

OWNERSHIP AND GATE KEEPING ROLE OF THE MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of media ownership on the gatekeeping role of the media. The paper anchored on the gate keeping theory and propaganda model and review of several literature on the subject matter, and it found out that gate keeping becomes necessary, not only to select the best among billions of stories available, but the economic needs of the medium, organizational policy, owners' interest, advertisers' interest, among others, formed criteria for judging/filtering/gatekeeping a particular news story. The paper analyzed the role of gatekeeping/why gate keeping, factors influencing gate keeping, and noted that gate keeping, if not carefully handled, as important as it is for the sanity of the media, may cause untold damage for the integrity of the media. The paper, however, urges the gatekeepers from journalists to the editors, not to allow ownership interest prevent them from discharging social responsibility or sacrifice big human angle stories for the promotion of their proprietors/publishers as this may cause them readership/viewers/listeners' loyalty.

Keywords: ownership, gate keeping, media

Introduction

This cliché 'he who pays the piper dictates the tune, tells a lot on why ownership of the media filter what goes out to the public. Whether media ownership is private or public, the interest of the owner plays a dominant role in determining what the media managers do or fail to do. Hardly can an owner tolerate a manager who operates contrary to his interest. Owners of the media are in charge of the commercial and legal control of interpersonal and mass communication technologies by individuals, corporations, and/or governments. Gatekeeping is the process through which information is filtered for dissemination, whether for publication, broadcasting, the internet, or some other mode of communication. According to Pamela Shoemaker and Tim Vos, gatekeeping is the "process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people every day, and it is the center of the media's role in modern public life. This process determines not only which information is selected, but also what the content and nature of the messages, such as news, will be. The power of the media owner to filter news necessitated gatekeeping. Therefore, this paper is aimed at investigating why the ownership determines what goes out to the public and the importance of gate keeping to the ownership of the media.

Literature Review

Ownership

According to Oxford dictionary, ownership is the act, state, or right of possessing something; Ownership is the state or fact of legal possession and control over property, which may be any asset, tangible or intangible. Ownership can involve multiple rights, collectively referred to as title, which may be separated and held by different parties. Wikipedia. It is therefore safe to define ownership as personal or collective possession of something with legal and economic control over it.

Media ownership: An Overview

In communication, media are the outlets or tools used to store and deliver content; semantic information or subject matter of which the media contains (Wikipedia). A technology journalist, Linda Rosencrance, says media, the plural of medium, broadly describes all channels of communication, including everything from printed paper to digital data. Media comprises news, art, educational content, and any form of information that can reach or influence people, including television, radio, books, magazines, and the internet.

Scholars have described media ownership as the commercial and legal control of interpersonal and mass communication technologies by individuals, corporations, and/or governments. This is not an issue of mere resources since there is also a political dimension to this ‘control’ which threatens the pluralism of democratic societies. Corporate mergers and media convergence therefore prompt debates over media concentration versus pluralism and over the acceptable connotations of control versus regulated stewardship.

Media Ownership, print or broadcast media are owned by; individuals, government, groups of individual’s etc. ownership of the media are the paternity or possession of a medium of communication. These means the act of owning this paternity may evolve as a result of partial or total financing of a medium either by an individual, an organization or a government (Raufu, 2003). He posited that the reasons for media ownership are to achieve political goals, economic goals among others. Many newspapers in Nigeria are owned by politicians. For example, president Bola Tinubu owns the Nation; Senator Orji Uzor Kalu owns Daily Sun and New Telegraph, while Tribune was established by late Obafemi Awolowo. This, sometimes make it difficult for the media to publish negative reports about the owner therefore turning the media to become agents of propaganda. Mass media organizations are registered as corporate entities with well-defined editorial policies and mission statements. Aside these documented policies, there are in-house styles and preferences which may not be documented. All these serve as yardsticks against which the suitability of mass media contents to be allowed passage through media gates are measured (Nwanne, 2008;

Ufuophu-Biri, 2006; Folarin, 1998). A typical example here is Presented by Snider (1995), who in the course of his research found out that it was ‘decreed’ by the medium’s management that stories which had been published in the Friday evening paper must not be carried by their Saturday morning paper unless there was a new lead or a ‘second day’ story.

Types of Media Ownership

Before 1992, media ownership was under the government until General Ibrahim Babangida took over as the president. As of today, the mass media operate through private which falls under the Pluralist theory and government media which falls under the Marxist theory. In Nigeria basically, there are four kind of media ownership viz: Government ownership, Private ownership, Mixed ownership and, Community ownership.

