

INFLUENCE OF COMMERCIALIZATION ON NEWS COMMENTARY: A STUDY OF DELTA BROADCASTING SERVICE, ASABA



OKONKWO, INNOCENT CHIDUMEBI[∞]; DR. IGBOEL CHINEDU[♣] &
DR. NNAEMEKA, FRANK[♥]

Abstract

This study assessed the influence of commercialization on news commentary of the Delta Broadcasting Service, Asaba. The background of the study was that commercialization has become a dominant practice of mass media institutions in the country. The study was anchored on the social responsibility theory and fiduciary model and aimed at ascertaining the dominant position of the editorial contents of the DBS, the depth of commercial editorials vis-a-viz others, and the influence of editorial on public sphere and journalism profession. The research methods adopted for the study were the content analysis and survey research. A sample of 24 bulletins from 60 bulletins over a two-month study period was content-analyzed. Results obtained shown that commercialized editorials dominate the bulletins of the DBS Asaba; commercialized editorial had more depth than non-commercialized editorial. The study further found out that commercialization had resulted in the people not being keen in listening/viewing DBS bulletins. The study recommended that the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission and the Nigerian Union of Journalists should pass resolution against commercialization.

Keywords: *Influence, Commercialization, Editorials, Contents.*

Introduction

The mass media are important social institutions in the society. Through the various contents of the genre of mass media, the wheel of the progress of the society is lubricated. For this reason, mass media practitioners consciously couch and package the media contents to suit the yearnings and aspirations of the information need of the public sphere. Editorial contents are part of the means through which the media reach out to the public. However, the sanctity of editorial contents are nowadays, being foiled by a disturbing phenomenon called commercialization.

[∞] Department of Mass Communication, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University.

[♣] Department of Mass Communication, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University

[♥] Department of Mass Communication, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University

News, commentary, articles, features among others are nowadays services to be paid and bought for by the public. This emerging development, which is at cross-purposes with the ethics of journalism profession has the tendency to influence-news judgment and editorial contents. It is against this background that this study intends to evaluate the influence of commercialization on editorial contents using the Delta Broadcasting Services.

Statement of the Problem

Harold Lasswell (1948), cited in Ndolo (2005, p. 21) states that the media perform three major functions in the society as follows: Surveillance of the environment, correlation of different elements of society, and transmission of culture from one generation to the next. To these three functions, Charles Wright (1960) cited in Okunua (1999) added the function of entertainment. A dialectic analysis, of the above functions will reveal that surveillance means recollection and distribution of information about the environment; correlation means interpretations; cultural transmission means the capacity of transmitting values norms, lifestyles, along different periods and among groups. It is therefore empirical of state that the media are important influence in the society. There are many assertions by scholars in media studies to express the influences of the media in the society. They include: 'mass media as the hub of the society,' 'mass media as the wheel of progress of the society,' 'mass media as the nerve centre/backbone of the society,' among others. Through the various contents of the media, the information need of the society is greatly enhanced. These include agriculture, education, and political, economical, cultural health, scientific, among others. Impliedly, if for any reason whatsoever, the media contents are commercialized; the public sphere will as well be affected.

Thus, the bogging questions this study intends to unravel are: What is dominant position of news commentary of DBS Asaba, What is the prominent attached to commercialized news commentary of DBS Asaba, how does commercialization of commentary affect the public sphere? What are the influences of commercialization of editorial contents on objective reportage, how does commercialization influence the ethic of journalism profession. This is the gap in knowledge intended to be filled by this study.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to ascertain the influence of commercialization on news commentary, using the Delta State Broadcasting service as a focus. The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To ascertain the dominant position of the news commentary of the Delta Broadcasting services (DBS).
2. To determine the depth (prominence) of commercial commentaries, vis-a-viz the other commentaries of the DBS, Asaba.

