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OVERVIEW OF MEDIA FREEDOM AND GOVERNANCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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CHAPTER ONE

OVERVIEW OF MEDIA FREEDOM AND GOVERNANCE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Lai Oso, Rotimi Olatunji, Dele Odunlami, & Kola Adesina

Introduction

Interrogating the concepts of media freedom and governance in the context of a digital space may not be as simple as it seems, especially when one considers the inconclusiveness of the variables for conceptualizing and measuring media or press freedom. Scholars have quipped time and again: What peculiar form of freedom should media enjoy and why? From what are the media expected to be free? Who is served by that freedom? What rights and advantages do individual citizens gain from such assumed freedom? How does that freedom serve the diverse interests of any given society, including governance? Of course, since the press and other critical media institutions hold governance accountable, it needs to be free first before it could reasonably and realistically agitate for social reforms. As Ibelema (2008, p. 11) argues, “a teetered press is unlikely to command the trust of the general public to be an effective crusader”. Similarly, Olatunji (2018) submits that only a free press can champion the freedom of the other sectors of the society: “Press freedom is the freedom of all and freedom for all. Press freedom is the fundamental rights of all humans. It is upon the foundation of a free, democratic, open, unfettered press that the rights of all members of the society revolve.”

The philosophical basis and human quest for freedom remain sacrosanct across ages. Equally so, the dimensions of media freedom have evolved alongside with media technologies. For civilisations before the evolution of print technology, media freedom was predominantly preoccupied with the rights of the story teller, individuals and groups to freely express opinions on diverse issues of the society. At a time when the visual arts and cave wall paintings were dominant, the artists craved for freedom of expression of ideas, feelings, opinions and so on through the visual arts. The requirements of media freedom assumed varied and more complex dimension with the invention of printing technology, the newspaper, broadcasting, film and now internet technologies.

However, any meaningful analysis of media freedom in the ensuing information age should and must first resolve the semantic issues of “freedom *to*” and “freedom *from*”. Since the First Amendment to the American Constitution, now popularly referred to as the Press Clause, many nations have incorporated issue of press or media freedom into their constitutions. In Nigeria, **Chapter Two, Section 39 (1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999** provides that “every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference”. In fact, **Section 22** of the same document is more pungent: “The Press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people”.

Press freedom, though fundamental like other freedoms, is by no means absolute. At least as members of any given society, journalists even in the day to day practice of their profession are still governed by other laws of the country. In Nigeria, despite protestations and series of resolutions at intellectual circles, media activities are still being hampered by other laws like the Official Secret Act, Contempt of Court Sedition and Defamation. It is even more curious that the promulgation of the Freedom of information Act (FoIA) has not in any way opened up governance to transparency. These limitations notwithstanding, the awareness on media freedom is a confirmed *sine qua non* as an indispensable element and in fact the guardian angel of democracy.

Nigeria no doubt has had its own fair share of the struggle for freedom of speech and of the press. Today, the country harbors the most vibrant media on the African continent. With the advent of the social media however a new chapter has been opened in the polemics of media freedom in terms of access to the media, who is indeed the journalist in the now digital public space? What are the expectations of the contemporary “prosumer” media audience? In other words, are the fears of media scholars on the dichotomy of the classic liberal and radical democratic perspectives of media freedom as identified by the likes of Curran (1996), McQuail (2000), Price (2002) still valid in the digital media space of today? To what extent do or should mass communications mediate in an equitable way conflict and competition between social groups in society? How does the society cope with the emerging issues, contradictions and unfolding realities which have become the inevitable fallout of the digital media and have precipitated all sorts of anxieties and several legal and parliamentary proposals in recent times? *Media Freedom and Governance in the Digital Age* presents a multi-perspective and trans-boundary scholastic response to germane issues of press freedom in contemporary digital age.

We open up the discourse in chapter two with Ogbonna, Okunade and Ayobolu examining in closer details, the concept of *Hate Speech, National Interest and Governance in Nigeria* as part of the fallout of the digital media on the nation's public sphere. They argue that the surge in electoral violence in Nigeria from 2011, 2015 and 2019 elections were as a result of hate speeches expressed by religious and political leaders and carried by the conventional/ social media and recommend the need to assess the Maltese law on hate speech which states that “...racial or religious hatred against another person shall be liable to imprisonment for a term from six months to eighteen months” on its work ability in Nigeria.

Chapter three appraises the usage of the Freedom of Information Act in Nigeria where **Adesina, Folarin, Ismail & Bakene** submitted that the implementation of the FoIA in the last eight years has not shown significant differences in what was operational in the first four years when former

President Goodluck Jonathan signed the bill into law. In order to address this challenge of implementation, the chapter suggests that Civil Society organizations, Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Nigerian Press Council (NPC), National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and other stakeholders should institute a framework and institutional policy to assess the performance of Federal, State and Local Governments in Nigeria on freedom of expression and the press.

The central preoccupation of Igyuve, Iloani and Agada-Mba's chapter four is to address the question of whether or not the Internet-based media should be regulated in Nigeria. The authors averred that the Federal Government of Nigeria should come up with a national framework and policy to drive the regulation of internet-based media through an active engagement of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to provide some level of sanity in the operations of internet-based media. This they suggest could be made possible through a two-prong approach of self and statutory regulations.

