

NEWS PRODUCTION IN THE NIGERIAN PRESS: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

Victor Jatula
Griffith College
REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

ABSTRACT

This study examines factors that shape news production in the Nigeria press to investigate its effect on media content and democracy, particularly since the return to civil rule in 1999 after 29 years of intermittent but dictatorial military rule. Using focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, the study found that the Nigerian press not only operates in a volatile ethnic and challenging economic environment but also encounters enormous political pressure which complicates, and often compromises the media's ability to fulfill its constitutional role. The study recommends implementing the Freedom of Information Act and sets out a procedure for providing the media with more generous operating space in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigerian politics. Newspaper. Democracy. Press freedom. Corruption.

INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that socio-political factors that shape news production in the Nigerian press since the restoration of civil governance in 1999 (after three decades of military rule) has not been sufficiently investigated. The current democratic framework that guarantees rule of law and separation of political, judicial and executive powers have seemingly created a more conducive environment for media professionals and organisations to operate; unlike in previous military epochs, chequered with censorship and political control; this present dispensation seemingly facilitates and allows the press to function with a comparatively higher degree of freedom. The return to civil rule, as noted by Ette (2013) was not only a leap towards liberal multi-party elections but also a major step towards increasing press freedom. Additionally, the legal environment has become more transparent with the abolition of the draconian Decree 4 of 1984 and the passing of the Freedom of Information Act (FoI) in 2007, granting media professionals access to official documents and government information previously beyond public reach. The study shall ask whether the press in Nigeria is free to perform its constitutional duties. Further, it will seek to examine the factors that shape news production in the Nigeria press by focusing on the setting within which the press operates and to demonstrate its effect on institutional structure. This study also evaluates the impact of Nigeria's socio-political context on the press.

General literature on the role of the press in the current democratic process in Nigeria is two-tracked: on one hand, the press is regarded as a quintessential socio-political institution that continue to advocate for democratic ideals within Nigeria's political space. Kalejaiye (2009) have observed that Nigerian newspapers evolved with an overwhelming political characterization which formed during Nigerian nationalism in the 1930s, matured at national independence in the 1960s and established itself as a profoundly important democratic force in the 1990s when it, along with other civil right groups resisted military authoritarian dictatorship. On the other hand, some scholars have argued that since independence, the press

has been dragged into the murky waters of tribal politics and as a consequence have become corrupted. Sobowale (1986) posits that rather than promote integration, independence and national development; the press has become biased, sectional and agents of disunity, occasioned by regional and ethnic differences. Tobechukwu (2011) have added that press reportage has been characterised by political, religious and ethnic stereotypes and primordialism. Adeyemi (2008) described the Nigerian press as the greatest threat to democracy in that those who establish media houses are members of the ruling class who do not have the interest of the people at heart but are interested in money, power, the economic benefit of setting up a media house and the political influence thereof. The study shall ask whether the press in Nigeria is free to perform its constitutional duties. Further, it will seek to examine the factors that shape news production in the Nigeria press by focusing on the setting within which the press operates and to demonstrate its effect on institutional structure. This study also evaluates the impact of Nigeria's social and political context on the press.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The press in Nigeria: an overview

The roots of Nigeria's post-independence politics and inter-group relations are deeply embedded in its history (Osaghae, 1988). Nigeria is a melting pot of different cultures and geographically separate people by Britain's administrative, economic and political imperatives seeded by trade monopoly, military superiority and diplomacy (Ikime, 1980). Political, cultural and geographical differences that characterise the people and kingdoms in Nigeria prior to the dawn of British Colonial rule in 1894, through the 1914 Amalgamation of Northern and Southern Protectorate up to Independence in 1960 remained largely intact. The northern region was largely Islamic and politically centralised; the western part was Christian, liberal and exposed to Western education while the eastern portion of Nigeria was an amalgam of stateless societies with independent political structures. The cleavages and political contestation for state power among the constituting units at independence in 1960 was not immediately problematic but the seed of ethnic rivalry and social discord had been unwittingly sown. After independence, historic distrust between the conservative North and liberal South created political tension among the federating units to the extent that Civil War ensued six years after independence (Omu, 1978).

As noted by Abati (2000), the Nigerian press is significantly affected by the political, regional and ethnic contestation for state power and resources that have characterised post-independence politics in Nigeria. Although the press was instrumental in the clamour for and attainment of independence, the North/South divide in the media not only suggest division in the regional centres of press concentration and production but also indicates deeper ideological, political and religious differences. The Lagos press (South) is the main conduit of national news in Nigeria. Its dominance is critical to understanding the role of the press in since post-independence (Oso, 2011). The ethnic rivalry and marked plurality of the Nigerian state which is also reflected in the ownership structures of Nigerian newspapers produces a press based on geographic, historical, ideological inflections (Akinfeleye, 2011). While most newspapers claim to be fair, balanced and objective advocates of democracy; press ownership structures and regional affinity suggest a strong degree of ethnicity and regional divergence in the press.