3. To ascertain the influence of commercial commentaries on public sphere and journalism profession.

Theoretical Framework

This study is premised against the Social Responsibility theory and the fiduciary model of the media. McQuail (2005, p. 170), explains that the social responsibility theory was the aftermath of the Robert Hutchins' Communication Commission, set up in 1942, following the response to the widespread criticism of the American press, especially because of its sensationalism, commercialism, political imbalance and monopolistic tendencies. The reports of the commission, published in 1947, were critical of the press* for its frequent failings and for being so limited in the access it gave to voices outside the circle of a privileged and powerful minority (McQuail, 2005, p. 171). According to McQuail (2005, pp. 171-172), the report coined the notion of Social Responsibility and named the key journalistic standards that the press should seek to maintain:

A responsible press should provide a full, truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning. It should serve as a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism and be a common carrier of the public expression. Thirdly, the press should give a representative picture of constituent groups in society, and also present and clarify the goals of the society.

In summary, social responsibility is based on propositions about the needs of democratic society which comprises the unwritten obligations implicit in the freedom of publication as well as general ethical and moral principles relating to truth and justice (Okenwa, 2007).

The Fiduciary model, on the other hand, refers to the media being held in trust on behalf of the public. McQuail (2005, p. 213) explains that Dennis et al (1989) used the term to refer to the fact that the media organizations are also social institutions that fulfill with varying degree of voluntariness and explicit commitment, certain important public tasks that go beyond their immediate goals of making profits and giving employment.

The theory of social responsibility is suitable for this study because its philosophical base negates the concept of commercialization and the use of the media against public interests.

The Concept of News Commercialization

News commercialization as defined by McManus (2009 Pp. 219 & 220), is 'any action intended to boost profit that interferes with a journalist's or news organization's best effort to maximize public understanding of those issues and events that shape the community they claim to serve. Also, Nwodu (2006) in National Open University of Nigeria (nd p.28) defines news commercialization as

the deliberate presentation of sponsored information to unsuspecting media audience who perceive these information as conventional public interest-oriented news.

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (1980 p. 152) as cited in Omenugha and Oji (2008 p. 13) expressing concern over news commercialization globally stated that: "the news has become commercial product... important developments in the countryside are pushed aside by unimportant, even trivial news items, concerning urban events and the activities of personalities".

Harrison (2006 p. 100), captured news commercialization as an economic process of 'commodification' whereby media audience are primarily seen as consumers. This economic rationalization of journalism has been aggravated by the fragmentation of the mass audiences as consumers. Lacy in McManus (2009, p.221) states that "the growth of alternative information and advertising sources in the form of cable television and the internet", and "the growth of public (stock) ownership of news media" are factors that have boosted commercialization of news. Hence the primary determinant of news worthiness becomes the ability to pay a media organization a certain amount of money rather than the presence of the classic elements of the news.

As competition for readers and advertisers on the internet has intensified, commercial interference appears to be rising, especially in American news media where news has been produced by business enterprises for more than a century and a half, and where almost all news is produced to earn a profit. On the other hand, in Eastern Europe, where the state once controlled media, commercialization is a new concern.

European scholars puzzled over why poor and working class people would support leaders whose policies kept them down. Political economist pointed to the media as a prime suspect. Murdock and Golding (1971 pp. 228, 230) opined that "the part played by the media in cementing the consensus in capitalist society is only occasionally characterized by overt suppression or deliberate distortion...The routines of news work lead to systematic distortions that label anything threatening to the status quo as illegitimate or ephemeral. According to Agbaje (2001 p. 45), one basic global reality is that the news is largely about prominent names and personalities it takes the marginalized, weak and vulnerable majority of the society far more time and resources than it takes the powerful and privileged minority to get heard in the media. They (lower class) would often have to 'commit an offence, constitute public nuisance, become an odd ball, be in unusually unfortunate circumstances or hook up to the powerful to be noticed by the media'.

News Commercialization in Nigeria

News commercialization in Nigeria is traced back to the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986. SAP was an economic policy aimed at encouraging self-reliance and reduction of over dependence on government

for financial subventions in business. Hence, government withdrew subsidies which were provided to federal and state owned media organizations.

It is important at this point to note that broadcast news commercialization in Nigeria is not peculiar to privately owned broadcast media alone. According to Ekwu (1996, p.63) as cited in NOUN (nd, p.30), faced with the inability to pay salaries of workers, produce or service available equipment and myriad of other problems occasioned by the decline in government subvention, the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) devised several other means to make money.

He further explained that for a prescribed fee, news broadcast become a media relations platform for individuals, communities, private and public organizations, government, and ministries to send messages to its various audience. These messages are presented as part of the news bulletin in the forms of straight news reports, news analysis, or commentary after the news, and programme.