Government ownership is media organizations set up, financed, owned, and managed by the governments. According to Apuke (2016), government owned media as those media that are completely financed and supervised by the government such as Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) and other state own radio and Television such as Oyo State Broadcasting Corporation (OSBC). The broadcast industry in Nigeria was a monopoly of the government until 1992 when the industry was deregulated under then Gen. Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida’s administration, paving way for the entrance of private outfits. Today, there is still massive involvement of both the federal and State government in the media industry. For instance, the Federal government owns the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) and the Voice of Nigeria (VON). Various state governments have also established radios, televisions and newspapers in the various states of the federation. Aina (2002) believes that “one obvious feature of government media is their trusting support of government policy, which the government sustains by carefully appointing her (loyalists) into their boards and other managerial positions.”

Private ownership is media owned and run by private individuals or organization (Apuke, 2016). Private ownership of the media has continued to blossom in Nigeria following the promulgation of decree 38 of 1992 which gave private individuals freedom to establish and operate independent broadcast stations in the New Media and Mass Communication www.iiste.org ISSN 2224-3267 (Paper) ISSN 2224-3275 (Online) Vol.55, 2016 13 country. Today, Lagos State alone, the media capital of Nigeria, is a host to over 20 privately owned radio stations, over 15 privately owned TV stations and over 22 privately owned newspapers and magazine outfits. Examples of this station are: AIT, Channels TV, and TVC News among others.

Mixed ownership is the hybrid of total government ownership and complete private ownership. Some writers have also identified other forms of ownership such as

Political parties and politicians ownership; Foreign or overseas ownership; Religious body's ownership, etc.

Problems of Media Ownership in Nigeria

Ownership is a critical factor in the regulation of the mass media. Media managers are often faced with the dilemma of balancing the media owner's interest and public's interest without infringing on the laws of the land or the ethics of the profession. Whether media ownership is private or public, the interest of the owner plays a dominant role in determining what the media managers do or fail to do. Hardly can an owner tolerate a manager who operates contrary to his interest. Media ownership has remained a topical issue in media discourse. This is because a popular saying has it that "he who pays the piper dictates the tune". Again, type of media ownership determines the level of freedom and efficiency of the organization. Sobowale (1965) for instance, observed that when the ownership of a country's media is vested in government or concentrated in the hands of a group, or an individual, the media tend to become mere megaphones of those in control. He explained that instead of performing the function of surveying the environment, correlating parts of that environment and transmitting culture; or providing entertainment, the media are turned into indispensable tools for relating power by those controlling them (Freedom of Information Act 2011). Similarly, Udejah (2004) points to the fact that ownership has had some influence on the operation of broadcasting organizations. He further explained that, the policy of the persons who paid the media workers salary determined the operation of the media station. Specifically, Udejah pointed that media practitioners in Nigeria were often subjected to all kinds of difficulties emanating from the ownership spectrum. Owners adopt various measures to exercise the desired level of control on media managers at various levels at all cost. A list of such measures according to Ekwelie (1986) include giving directives on what should be covered, redeployment of staff to lower positions or instant transfers, superimposing partners on the regular staff, promotion or denial of it, bribes, gifts and donation, creation of fear and fiction within the media establishment. However, apart from giving directives to the staff, owners of the media, to a large extent determines, what goes out to the public and what should not make news. That is why the definition of news is different in the news room. In the news room, news is what the editor says is news, Ewuola (p28, 2009). However, ownership/editorial policy control, advertisers influence and other factors have challenged the authoritarian decision of the editor.

Gatekeeping

The term gatekeeping was first used in a research context by the Austrian Psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947) who was primarily concerned with producing desirable social changes in food habits by controlling the type of food that passed through the various

gates or portals existing between the farm and the family table. Lewin aptly noted that the gates were governed either by impartial rules or by gatekeepers, who are individuals or groups charged with the responsibility of deciding what passes, and what is denied entry. He extrapolated the metaphor of the food gates to news gathering and dissemination. In essence, a news gatekeeper is whoever governs the journey of news items in the communication channel.

According to Cambridge Dictionary, to gate keep is to try to control who gets particular resources, power, or opportunities, and who does not, and it defines gatekeeping as the activity of trying to control who gets particular resources, power, or opportunities, and who does not. The process of gatekeeping has extended from the traditional act of deciding what news is the best news but information in general. According to Marcelo Thompson, there are actors called intermediaries that are involved with the architecture of information we come in contact with. They are making decisions about the structure as well as the content of our information. These decisions make these intermediaries technological gatekeepers. This provision of information for an organization's member as well as those outside that organization is less about Agenda Setting media outcomes but a practical approach to usability.

Why Gatekeeping

It has been established that journalists are attempting to meet the needs of their audience. They identify news and then report it. It's this identification process that we find traditional gatekeeping. In exercising its "surveillance" function, every news medium has a very large number of stories brought to its attention daily by reporters, wire services, and a variety of other sources. Due to a number of practical considerations, only a limited amount of time or space is available in any medium for its daily presentations of the news to its audience. The remaining space must be devoted to advertising and other content.