Adesoji (2010) have argued that the motive for profit maximization in the press since 1999 is its defining character. The commercial imperatives now mean that those that can afford to pay now determine what people read by the influence brought to bear upon editors, reporters and the public. His study indicates that for pre-1999 newspapers, revenue generation was a

mirage and not it's driving force. Oso (2011) provides compelling evidence that since 1999, the market has become the decisive moderating force for all press outfit, location, religion, ethnicity or political affinity notwithstanding. The press runs as commercial businesses, with production process and cost, and news as the product. He argues that the ideal press should be independent of external control to fulfil its constitutional responsibilities but as the press is not free of the need for capital, their independence is hindered by those who possess capital. Adesoji (2010) and Ette (2000) claim that the press has remained by and large, tools in the hands of politician in perpetuating hegemonic power structures. Oso and Bello (2012) contends that advertising revenue now drives the business of news making as opposed to editorial content.

On the influence on ownership, Adesoji and Hahn (2011) have noted that newspaper owners wield enormous influence that determines the slant of their publications. While it is difficult to ascertain the degree of influence owners wield in determining the content of their publication; in the Nigerian context, owners who often double as editors of their publications bear a more direct impact, both on their staff and on content. Research on the Nigerian press indicate that commercialisation, ethnicity and ownership influence bear significant impact on news production to the extent that media agenda is synonymous with the agenda of press owners, editors, advertisers and regional political power holders.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate what shapes news production in the Nigerian press and explore if and how this structure impact on newspaper content in particular and national politics in general, eclectic research methods were adopted. Mixed methods were utilised to reduce the inherent limitations in either methodological approaches. Besides, data from one method helped develop and inform the other (Creswell, 2003). This strengthened the reliability and dependability of overall data generated as well as the discussion and analysis thereafter. In addition, one method was nested within the other method to provide insight into different levels or units of analysis. Furthermore, it allowed the study to first gather data from a large number of participants which gave an overall view. This was followed up by semi-structured interviews with fewer participants to elicit detailed opinions and commentaries, particularly on core issues that relate to the subject matter. Finally, mixed method was utilised because of its ability to generalise the findings to a population and develop a detailed view of the meaning of a phenomenon or concept for individuals.

To confirm the causality of any such relationship I needed to explore actual social relationships within newspaper organisations, between proprietors, editors and journalists. The primary objective for using this approach is to obtain a broad consideration of the study objectives on one hand while on the other, gain multiple perspective of the same phenomenon, thereby increasing the validity and reliability of data. Principally, the study used semi structured interviews and focus group discussions to investigate broader questions about the effect of regional concentration of newspapers as well as the institutional structure of Nigerian newspapers and how that impact on news organisations, the professionals that work within them as well as the content they generate.

In total, 18 interviews were conducted in Lagos and Abuja, Nigeria. The participants included a cross-section of Nigerians that mirrored the diversity inherent in the overall population. Adequate consideration was devoted to gender equality among participants, age diversity, ethnicity and religion. A total of six focused group discussions were conducted in Lagos (4)

and Abuja (2) in Nigeria. The discussant were purposely selected based on their availability and more importantly, based on their understanding of the purpose of research. Similar to the participants in the semi-structured interviews, age, gender, religion and ethnicity of participants were diverse to reflect the diversity inherent in Nigeria.

DISCUSSION

Nigeria is a consolidating democracy with a relatively competitive press. The press operates in a highly contested media space with layers of interest and influence. Since 1999, the press has functioned within the scope of an elected democratic government, one that is characterised by open elections, free markets, and private ownership of print and broadcast media with limited State intervention. While the State provided the main operational framework through regulation and media laws, private ownership oversees the independent production of news through management priorities and capital investment of the means of production. Within this architecture, newspapers are viewed more as social and political tools rather than engines of economic growth and political development. As the State performs oversight roles without coercion; private ownership of the means of production ensures functionality within the system.

