rural societies to conurbations such as are now typically associated with advanced societies. It identified the existence of systems that supported the large, impersonal social relations of industrialised societies. These relied on the mediated forms of transactions often facilitated by technological innovations. Printing and publishing, photography, film projection, gramophone

records, radio then television broadcasting – these all helped to facilitate what Thompson (2001) described as the symbolic exchange that characterised the modern state. According to Schramm,

“Without a sophisticated and efficient development of communication, the base of population, cooperation, industrialisation, education, and skills needed in modern industrial society cannot possibly be established. It goes without saying that underdeveloped countries have underdeveloped systems too.” (Schramm, 1964:41)

Though it took a while before they were deemed crucial to society, the media had always been acknowledged as being important for expanding people’s horizon, harnessing human and material resources in nations. Since appropriate information needed to circulate for the purpose of surveillance (watchman), decision making (policy) and for socialising members of the society (teaching), in modern societies where the personal contacts could no longer suffice, mediated communication was essential. The three roles outlined above are similar to those outlined by Functionalist theorists like Lasswell. He recognised three needs for communication in society – surveillance of the environment, correlation of parts and transmission of cultural heritage. A fourth function identified by Wright is entertainment, an acknowledgement of the importance of its purpose as a lubricant of the social system. Whereas academy tended to concentrate on the study of journalism practice, placing a higher premium on news and factual programmes especially in the monitoring role, other forms - even the humble and seemingly mundane entertainment like music or films. These inform, educate, as they entertain and they attract large audiences. Through entertainment folk learn about their past, how to deal with various situations. These are part of the broad base of media representations which inform the construction of identities as people learn who and how to belong. Indeed, Infotainment, a more audience friendly form incorporates entertainment values in news and factual content (McNair, 2000).

As noted in McQuail (2010) functionalists regard society as a network of systems. The media system exists within this network of interdependent systems and it helps to maintain the others. The media were particularly crucial to nation building, more so when disparate ethnic groups whose national identities and allegiances had to be superseded by the newly constructed civic entity. Whether to secure knowledge of the histories and relationships from the past or in contemplating current realities, the media are crucial to how individuals and nations imagine themselves, and others. Though as demonstrated in Ugboajah and Jefkins (1986) traditional societies had their own communication strategies (oramedia) which worked for them, yet with heavily capitalised media organisations which relied on technology and operated on much larger scales, covering hitherto unimaginable scopes, new ways of reaching out to shape public opinion, form consensus, establish policy had been found. Anderson sums up the case thus, “. . . the convergence of capitalism and print [make that media]

technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation.” (1991: 46). Print technology, like broadcasting, formalised communication, facilitating the recording, distribution, and archiving of messages. With this, audiences further afield could be reached, and what was otherwise unfamiliar could be presented, the rituals of modern life (for example sports, civic nationalism, religion) could thus be inclusive. Such potential is invaluable in the course of nation building – whether the mission is for support specific sectors like education, agriculture, or health, whether to stimulate economic activities, promote family planning or deliberate on reproductive health issues, whether for politics and voter education or general public enlightenment to encourage tolerance and civic duties. It was once thought that the higher media exposure the more substantially information gaps within society would be closed.

The earlier models (emphasising the linear top down flow of information) like Schramm’s and Lerner’s have been found to be too simplistic, paying inadequate attention to other dynamics of the context of communication. Yet dated and incomplete as they were, they are to be credited for the initial push in scholarship about media practices and nation building. Concerns of how to integrate different groups within society, how people conceive of themselves, and common needs in the society had to be addressed. In these, questions were raised about how the media work. Whereas initial ideas like the Strong Effects models presumed that the media were all powerful and irresistible, it soon became clear that audiences were not so malleable; they were certainly not simple undifferentiated mass of individuals. There were structural differences in their access and use of the media. Media effects were limited (partly) because of what people did with the media. This is the limited effects model of media influence but the media are powerful.

Nature of Media Power

Mass media were identified as a key feature of industrialised society, facilitating the types of information exchange and circulation of ideology - particular beliefs systems that shape consciousness. This is just one type of power which helps states legitimise their authority. Thompson offers four forms as an analytic paradigm. Economic power refers to institutionalised control of material and financial resources. This includes control of the means of productive activities as found in commercial enterprises. Political power refers to the authority to coordinate and regulate patterns of interaction. Usually associated with dedicated state institutions, but it exists in varying degrees within various organisations. Coercive power refers to ability to legitimately use armed or physical force. Such hard power is found in military and paramilitary institutions. The media along with religious and educational organisations are cultural institutions; they wield symbolic power.