Within any news organization there exists a news perspective, a subculture that includes a complex set of criteria for judging a particular news story – criteria based on economic needs of the medium, organizational policy, definitions of newsworthiness, conceptions of the nature of relevant audience, and beliefs about fourth estate obligations of journalists. This news perspective and its complex criteria are used by editors, news directors, and other personnel who select a limited number of news stories for presentation to the public. They then encode them in ways such that the requirements of the medium and the tastes of the audience are met. Therefore, personnel in the news organization become gatekeepers, letting some stories pass through the system but keeping others out. This then limits, controls, and shapes the public's knowledge of the totality of actual events occurring in reality (Wikipedia). According to American political scientist Doris Graber, journalists rely on the five criteria when choosing a news story. The first criterion is strong impact. Local stories

impact the public more than unfamiliar international events. To attract attention, journalists inflate news and present them as situations that could happen to anyone. They turn rare international crises into everyday scenarios, personalizing stories and losing the main significance.

Violence, conflict, disaster, or scandal is the second criterion. Topics such as murders, wars, shootings, or hurricanes captivate the attention of the audience. Newspapers containing violence outsold other newspaper chains that contained less violence.

The third criterion is familiarity. News stories gain more attention if they have issues about the public or if they include familiar situations concerning a large audience. Journalists try to turn international events or crises into stories that can relate to their current audience. People tend to retain a lot of information about celebrities and tend to care about the personal intimacy of other's lives. They value the traits and attributes of others and may try to relate to them in many ways. News about a celebrity's or president's death may resonate on a deeper level, allowing certain events to remain in the memory much longer.

Proximity is the fourth element. People prefer local news and proximity. People pay close attention to local news more than they do to international or national affairs. Local media outlets do well because they focus most of their stories on local events, about seventy-five percent. There is a strong preference for local news over international and national news.

The fifth element is timeliness and novelty. News should be something interesting that does not occur every day or an event that is not a part of people's lives. Events such as hurricanes or new store openings capture the attention of many.

The news criteria pressure journalists and news outlets to frequently publish new stories, to stay current on events. Reporters attend local events to get stories quickly and easily. When events are difficult to report on, journalists resort to interviews, or experts of the event, or field. The five criteria dictate which events are chosen and which events to spend money on to report. The size of a newspaper also dictates which stories to publish and which ones to skip. Once stories reach news outlets, editors must determine which stories to select. Editors do not spend much time choosing stories. An average editor must choose stories in seconds. Investigative or complex stories are covered by TV sources and radio. Those types of stories go towards television and radio because they have more time to dedicate to the stories. They can describe the event, background, and causes in depth. The size of the paper and the pressure editors have may cause bias in the audience's perspective. Stories containing the five criteria almost always make the front page of the news. The frequent representation of those types of stories often leads to skewness from the public

News Gatekeepers

The discussion of media gatekeeping is a debate between traditional journalism and the blogging community. Political bloggers have increased their audience as well as their scope of activities and ambition. Schiffer considers it an alternative form of journalism that can possess traditional journalism's sought-after qualities while omitting some of its drawbacks. The main criticism of traditional journalism is the lack of control by the users over the content they are presented with. Blogging utilizes the community to perform a type of collective editing. As consumers interact with the blog and each other on its behalf, the popularity grows calling more consumers into the fold. While this will certainly allow the user to decide for himself what news needs to be out front, blogging has its limitations as well. Because anyone can blog and can do so without editing from above with professional standards from the trade-craft, filtering the information down to its most essential components is often overlooked. Difference between traditional journalists and bloggers aside the main similarity is that both parties have to decide what is newsworthy and then report it.

Schiffer also found that user-created content creators utilize a type of gatekeeping as it concerns the comments on their publications. Some bloggers require approval by a moderator before comments can be added to a post. At times comments are disabled altogether. This means that bloggers are not only gatekeeping the content they output but also the on-page discussion around that submission. Larger media organizations with an online presence have the same capability as it is associated with the technology and not the host.

Media Control in Nigeria

Ownership/editorial policy control: Media are public service organizations and as such, come under several controls. One such control is ownership control. It is often said that “He who pays the piper dictates the tune”. Literally, this means that a piper must play the tune to satisfy the person who has hired him. Every news medium belongs to either an individual, group of individuals, or government. Must media owners control their newspapers through the editorial policy? The editorial policy of a medium is a broad-based set of ideas normally or usually formulated before the takeoff of the medium especially the print medium and articulated on the first day of appearance under what is called a mission statement. The editorial policy states the angle or point of view that will guide the newspaper news and features including its editorials, ideas, desires, and interests, which will protect and project the owner's interest (Lang, 1959). **Advertisers’ control:** Advertising is one of the major sources of revenue for media organizations. As such advertisers exert some sort of control over what goes on in the media. This is because he that pays the piper dictates the tune. With their financial power and influence, they not only choose how their messages should be crafted but

also decide the page placement and the time to air their adverts in the broadcast media.