The relationship between the press and the State has relatively improved since 1999, however, newspaper houses and media products are still subject to arbitrary State interventions including but not limited to arrests of journalists, closures of newspaper organisations and the use of extra-legal measure to control the press. In spite of relative press freedom, political interference (pressure not to publish) mainly by the State, political elites and newspaper proprietors remains prevalent. Undercover censorship is still a recurring problem in Nigeria regardless of the supposed freedoms expressed in the 1999 Federal Constitution. Government philosophy and documents may state press freedoms exist, but in the day to day affairs of life such freedoms fluctuate widely. A Lagos-based reporter observed that:

The Nigerian press is said to be free but when reporting on corruption, human right abuses, executive rascality and electoral malpractices; journalists are arrested, denied access to information, detained or targeted by the State and its security apparatus. (Anonymous (2013) Focus Group Discussion comment)

The volatility inherent in Nigeria has an unsettling impact on the press and may have compromised it. The study found multiple challenges that confront news production in the Nigerian press. While some are global in nature- challenges associated with decline in advertising revenue and drop in circulation figures, others a local in nature- micro-management of journalist by owner/editors, political pressure and poor working conditions. These constraints are compartmentalised and discussed below.

Economic Challenges

The relevance of the media in a democracy is undisputed and freedom is a fundamental prerequisite required by media practitioners everywhere to expressly discharge their duties. In Nigeria however, press freedom is not only threatened but is radically endangered by acute access financial resources. A *Vanguard* reporter stated that:

Media freedom is a fragile commodity and we journalists are particularly exposed to threats. We operate at the frontlines of a battle for political power that is often waged with deadly weapons. Censorship, harassment, imprisonment of journalists

and political control of news outlets are some of the most often cited. (Anonymous (2013) Focus Group Discussion comment)

An Abuja reporter said that Nigeria's ruthless business climate characterised by poor circulation figures, poor wage structures, and sub-standard working conditions influences unprofessional practices across the board. He stated that many proprietors are unable, unwilling or deliberately delay salaries and wages. *"There are cases where, newspaper organisations owe their workers between five and 12 months' arrears of salaries and wages."* Admittedly, it would be extremely difficult for the media organisations and journalists working in them to act independently under such financial circumstances. The press has become easy preys to interest groups seeking to advance their selfish agendas, using advertising money as bait for positive media coverage. A Lagos-based journalist noted that:

Newspaper organisations and their journalists are pressured by needs and want to engage in immoral conduct such as accepting gifts and bribe to ensure survival. Journalists probably would be less inclined to corruption if we have more. (Anonymous (2013) Interview comment)

The comments above indicate vulnerability to corrupt practices within the press; a situation compounded by poor salaries and poor working conditions. The concept of minimum wage generally prevents the income threshold from falling below certain earnings, however, in the Nigerian press, mainly dominated by the private ownership; salary earnings are largely unstructured, untimely and inadequate. The bargaining power of each individual is fundamental to wage negotiations and salary agreements. While this system may give a few experienced journalist fair advantage; majority others are left at a disadvantage. Significantly therefore, the system exploits Nigeria's mass unemployment and gives proprietors undue advantage during recruitment and salary negotiation.

Table 1: Monthly approximate remuneration of newspaper journalists in Nigerian

Post	Monthly salary (Naira)	Euro equivalent
Reporter	N25,000 - 34,000	€125 – 170
Senior Correspondent	N35,000 - 50,000	€175 – 250
Assistant Editor	N50,000 - 75,000	€250 – 375
Editor	N75,000 – 100,000	€375 – 500
Senior Editor	N100,000 -125,000	€500 – 625

Source: Data gathered at focus group discussions and interviews with 11 journalists

Note: Exchange rate at €1 equivalent N200 as at October 2014

Interview data provided by journalists indicate that a large number of employed workers earn between 25,000 and 55,000 Naira (approximately 125 – 175 Euros) per month. A significant minority earn in the region of 35,000 to 75,000 Naira (approximately 175-375 Euros) per month; while the remaining few earn over 100,000 (approximately 500 Euros) monthly. An Abuja journalist said that:

When you compare what the entry pay is for the banking and telecommunications industry (N100, 000 and 125,000) respectively, you will understand that we are grossly underpaid. Even if some journalists refuse bribes, their majority others will take it. This among other reasons emboldened some to start taking it too. (Anonymous (2013) Interview comment)

In addition to the above, an analysis of the cost of living in Nigeria indicates that the take home pay of journalists is not only comparatively small but an inducement to corruption. A *Leadership* journalist noted that “*Nigerian journalists are an endangered species; over-used and under-paid.*” A former Lagos journalist, now public relations professional commented that while still in the employment of *Tell* magazine, her first-hand experience of financial difficulties was from the point of her first assignment. She commented that her pay barely covered her expenses and as a consequence, she had to switch careers.