Although this is soft power, cultural institutions are no less influential. Information and communication is the route to robust debates and informed decisions. No doubt

ability to shape public opinion is power. Citing Max Weber, Thompson submits that the capacity of a state to command authority depends on its capacity to control both coercive and symbolic power (2001: 15). Put differently, winning the war is as important as winning the minds. Hearts and minds are a more desirable means to an end, than use of brute force. After all it is said, “Convince a man against his will; he is of the same opinion still.” Albeit without powers of actual incarceration as courts of law, courts of public opinion are weighty and consequential to what people think and believe.

Media are powerful more so since they abound and circulate particular knowledges and viewpoints. Whether in cities or remote villages, even when we do not actively seek them out, we are accosted by varied forms of messages. Media are ubiquitous, and now can be more readily accessed via a variety of platforms. Current democratisation of media means people other than professional media operatives are actively involved in content creation and dissemination. Such empowerment is bound to be consequential in the symbolic processes.

“Symbolic actions [including utterances – be they written, visual or aural] may give rise to reactions, may lead others to act or respond in certain ways, to pursue one course of action or another, to believe or disbelieve, to affirm their support for a state of affairs or to rise up in collective revolt” (Thompson 2001: 15-16).

This is further evidence to support the need for careful integration of media and communication initiatives for development to occur and be sustained. Scholarly attention must not relent. Nigeria has come a long way since its amalgamation and even independence. New eras beget their own challenges. The chapters offered here identify some of these; they are contributions towards scholarship in Nigeria.

Structure of the Book

This is the first in the book series conceived by the Association of Communication Scholars & Professionals of Nigeria. The association seeks to promote quality scholarship, and interest in public policy, especially as relates to the media and communication. It also seeks to promote research and dialogue between scholars and practitioners on the one hand, and engagement with the wider (international) academy on media and communication. The reader should find that the book has done these.

Most of the nine chapters had been initially presented at the inaugural conference of the association titled Communication, Diversity and Multiculturalism in Nigeria: Challenges in the 21st Century, offered a broad umbrella for academic interests and perspectives. Authors’ competencies and research interests come through in their chapters. Most have written from empirical bases, their arguments based on result of findings or field experience. Arguably, topics covered also reflect current priorities in Nigeria a decade and half into the 21st century. The book thus offers some current insight into media practice in Nigeria.

Chapter Two written from a practitioner's perspective, consists of experiences of the voice of the voiceless. Advocacy as pursued through intergovernmental agencies like UNICEF and UNFPA is privileged though the subjects they work for are not. The chapter's position is consistent with African valuing of children and youth. Alas the high esteem hardly manifests in public or policy agenda. Media practitioners too need assistance in recognising the issues affecting youth and children. In spite of lip-service paid to them, in reality issues pertaining to children and youth remain lower down on the pecking order yet having a youthful population is one of Nigeria's particularities. Unlike the challenge of ageing populations encountered in Western societies, Nigeria is privileged. Its greatness cannot be divorced from it being the most populous African nation and the sheer size of its children and youth population. Yet when infrastructure, knowledge, attitudes and practices required to transform society – to nurture, sustain, and protect the human resource - is inadequate, this privilege constitutes a burden. This chapter reviews experiences of development agencies as they ensure that appropriate information is deciphered and shared in the right quarters by the right people. It offers examples and appraisals of strategies informing the work of media advocates. Pitched within the area of agenda setting, this is a practical demonstration that media power does not simply work, it has to be harnessed.

Mass media have been on a high pedestal since modern times. They constitute spaces for public deliberation of issues and forming of opinions. Ideally for these, information should flow freely yet the commodification of information – sourcing, processing and distribution of news is not without its challenges. How does the complex operations of news organisations ensure that there are no structured exclusions? How might the exclusion occur? What accounts for the performance of news organisations? The Third Chapter deliberates on some obstacles to the attainment of journalistic ideals as required in the task of maintaining a democratic society. Should governments be involved in the business of news albeit of news agencies? These help to sustain newspapers and news departments of radio and television stations. The chapter with its political economy slant, reports an empirical study of the News Agency of Nigeria. It brings an interesting twist on the Media Dependency theory applying it to news organisations rather than to individuals.