The deregulation of the broadcast industry in 1997 by the Military government of Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida also contributed to the compromise of the news. Initially, Private owned media relied heavily on commercial advertisers and airtime sale for a bulk of its revenue. As more private broadcast organizations were licensed, the competition became stiff providing advertiser a variety of media to choose from. Commercialization of news broadcast then became an additional life-line for media organizations.

Unfortunately, we find that the Nigerian broadcast media is largely driven by commercial interests. As a result, news broadcast have becomes commoditized. This commodification is seen in Nigerian broadcast media through the indirect advertisement and presentation of public relations messages as part of the news bulletin.

A vivid example of this is the presentation of messages on reality television competitions such as: Nigerian Breweries 'Guilder Ultimate Search' and MTN's 'Project Fame' as part of the news bulletin. The presentation of such commercial news speaks volume about the lack of prioritization and editorial rigor given to the news, as not all events attain the level of relevance required to be presented as part of the broadcast news bulletin.

Levels of Broadcast News Commercialization in Nigeria

According to Omenugha and Oji (2008 p. 18), the commercialization of news broadcast operates at two levels in Nigeria:

- The institutional level
- The individual journalist level

At the institutional level, charges are 'officially' placed for sponsored (commercial) news programmes. For example, Ogbuoshi (2005) enlists the commercial news rates of Radio Nigeria Enugu as follows:

- Commercial news - N47,000
- News commentary/political news - N52,000
- Special news commentary/political -N60,000

Commercialization at the institutional level is flourishing because editors, publishers and broadcast media owners perceive their organizations as profit making venture that should yield financial return. When media owners map out commercial news as money-making-avenue, it automatically means that hard news reports might be dropped or postponed in order to accommodate commercial news items on the news bulletin.

Writing on the semantics of commercialization of news by broadcast stations in Nigeria, Tom Adaba, a former Director General of the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), distinguishes between the "legitimate sales of airtime for paid messages adjacent to or within breaks in the news" and "charging news sources for the privilege of covering and relaying their pre-paid views or messages as news". According to him:

In the first case, what the sponsors are buying is "the credibility of the newscast and newscasters to confer stains by association on their company's logo, message or product" while in the latter: What the broadcast station is doing is selling cheaply the integrity of its newscast and newscasters by attesting to the "truth" of the claims of the so called "sponsor" (Omenugha and Oji, 2008 p. 15)

At the individual journalist level, journalist or group of journalists makes monetary demands to cover an event or report the event. This is referred to as the 'brown envelope' syndrome. According to McManus (2009, p. 219), the economic rationalization of journalism has been aggravated by the 'splintering of mass audiences as consumers'.

The brown envelope is a metaphor for bribery and corruption in Nigerian journalism. It is popularly referred to as 'kola' by some media professionals. Onyisi (1996, p, 80) in *NOUN* (nd, p.22), defines the brown envelop as the "practice of offering and receiving gratifications in the form of gifts, drinks, food or money-in order to influence the judgment of a journalist.

In the past, journalists received these gratifications from politicians, government officials, organization, and individuals seeking to influence the journalist sense of news value judgment or let go of certain information. However, in the content of commercialization of news, the opposite is the case as journalists now demand for money, favors, transport fare, gifts etcetera.

There is no doubt that the brown envelope has become an endemic ethical problem confronting journalism profession in Nigeria yet opinions about its moral implication are divided. The practice of journalism for personal gains compromises both ethics and objectivity which are major aspects of the social responsibility

function of the media. According to Onyisi (1996, p.24) in NOUN (nd, p.24), there are two basic schools of thought: those who argue that journalists accept the brown envelope when offered as an expression of their consonance with African Culture. On the other hand, are those of the school of thought that the brown envelope is an act of bribery.

Regardless of the circumstance or situation, offering and or receiving brown envelope prevents tarnishes media credibility and creates instability in the society. One of the major reasons why it is difficult to put an end to the brown envelope syndrome in Nigeria is the fact that it is considered to be a meal ticket for numerous journalists who work for media organizations that owe salaries for months. Therefore, journalists are indirectly encouraged to find alternative means of sustaining their families.