Cases of Unpaid Salaries in the Nigerian Press

To add to the financial challenges confronting media professional, a number of media outfits are in the habit of delaying salaries. “NUJ pickets *Champion* Newspaper Over its Member’s Unpaid Salaries” (*Daily Trust*: 09/06/2013). The paper reported that the headquarters of *Champion* in Lagos was shut down from May 27 to 29, 2013 by members of Nigerian Union of Journalist (NUJ) over the non-payment of salaries and allowances arrears of its staff running to about 18 months. Similarly, “*New Nigerian* (NN) Staff Give Ultimatum over Unpaid Salaries” (*Blueprint*: 16/01/2013) reported that workers of *NN* are owed 10 months’ salary arrears- a deliberate failure of management (jointly owned by the 19 Northern states) to fulfil its financial obligation. Furthermore, “NUJ Threatens Media Organisation over Unpaid Salaries” (*Punch*: 02/04/2013) reported that NUJ president, Mohammed Garba, decried media owners owing journalists several months of unpaid salaries.

Physical Challenges

The comments from media practitioners that participated in the study indicated that the relative stability and freedom with which journalists conduct their trade in this current democratic dispensation is incomparable to the degree, consistency and brutality most journalists experienced during the military era. Nigeria however remains a dangerous place to be an active journalist. *Punch* newspaper reported “2012 As Deadliest Year for Journalists” (*Punch*: 30/12/2012) by asserting that Nigeria has a long history of violence against journalists, particularly during the military era when the founding Editor-in-Chief of *Newswatch* magazine, Dele Giwa, was killed via a letter bomb in October 1986; and concludes that media practitioners are still under attack. In the current dispensation, state security agencies remain a threat to press freedom. “Nigerian Police as the ‘leading Source of Abuses against the Press’” (*Guardian editorial*: 4/5/2010). The editorial claimed that the police are frequent tools in the hands of executive power holders who use them to intimidate or suppress the press. A *Tribune* correspondent stated that:

The job of a journalist is highly dangerous. While the spate of attacks has reduced; when compared to other emerging democratic states, Nigeria still has a high mortality rate in terms of media professionals. (Anonymous (2013) Interview comment)

The study found that the major threat to press freedom and security since 2011 has been the violent campaign by the militant Islamist sect *Boko Haram*, whose wave of bombings, assassinations, and intimidation across the Northern part of Nigeria has left a trail of death and destruction. “Nigeria: Media under Siege as *Boko Haram* Bombs *ThisDay*, *Sun* and *Moment*” (*Leadership*: 27/04/2012). The paper reported that the *Boko Haram* sect yesterday (26/04/12) turned its attention to the media as it “*unleashed a string of coordinated attacks on three media houses in Abuja and Kano killing no fewer than nine journalists in the process.*” *Guardian* reported the same attack: “*Boko Haram suspected as bombs kill at least seven at*

Nigerian newspapers” (*Guardian*: 27/04/2012). During the news-game using the above newspaper cutting, a reporter with *Trust* noted that the attack on *ThisDay* in Abuja:

...was not only targeted at Southern newspapers. A reporter of the Nigerian Television Station was killed in Maiduguri. So that attack on *Thisday* in Abuja is not an isolated incident. The attack is intended to send out a strong signal to the media in general. (Anonymous (2013) Focus Group Discussion comment)

In a newspaper article titled: “*How free is the Nigerian Press?*” (*Thisday*: 19/05/2013) the author argued that journalists are still being murdered in the course of their duties. These include: Godwin Agbroko of *Thisday* (December 22, 2006), Paul Abayomi Ogundeji, *Thisday* (August 16, 2008), Bayo Olu, *Guardian* (September 20, 2009), Edo Sule Ugbagwu, *The Nation* (April 24, 2010), Zakariya Isa of the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) (2011); Enenche Akogwu, *Channels TV*, (January 20, 2012).

A United Kingdom-based organisation *Committee to Protect Journalists* (CPJ) ranked Nigeria high among nations where killing of journalists is seen to be rampant. An article titled: “*World Press Freedom Day: Nigeria 11th Worst Nation for Journalists*” (*Leadership*: 03/05/2013) lamented that while deadly violence continues to plague the press globally; there has been a noticeable increase in Nigeria. cpj.org¹ also listed several recently killed journalists and they include: Sunday Gyang Bwede and Nathan Dabak of *The Light Bearer* both murdered in April 24, 2010 in Jos, Plateau State; Ikechukwu Udendu of *Anambra News*, murdered in January 2013 in Anambra state and Nansok Sallah of *Highland FM*, murdered in January 2012. It is important to note that while killing of journalists may have reduced since 1999; violence against media practitioners (particularly by State security agents and political thugs) did not end with military rule. Nigerian journalists still face real and potential threats in the discharge of duties. These threats may have potentially impeded investigative journalism as a whole or limited newspaper’s ability to push boundaries, probe politicians or challenge certain economic or policy excesses.