Inspired by concerns for the attainment of gender equality as outlined in the Millennium Development Goals, the focus in Chapter Four is on portrayals of mothers in television advertising. With advertising spend accruing to billions of naira, advertising is another pillar in Nigerian media business as elsewhere. Citing Association of Advertising Agencies of Nigeria (AAAN), a newspaper reported in August 2014 that 125 billion naira (about £440 million) was spent in the year 2013. Almost half of that figure (66.3 billion naira) went on television alone. Advertising is big business! Besides providing much needed revenue for media organisations, advertisements constitute prized content in plum media spaces designed to command audience attention. Ability to influence audiences, especially with repeat exposure to

messages is strong justification for this chapter. How congruent are these persuasive commercial messages with development goals? In their bid to sell products/ideas within very limited time, advertisements tend to make associations with the culturally familiar which may be harmful. Semiotic analysis was used to unlock the meanings in the sample of texts examined in this chapter.

General expectations of media in general, more so when social change is the goal, is that they will work towards a cohesive, progressive and inclusive society but this is not always so. Media representations may further entrench established positions which are inimical to the security and well-being of society. Using narratives from national newspaper coverage of the infamous abduction of school girls from Chibok (North East Nigeria) Chapter Five demonstrates contradictions in the report of this notorious crisis. With this it calls to question the adequacy of news routines and media performance. This chapter and the next review theoretical debates underpinning these.

Chapter Six makes a strong case for raising the profile of environmental issues as it revisited the role of the media in good governance. Like Chapters 2, 3 and 5, its concerns addressed journalism practise using the Agenda Setting model. Drawing on global imperatives enshrined in policy documents (particularly the Millennium Development Goals) and expectations of Western ideals in journalism practice, the chapter presents a content analysis of online newspapers. This was a comparative study of media practice in Nigeria and the UK. It is appropriate to aspire thus, since online platforms expose newspapers readers to best practices beyond national boundaries. Attention to media representations aid the appreciation of the symbolic acts of communication. It is fitting that so many chapters focused on aspects of this media process that gives insight into how circulated meanings are structured.

The gear shifts in Chapter 7 which takes a philosophical look at the process of labelling. Taking on the mono-logic of binary oppositional narratives that confer status of Western values while underwhelming black consciousness, in this chapter we turn attention to issues of identity. The chapter demonstrates that Others are constructed, but who does the Othering? The media reflect on the Othering construed within a dominant culture but how does this stack up against the Others' own representations of themselves? These are germane and consequential concerns for an ethnically diverse nation like Nigeria. However the concern for Othering expressed in this chapter is anchored on the trans-national nature of media transactions, a strand that recurs in Chapter 8.

Whereas Chapter 7 is a diagnostic essay examining what black consciousness communicates to the black race and the world, Chapter 8 is an empirical treatment of audience engagement with Nollywood – Nigeria's video/film industry. It is a departure from the focus on journalism, an affirmation of the place of film (exemplifying other forms of popular culture) in the quest for nation building.

Dissatisfied with Western orientations in mainstream film industry, Nollywood regales audiences with African stories told from African perspectives. An example of subaltern voices, Nollywood is an industry with a mission, and it is making incursions beyond its niche market; the industry has captured audiences other than those it initially intended. The chapter reports on a study of who its Other audiences are and how they engage with the films.

The final chapter proposes institutionalised diversity within media education as a panacea for myopic visions in media systems in an ethnically diverse, multicultural nation like Nigeria. This empirical study of the Nigerian academy (as pertains to mass communication, media and allied subjects) reveals prospects of deep polarisations. In these is evidence that media power are not without limits. Much must be done to harness the potential of the media for intended missions. The authors offer suggestions of how divisive tendencies in media across the nation can be systematically and structurally addressed. If the media must be effective monitors of the realm, their vision needs be sharp. To facilitate robust debates, media operatives need to be informed, impartial transmitters of various viewpoints. For these to happen, the place of learning must be liberating.

Nigeria is great in its histories, the result of series of interactions between and within ethnic groups and nations as much as it is the product of colonial configurations. Its media have grappled with diverse concerns, sometimes by invitation but mostly through their routine practices. Examples of national challenges addressed here are features of our own frames. Even after 100 years of its existence the nation Nigeria is still in the making, as are its media. They remain vital in an unending journey of transformation. Therefore mindful of a fast changing world, they need to appraise and adjust their roles as they continue to work for the nation.

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