3. Legal constraints Ndolo (2005) says every society is governed by a plethora of laws that guide human actions and activities. Plato's notes that "without law, man differs not at all from most savage beasts." To this effect, some set of laws are made to regulate the activities of the media to avoid the abuse of the industry by the bad eggs. Such laws include:

Defamation: Okoro (2004, p.65) defines a defamatory statement as any statement that has the capacity or tendency to lower the reputation of a right-thinking person or cause him to be shunned or avoided, to expose him to hatred, contempt, ridicule or to convey an imputation on him disparaging or injurious to him in his office, profession, calling, trade or business. Technically, the Court of Appeal in the case of NTA vs. Ebenezer Babatunde (1964) NWLR (PT 440, 75) as cited in Ndola (2005, p. 512).

Obscenity:- Obscenity or indecent material is defined by Cockburn, cited (Okoro, 2004, p.73) as one which tends to " ruin and corrupt those whose minds are open to immoral -influences and into whose hands is likely to fall.'

Contempt of The offense of contempt of court comprises conduct that "interferes with the administration of justice or impedes or perverts the course of justice" (see Osborn's Concise Law Dictionary, eighth edition, 1996, p. 45).

Sedition:-Section 51 (1) of the Criminal Code Act states that any person who: Bring into hatred or contempt or excite disaffection against the person or Government of the Federation; or Incite the citizens of Nigeria to attempt to procure the alteration, otherwise than by lawful means, of any other matter in Nigeria as by law established.

Copyright:-This is a law that forbids anyone from stealing another person's intellectual work. However, for any work to qualify for protection under the convention, it must carry the symbol and the name of the copyright owner, including the year of first publication (Kupe, 1999).

Passing-off: - says Enechi (1997), the law forbids anyone from the theft of business identities such as trademarks, logos, labels, etc.

Privacy:-This law forbids anyone from infringing on or interfering in others' private affairs. The right includes the privacy of citizens' homes, correspondence, telephone conversations, and telegraphic communications. (Ewelukwa, 2004).

Official Secrets Acts:-This law forbids anyone from spying on the communication of state secrets and breaching official trust documents, or plans that have to do with anything situated in a protected place (see S. 2 of the Act; also Elias: 1969) as cited in (Okoro 2004, p.86).

The gatekeepers in the media

Gatekeeping occurs at all levels of the media structure—from a reporter deciding which sources are presented in a headline story to editors choosing which stories are printed or covered, including, but not limited to, media outlet owners and advertisers.

Factors Influencing Gatekeeping

The following five themes were identified during the analysis of the data: Education, training, and experience influence the journalists' selection of the stories; focus on crime and conflict; newsworthiness of the story; self-promotion, and job security.

Discussion of findings

It was discovered through this study that the problem of encountering the media started from the mundane when the media industry was dominated by the media. The deregulation that occurred after the taking over of government by Babangida also gave some politicians opportunities to venture into the media business, thus enabling them to use the media to promote their political ambitions and dictate what goes out to the public. It discovers that gatekeeping occurs at all levels of the media structure - from a reporter deciding which sources are presented in a headline story to editors choosing which stories are printed or covered, including, but not limited to, media outlet owners and advertisers. It was discovered that some factors influencing gatekeeping are education; training and experience influence the journalists' selection of the stories; focus on crime and conflict; newsworthiness of the story; self-promotion, and job security. The federal/state government-owned media employ the service of editors and managing directors as the case may be, to filter news purposely to ensure that the news story does not cause chaos, incite members of the public against the government, avoid indecency, promote the goodwill, programs, and activities of the government – owner. Findings showed that most private newspapers are owned and controlled by individuals who are mostly politicians who established the newspaper for, majorly to promote their political aspirations. It becomes expedient to consider owners' interest in gatekeeping from the reporters to the line editors and editors.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Having identified the effect of ownership on the gatekeeping role of the media, it is hereby recommended as follows:

All the gatekeepers (from journalists to the editors), should be provided with adequate training to identify newsworthiness and other contents like editorials, cartoons, and opinions, that are good for consumption by the public. This will prevent them from deviating totally from the social responsibility of the media and ensure that the public gets satisfactory information despite the effect of gatekeeping.

The gatekeepers should be careful in sacrificing beneficial information or human-angle stories for the glorification of their proprietors/publishers. Taking cognizance of this will enable them to remain relevant in the market and prevent them from being tagged as 'political station/newspaper.

All gatekeepers must be wary of passing stories that attack the personality of the opposition of their proprietors/publishers as this may tarnish the image of the station/newspaper and even affect the owner of the medium.

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