On the other hand, some media organizations mandate journalists with marketing responsibilities in addition to their reportorial duties. For example, Omenugha and Oji (2008 p. 17) reports that journalists in charge of specialized pages or columns are made to source for adverts to support 'their' pages or the pages are dropped and probably with the reporter.

According to Awogbemila (2001 p.50), reporters and correspondents who meet regularly at common beat have found it beneficial to formalize their rendezvous, present a common front for getting and managing aids, grants, or gifts from their sources. Virtually every beat imaginable has a local club of news reporters which registers members and often issue identify cards. These clubs often receive funding for their activities from their news sources. (51).

In an interview with a journalist from Silverbird Television (one of Nigeria's foremost privately owned television broadcast station), the author found out that the news bulletin of the station is divided into two categories of: commercial and non-commercial news contents. Commercial news as the name implies are news stories that have been paid for by an organization. Eminent, individuals etcetera, while non-commercial news are hard news obtained through the investigative efforts of its journalist or obtained from international news agencies such as Reuters for a fee.

Also, studies have shown an increasing trend in the percentage of commercial to noncommercial news content in Nigeria, Omenugha and Oji (2008 p. 16) in an interview with the News Editor of Enugu State Broadcasting Service (ESBS) Enugu, East of Nigeria, found a monthly increase in the percentage of commercial news in 2007. Specifically, the statistics revealed that for the months of October, November and December, the percentage of commercial news contents were 40%, 47.8% and 50% respectively.

Implications of News Commercialization

The commercialization of news broadcast in Nigeria has numerous effects on both the broadcast industry and its audience. For one, it leads to a disregard of ethical practice in journalism profession. The ethical code for journalism profession

prescribes among other things that journalists exhibit high level of responsibility in deciding news contents; be fair and accurate in reporting issues of public interest; respect individuals' right to privacy; defend the confidentiality of their sources of information; uphold decency in their reportage of issues; shun discrimination of any kind; protect national interest; and shun the act of asking for or accepting bribe and all forms of gratifications as precondition for publishing information (Fab-Ukozor, 2000; Nwodu, 2006, p. 165 and Udeze, (2012) in NOUN (nd p.20). It is impossible for journalists and the broadcast media to uphold this ethical standard when it is concerned with profit making.

Secondly, the commercialization of news broadcast is a flout to the stipulation of the NBC code which explicitly distinguishes between advertising in news and commercialization of news broadcast in sections 5.1. 18 & 19. It states that: "commercials in News and Current Affairs programmes shall be clearly identified and presented in a manner that shall make them clearly distinguishable" while *"the promotion of an organization, product or a service of commercial interest shall not be treated as news analysis, commentary or editorial"* (NBC, 2010 p. 44). In essence, as far as the NBC is concerned, commercial messages during news broadcast should be limited to advertising messages interjected during breaks in a news broadcast, and not treated as part of the news bulletin.

Thirdly, since news items are paid for, it becomes problematic for editors to edit the item based on known professional standards or principles. The saying he who plays the piper dictates the tune comes to bare at this point. Since the media would not like to lose a major customer, -they will do all that is within their reach to satisfy such client that pays enough money. News stories become so sacrosanct to the extent the editor is constrained to edit the purported news item on the basis of what might interest the sponsor, as against public interest (NOUN, nd p. 32).

The watchdog role of the media is also gradually being religated in pursuit of news stories that will yield financial gains both to the broadcast organization and the journalists. McManus (2009, p. 220) states that the economic rationalization of the news 'predicts a temporary decline of journalism's expensive, but vital watchdog function'. News consumers have a vested interest in the news because it is an avenue through which they are kept informed about important events, government actions and policies, social issues etcetera. By commercialization, certain issues of social significance are set aside (deliberately or otherwise) in order to accommodate paid-for news messages.

According to Omenugha and Oji (2008 p.25), some other negative implications of commercialization of news broadcast in Nigeria are:

- It has affected information flow tremendously - due to the fact that most news are paid for, hard news is set aside for monetary gains. The greatest flaw in the practice of news commercialization is that "news is narrowly defined against the weight of the news source's purse" (Ekwo, 1996 p.66).
- It makes the news vulnerable to abuse by interest groups who can pay their way

into the media to project an idea they want people to accept positive or otherwise.