Legal Challenges

Access to information is a challenge as certain individuals, organisations and government departments deny or restrict journalists’ right of access. A significant number of journalists agreed that access to government documents is limited because official papers are either classified as confidential information or under national security, a practice that became the rule, rather than an exception during the military era. Until the passage of the Freedom of Information (FoI) Act in 2011, access to official information was restricted by provisions in the 1962 Official Secrets Act, Decree 4 of 1984 and the Criminal Code, which created various press and speech offences, including sedition, criminal defamation, and publication of false news.

The 2011 FoI Act was seen by several newspaper journalists as a milestone that would gradually remove several legal restrictions that hinder access to official information; thus guaranteeing citizens’ right to public information and improving the working environment in which newspapers operate. *Daily Trust* and *Punch* newspapers articles: “Jonathan Sets the Agenda for Office and Signs the FoI Bill into Law” (*Daily Trust*: 01/06/2011) and “President Signs Historic FoI Bill” (*Punch*: 01/06/2011) both reported that the new legislation is the result of a decade-long advocacy campaign led by civil society groups and media practitioners. *Guardian* newspaper editorial (04/06/2013) observed that the signing of FoI

Act is a “key step to ending impunity. The bill is fundamental to rule of law, human rights and the key role of the media in sustaining democracy”.

Since its passage in 2011, has access to government documents enhanced press performance? Are journalists as well as the general public able to access government information? Is "right-to-access" being implemented and enforced? Commenting on the FoI Bill since its passage, a reporter with *Tribune* contended that nothing has changed in terms of barriers journalists face in accessing information.

“*The Reality of Freedom of Information Bill*” (*Daily Trust*: 17/9/2012) noted that the excitement that came with the signing of the 2011 FoI Act, as elicited among members of civil society, the media and human rights groups, is being replaced with frustration and disappointment. The Nigerian Guild of Editors (NGE), in responding to the impact of the FoI Act remarked that “*the president has more than anyone else empowered the citizens to participate in the governance of their own affairs; however, its implementation so far has been far more in breach of the provisions than compliance by government agencies.*”

The FoI was summed up by an Abuja editor as “*toothless bulldog, a deliberate watered down version of reality reconfigured by Nigeria’s elites to further conceal corruption at all levels.*”

So, frustration with the limitations of the legislature is not confined to southern editorial rooms. These comments indicate that denial of access to information in Nigeria remains a real threat to democracy. A virile press is the voice and conscience of the people. It plays an optimised role in an atmosphere of freedom, in which access to information is guaranteed and where ideas, information and opinion are expressed freely. In the absence of press freedom and unlimited access to information; official secrecy and concealment will continue to hinder media professionals across the board.

Professional Challenges

This study has identified three critical professional challenges that confront the press. Firstly, newspaper proprietors, through recruitment policies, management structures and editorial priorities; pose a threat to professionalism due to the premium they place on their relationship with business and political elites. Secondly, most newspaper organisations discourage in-depth, substantive journalism because of the expenses and time commitment involved, this is underpinned by market-driven business model that focus more on popular culture than hard news content. The final challenge is a dearth of skilled manpower and competent staff. A *Guardian* editor in Lagos noted that:

The media space is saturated with politicians who own newspapers. The reason why they invest so much in such ventures is for publicity and to push their political agenda. Are these papers economically sustainable? Not really. I'm afraid not. Gbenga Daniel as Gov. of Ogun State started Comet and Westerner newspapers but the papers died immediately he left office. That shows the power owners wield.
(Anonymous (2013) Focus Group Discussion comment)

According to Focus Group 2 discussants in Abuja, “*it is a tall order to expect editors of privately owned newspapers to turn against or criticise their owners, advertisers and shareholders.*” They also agreed that the power of ownership is overwhelming, especially in the Nigerian context where high unemployment, unenforced labour laws and a spongy court system prevails. An Abuja-based civil servant that partook in Focus Group 2 noted that:

By and large, Nigerian newspapers operate in a difficult environment- dearth of infrastructure, no constant electric power, no paper mill, dearth of properly

trained manpower; yet, they have to critic those who wield power and wealth. This is not a rather comfortable task. (Anonymous (2013) Focus Group Discussion comment)

The study also found that critical skills that integrate multimedia knowledge and Information Technology remain a challenge. With more people consuming news digitally; the imperative for re-skilling, up-skilling and re-training appears to be more cogent than ever. As society changes, so must the press transform its ability to function as democracy's watchdog. A Southern newspaper editor commented that “the quality of newspaper content is directly related to the competence of journalist. What we have are mostly unequipped and ill-trained graduates who find themselves in the press but lack critical investigative and basic reporting skills with which to report corruption, election crisis, ethnic tension and other social and political issues in a balanced manner.”