In chapter five, Ajaegbu, Jegede and Olanrewaju delved into portrayal of youth cultural values in indigenous home videos in Nigeria with a clear submission that the selected and analysed videos appropriately represented the indigenous culture with implications for cultural transmission, value re-orientation and national integration.

In chapter six, Yusuf and Olatunji interrogated issues around female candidacy in the 2015 and 2019 general elections in Nigeria, with implications for media and governance clearly demonstrated. This chapter demonstrates that women participation in elective positions during the 2015 and 2019 general elections was very low and continues to be in the decline, which suggests that political parties as well as the electorate are not sensitive enough to the important issue of gender equality. In numerical terms, the study reveals that the population of female registered voters are almost at par with the male counterparts stressing however, that this is not reflected in gender representation at all levels of elective or appointive positions in the country, a development which the authors say calls for increased intervention by media and other stakeholders in increasing awareness on women participation as candidates during general elections in Nigeria. The concluding part of the chapter dilated on the prospects of social media for an expanded public sphere that allows increased women participation in elections and governance.

Opportunities and challenges of social media for women's empowerment initiatives in South-South, Nigeria and newspaper Framing of Obasanjo's Fulanization and Islamization Speech are presented in chapters eight and nine respectively. In the former Osuagwu says that muteness in the communication arena is a significant challenge to the use of social for genuine empowerment. Following the outcome of an empirical study, the use of social media for interpersonal and group communications is recommended as pathways for overcoming muteness and paving the way for genuine empowerment of women. Real-life communication, as opposed to digital interaction, would help women initiate and engage with stakeholders to depict their experiences, enhance women visibility as well as project their voices. Women should make conscious efforts to embrace the use of social media for entrepreneurial purposes to address the lack of Internet access. In the latter it is Fatonji, Oso and Atofojomo's view that although freedom of expression is necessary for democracy to thrive, an unbridled freedom is disaster waiting to happen. While constructive criticism of the government should be encouraged, unguarded and inciting statements should be avoided. The authors opine that Obasanjo did nothing wrong in criticizing the government on state of insecurity and other problems affecting the nation, but he did

everything wrong for making heavy allegations without any evidence to back his claims. More importantly, Journalists are expected to utilize their power of gate keeping and framing to avoid, select and report issues related to religion, security and ethnicity.

Chapter nine anchored by Owolabi and Akanni focuses on issues and challenges of media ownership, national interest and governance in Nigeria. The thrust of this chapter is that the media as the mirror of the society have had to undergo series of transformation largely resulting from the society which in-turn had received enduring impact from such phenomena as globalisation. The authors argue that the yoke exerted on the Nigerian state and indeed all African states, or better still the entire global south, has turned out to be the new challenge taking the place of political servitude of the colonial days. The authors observe that rather than work towards holistic emancipation, not a few media establishments and individual journalists are seeking individualistic succor via short cuts manifesting in corruption. Many now pander to power with less or no faithfulness to national interest at all. There is however no doubt to the fact that integrity is the strongest asset for any player in the media world and the evidence remains conspicuous with the tradition sustained by towering media institutions globally and locally.

Chapter ten showcases social media use among youths and its implications for grassroots mobilisation among youths in Rivers State, Nigeria. Here, Odoyi, Omego and Olatunji counsel community based organisations, political parties, governments and policy makers to re-orientate youths away from usage of social media for mere entertainment function to one of productive and instrumental engagements. The writers say it behooves public agencies to use social media to reach, interact, and collaborate with youths or mobilize them for grassroots development. The authors further recommend that the government should harness its potentials for youths to enhance social capital, where public agencies and officials become part of youths' social networks and engage with them in an interactive manner.

Badmus, Okaiyeto and Mustapha writing on maximizing the potentials of online civic forums for e-Governance in Nigeria argue in chapter eleven that at this point in the nation's history, when legitimacy and public trust in political institutions in the country are declining, it is imperative that the government plans and implements e-participation initiatives as a way of signposting readiness to involve citizens more in policy and decisions making. They suggest further that e-participation can be utilised for informing citizens, generating support among them, using their input in decision making and probing for their needs, e-participation is a one-stop initiative for efficient service delivery and excellent and all-inclusive governance.

In the closing chapter, Odunlami joined issue with the position of Adesina and his colleagues in chapter three on FoIA. Odunlami maintains that Nigeria's quest for sustainable development can hardly be contemplated without the religious implementation of FoIA. Odunlami's thesis in this chapter is that nine years after its promulgation, the mass media have not fared any better in the use and applications of the provisions of this vital law. If properly implemented, the author submits that FoIA will enrich the practice of any investigative journalism, transparency in governance and sustainable development in Nigeria. The chapter concludes that mere legislations without the requisite democratic ethos and open attitude to information management by leaders of social and governmental hierarchies might defeat the essence and goals of sustainable development and the cherished values of the Freedom of Information Act in Nigeria.

In conclusion, this book carefully presents, in an integrative manner, the currents of thoughts of scholars across different strata of the Nigerian media intellectual space on *Media Freedom and Governance in the Digital Age*.

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