- Many Nigeria journalists and broadcast organizations have lost the zeal for investigative journalism. Many have also lost their mission turning to praise singing and propaganda, which has dire consequences for the Nigerian society.
- Hence, the audience is deceived into believing that a piece of advertising and public relations is news.

Finally, the commercialization of news erodes the credibility of the broadcast medium. There are Nigerians who do not accept news information hook line and sinker from local broadcast stations. Often times they seek to confirm the authenticity of the information either by viewing the news broadcast from multiple stations, or tuning to international broadcasters such as British Broadcasting Commission (BBC), Cable News Network (CNN), Al Jazeera and the like for confirmation.

Methodology

The research methods adopted for this study were the content analysis and the survey research methods. The content analysis aspect of the study generated data on the dominant position, form and direction of the news commentary of the Delta Broadcasting Services, Asaba. On the other hand, the survey research design was used to generate the data on the influence of commercial editorials on public spheres and journalism profession. Both research methods were suitable for this study because the study involved studying the manifest contents of editorials as well as how the editorials influence the public and the profession.

The population of interest for the content analytical aspect was 60 bulletins of the DBS over a period of two months (1st July, 2016 to 30th August, 2016). Using the method of sampling which gives all the days of the week equal chance of being selected, multiple week's sampling method, a sample of 2 bulletin, (12 per each month) was drawn for the study. The unit of analysis was news and editorial matters while the content categories were: position and column size. Position in this paper refers to the target of the editorial (commercial or public sphere), while column size refers to the length of the editorial contents. Each issue of the bulletin was read to identify the nature and the volume of the editorial.

The research instrument used for the content analysis aspect of the study was the coding guide and the coding sheet. Two other research fellows assisted the author in the coding exercise. The researcher adopted the Holsti's formula to determine the inter-coder reliability which yielded 94.68% agreement among the orders.

On the other hand, the area study for the survey aspect of this study is Asaba, which has a total population of 213,486 (NPC 2006). A sample size of 400

respondents was drawn using the Taro Yameni's formula. Cluster sampling strategy was used to select the sample from the two local government areas (Oshimili North and Oshimili South), Ogbe-Ogologo Market, artisan quarter and College of Education Asaba.

The research instrument used was the questionnaire. The data obtained were presented in simple frequency tables.

Findings/Discussion

In this study, our findings revealed that the bulletins of the Delta Broadcasting Services were dominated by commercial commentaries. Again the study found out that the depth of commercial commentaries was more than non-commercial commentaries. Furthermore, the study found that the public no longer have interest in listening/viewing the bulleting of the DBS Asaba. These-findings negate the theory of social responsibility theory upon which this study is anchored. The mass media exist to nurture the society through balanced information dissemination and equal access to information given to all categories of people. Findings of this study are not intended with these provisions. Thus, the media through commercialization are shirking from their statutory responsibility to the public.

In a related development, this study is in line with the study on 'news commercialization in Nigeria: Undermining Issues in public interest for financial Gains' by Chioma, P.E. (2013). The study found out that the inability of the audience to receive adequate and relevant messages of social importance was the key influence of commercialization of News. Against the background of these findings, it is there concluded as follows:

Conclusion

The commercialization of news is a contradiction to the social responsibility function of the mass media. News should be presented as news and not as advertising or public relations. It should be based on reporting both local and international events of social significance to the society and not treated as a profit-making life-line by broadcast media owners and journalists. Hence, the objectivity, professionally approved criteria for determining news worthiness should be the guiding principle for news gathering and reporting.

Recommendations

- There is need for NBC to intervene in order to mandate the broadcast media to live up to its social responsibility of protecting the publics' right to receive reliable and accurate information.
- Nigerian broadcast media should pay attention to the social sphere in order to adequately understand public opinion and popular interests of the people. This will guide its news gathering and reporting, as well as ensure that hardcore news becomes the focus of the news bulletin.

- The sanctity of the news should not be tampered with. Broadcast owners should be find alternative sources of funding its business such as airtime sale and commercial advertising.
- There is need to educate the audience on the value of news and standards for judging news.
- It is important that the media performs this social responsibility as people derive an understanding of the world from the news media through: news broadcasts, current affairs programmes, commentaries and the

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