The final obstacle under professional challenges is the overwhelming lack of infrastructure—computers, dicta-phones, digital recorders and camera, mobile internet, limited access to online resources and the inadequacy of in-house training and development. A noteworthy number of Lagos reporters said that training drastically improved their writing. Solving the skills deficit in their reporting made it easier for them to address the other challenges to their work. However, training does not always lead to better journalism, principally because it only addresses one challenge (a lack of skills) of the many facing journalists.

Figure 1 below indicates major criss-crossing challenges that confronts journalists in Nigeria, specifically, obstacles to professionalism and performance.

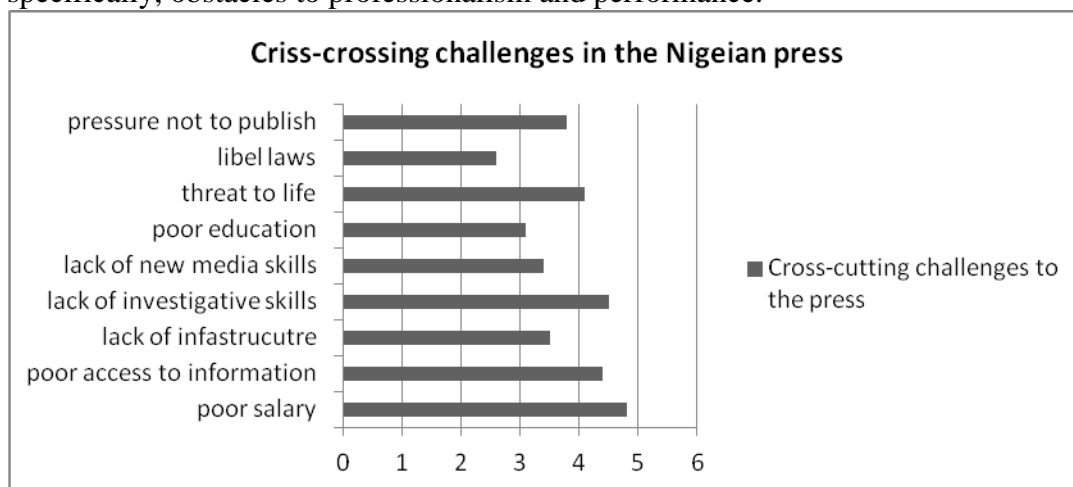


Figure 1: Cross-cutting challenges in the Nigerian media
Source: Data gathered at interviews and group discussions

The study found poor pay and limited access to information as the biggest obstacles to professionalism. These challenges significantly impede performance and objectivity in the press. The findings also suggest that news coverage of politics is not adequately keeping the public informed, nor is the press playing its watchdog role effectively. Narratives on political and economic development in the mainstream media are inadequate, incomplete and inconsistent with reality. Reportage of politics in particular is generally predictable and pedestrian. Given the centrality of politics to Nigeria's economy, coverage of main political issues is peripheral while partisanship and bias are central.

Impact of current structures on news production

The effects of these factors are twofold: corruption on one hand and the increasing influence of advertising revenue on news content. These two combined have eroded editorial

independence in most Nigerian newspapers, thus limiting the ability of the press to positively influence public policy.

Increasing Influence of Advertising over Reportage

Historically, advertising revenue and circulation reach covered a substantial part of newspaper production cost, leaving the reading public to buy at reduced prices. A steady decline of the latter has meant a progressive dependence on the former, especially, advertisement. With declining advertising revenue (See *Sunday Trust: 18/11/2012 for elaboration*), most newspaper now depend on political advertising to cover production cost. An editor with *Tribune* remarked that “*corporate and political advertisements are the two main sources of revenue in the industry but the latter far outweighs the former*”. The illustrations below in (*ThisDay* and *Tribune* newspapers) provide ample evidence of how some newspapers now use their front-page for political advertisement.



Figure 2: Nigeria Arise. Support Jonathan
Source: *ThisDay* (12/01/2011)

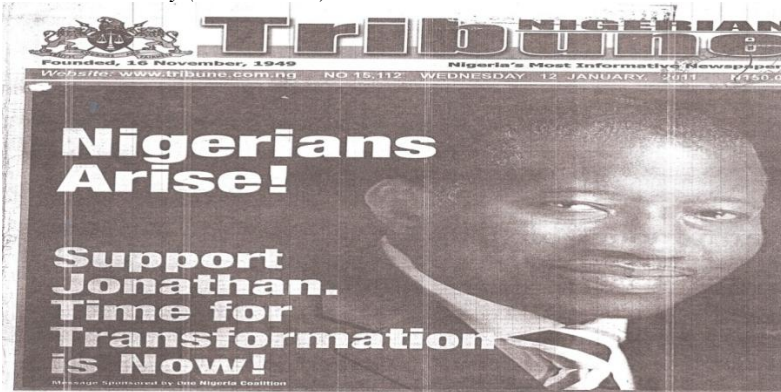


Figure 3: Nigeria Arise. Support Jonathan
Source: *Nigerian Tribune* (12/01/2011)

The primacy of political advertisement indicates a shift towards increased commercial spaces in order to accommodate more advertisements and generate more revenue. Note that the placement of the advertisement in the front page would have been taken up by headlines or a news-photo for the lead story. This has several implications for newspapers, particularly their ability to inform the public and encourage political participation. On one hand, it supports the revenue base of the press and increases financial stability. On the other hand, however, the prominence given to advertisement may have compromise editorial independence. It may have resulted in reduction of space devoted to investigative coverage and analysis both of which are crucial to the political role newspapers play in a democracy.

The commercial dynamics that surrounds advertising in the press has resulted in indirect control of newspapers by wealthy politicians and corporate organisations, who through advertising Naira; influence the slant of reportage and define the boundaries of coverage. The nexus between the elite and the press is such that the former seeks to recruit the latter in the

pursuit and contestation of state power; while the latter seeks to publicly and positively project the latter for political gains. It therefore suggests how interest in the press is manifested and employed for mass propaganda.

These developments are indicative of the extent that advertising revenue can tame investigative reporting and how government and corporate sponsors have used advertising contracts to 'fix' critical papers such as the now defunct "Next newspaper" and even critical reporters. A Lagos based journalists concedes that:

In my 23 years of media engagement, survival in the newspaper industry boils down to advertisement. NEXT newspapers (now defunct) that tried to breathe in a bit of fresh air by its robust investigative journalism had to close down due to lack of funds. Attack corruption and corruption fights you back. NEXT was forced into an early embalmment due to suffocating lack of advertisement funds. (Anonymous (2013) Interview comment)

The above commentaries imply a deepening of affiliation between newspapers and the political elite in which the elite provide revenue through sponsorship, advertisement, access and privileges for the press and in return, the press operates as propaganda machinery for the reassertion, re-election and hegemonic dominance of the ruling class. An alliance based on mutual economic benefit. So long as advertisements are steady, the press will stay in their favour.

Corruption in the Nigerian Press

The study found that news organisations in general and newspaper journalists in particular are deeply entrenched in allegations of controversies, corruption, and "cheque-book journalism"² which in no small way affect objectivity, professionalism and balanced reporting. Nigerians are exposed to extensive corruption and political influences that permeates society. Within the media, journalists are also exposed to bribes and gratifications. Bribery encourages bias as the receiver is generally disposed to act in favour of the giver, even if it means omitting, manipulating or ignoring the facts. Although the Code of Conduct, Nigerian Guild of Editor prohibits bribery; several journalists' anecdotes reinforced the impression of widespread extent and rampancy of corruption in the press. A Lagos reporter noted that: "it is no longer news that journalists entrusted with the responsibility of monitoring the activities of public office holders as enshrined in Chapter 1, Section 22 of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution are grossly engaged in corrupt practices and have allowed politicians and corporate organisations to compromise journalistic standards". Journalists are now viewed as "shameless mouthpieces of politicians." It can therefore be argued, and rightly so, that the press operates in self-interest and in that of the minority few elites. Arguing from an economic view point, a Group Five from the South noted that:

Newspapers sell news for money. Where else do you think they get money from? How many people buy newspaper or even read newspaper in Nigeria. Don't you know it's more lucrative selling mobile phone recharge cards than newspaper by those street hawkers? So they (newspapers) have to look for alternatives... (Anonymous (2013) Focus Group Discussion comment)

The group discussion reinforced the view that newspapers have two audiences: on one hand is the reading public while on the other are the ruling elite. These two audiences have conflicting interest in that, while the former (public) require transparency in and scrutiny of

public and political office holders; the latter prefer a system of uninterrupted and unchecked political secrecy that makes misappropriation and embezzlement of funds possible. It is the case that due to diminishing purchasing power of the reading public, most newspapers are “cozying up” with the latter audience for advertising revenue and other fringe benefits. A Lagos editor observed that:

Corruption is so prevalent in the media and the temptation is so high. Journalists interact with the high and mighty, especially politicians and big business people who not only have political and economic agenda but would enlist support for the media, at any price. It therefore takes a lot from journalist to resist an inducement of a bribe, more so, as they are poorly remunerated. The fourth Estate has undoubtedly been eroded by institutional corruption. (Anonymous (2013) Focus Group Discussion comment)

The commentaries indicated that journalism in Nigeria has shifted and bargained its position as watchdog of society to become collaborators in the gradual devaluing of its values through mis-information and cover-up for dishonest public office holders. It also found that just as reporters lobby for press secretary position, their employers take on political appointments. Some journalists are in the habit of deliberately mis-represent and mis-inform public opinion in favour of their affiliated party in return for political appointments. While it is not wrong for journalists to take up political appointments; it is interesting to note that such appointments pose a threat to common good when the office holder engages his network of media contacts to manipulate public opinion.

Corruption in the Nigerian Media: the case of Azubuike Ishiekwene³.

In an article: “Newspaper’s Senior Editor to Refund 17 Million Naira Proceeds.” (*Osun Defender*⁴: 22/03/2010) reported that the Board of Directors of *Punch* newspaper today fired the company’s executive director in charge of publications, Mr Azubuike Ishiekwene following his indictment by a probe panel set up to investigate the various allegations of multi-million-Naira corruption charges against him. The board found him guilty as charged and immediately terminated his appointment.” The indictment against Azubuike was instigated by Mr Steve Ayorinde, a former senior correspondent of *Punch* who petitioned the board in February ⁵and accused Azubuike of using *Punch* newspaper as a platform of extorting millions of Naira from corrupt politicians and top business executive. The weight of allegations and public outcry that followed the indictment forced *Punch* to set up a probe panel that found Mr Ishiekwene guilty of financial misgivings.”

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Breaking News: Punch Newspaper's Senior Editor To Refund 17 Million Naira Proceeds

According to fresh reports Culled from independent citizen journalists internet portal IReports-NG the corruption investigation by Punch Newspaper management has snowballed into a big hush scandal as a Senior Editor is made to cough back about =N=17 million Naira into the coffers of the Media organization.... Read more... :

The last is yet to be heard about the corruption charges levelled against the suspended executive director of The Punch Newspapers, Azubuike Ishiekwene as the media house has so far discovered that Azu had in the course of his various private business deals robbed it of not less than N17 million revenue.

IReports-ng sources in the organisation revealed that as at last week, the

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PHOTO: Ngeige in his polling unit
Ngeige 'll End

Figure 4: Punch newspaper senior editor to refund 17 million

Source: Osun Defender

In our focus group reading exercise, participants in Group One in Lagos responded unanimously to the article above noting that it is a classic example of abuse of power, professional misconduct and greed of unimaginable proportion. Another journalist with *ThisDay* newspaper spoke of how Azubuike's scandal shook the media in general and questioned the credibility of every journalist. "The Azu-gate put us all in bad light and everywhere you went afterwards, you were looked at like a professional extortionist." He added that the widespread nature of corruption within the media is alarming, particularly among pressmen attached to the State house. The findings conclude that corruption permeates the Nigerian press. Media organisations as well as the journalists that work in them are indifferent to corruption. Acceptance of gratification has become the norm rather than an exception; even though bribe of any kind has a tendency to accentuate editorial and reporting bias.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The major set-back that casts a shadow on the Freedom of Information (FoI) Act is the jurisdictional challenges obstructing its wheel of progress. The Act remains unenforceable in most of the federating states on the ground that it is yet to be integrated into state laws. It is equally important to reiterate the unwholesome attitude of public officials who notwithstanding the passing into law the FoI Act are still reluctant to supply requested information. The delayed implementation of the FoI Act has hindered access to official documents and limited the quest for accountability in public office. In theory, it is said that the business of government is open to public scrutiny, open to fair and just laid down procedures in the conduct of public affairs and open to accountability; however, in practice, official secrecy, corruption and unconstitutional discretionary powers are institutionalised. It is recommended that the State in Nigeria should review the implementation of the FoI Act.

CONCLUSION

The media's operating environment in Nigeria is volatile, political and hampered with professional, physical, financial and legal challenges that impact on newspaper organisations, the professionals working within them and the news they generate. The fallout of the

challenges not only complicates the news gathering and production process but also compromise the content generated to the extent that professional ethics and investigative journalism are impacted. The increasing preference of political and corporate advertising on editorial independence and news reporting as well as cases of corruption within the media have combined to limit the functioning of the press in providing pro-democracy news content that empower the public to make informed decisions. It is noteworthy to highlight that although the Nigerian media in general and newspapers in particular remain important stakeholders and game-changers in the current political process, however, the effects of intrusive ownership, regional newspaper cleavages and institutionalised challenges have had multiple implications on press performance since 1999. A significant majority of these implications have raised concerns as well as questions about the impact of regional concentration of newspaper ownership and production as well as the contribution of the press to the political process in Nigeria.

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