

NEWS COMMERCIALISATION: AN ABERRATION TO NEWS NEUTRALITY AND WORTHINESS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper looked into the consequences of increasing commercialization of news by media organisations on the time tested principles of neutrality and worthiness. News is a report of events disseminated to the public through the mass media, and as such must be truthful, unbiased and of interest to members of the public. This paper examines the practice of news commercialization by journalists in Nigeria, reasons responsible for the change in ethical standard in journalism practice and its consequences on the neutrality and worthiness of such reports that are sponsored and imposed on the public. The factors considered in this paper included the history of news commercialisation in Nigeria, the opinions of journalists on why the practice has persisted and its consequences on news reports, lack of fund to finance government owned media stations and the tendency of media organisations to see news as commodity that must be paid for, as well as conflicting interests, were responsible for the shift from neutrality in news report to the commercialization of news.

It was recommended that media professionals get properly acquainted with the ethics of the profession through regular training, the need for internal regulation and the need for adequate funding of media organisations by their owners are mandatory.

Key words: News, news commercialization, News neutrality, media practice, mass media

Introduction

News dissemination is as old as mankind. Before the advent of the mass media, information has been disseminated to people through word of mouth, as well as other traditional means such as town criers, village squares meetings and by other ancient

forms of communication. News dissemination took a colourful dimension with the advent of the mass media and since then, news writers and their institutions have kept surveillance of the society by reporting trending happenings and events around the world.

The mass media is saddled with the responsibility of providing information for members of the public. Such information is expected to be packaged in a way that it becomes useful and of interest to members of the public so as to enable them make informed decisions and choices that stimulate their growth and development. The information packaged and disseminated by the mass media is referred to as news.

News is a media report that informs the public and enable them keep abreast of current events happenings around them as well as monitor the international scene. According to Okunna (1999) news is a truly concise and accurate report of an event. This means that when an event takes place, it must be recorded and details provided must be factual. If news is to be reported it means that the recipients of news have the right to information and the media should prioritize that over any other packaged report offered to the audience.

Harcup (2012), defines news as ‘a selective version of world events with a focus on what is new and, or unusual’. The expectation from mass media institution is that they satisfy the information need of members of the society by providing undiluted information of events around the world.

For information to qualify as news it must have certain values based on criteria such as impact, prominence, proximity, timeliness, human interest and oddity. News report that is anchored on the six cardinal elements or canons of journalism including truth, fairness, objectivity, accuracy, independence and responsibility, is neutral and worthy of the audience attention.

The journalists are the professionals who are trained in the art of news gathering and reporting. In doing so it is expected that they conform to the ethics of the profession which canvases for objectivity and worthiness in news report. But, in recent times, journalists began to operate as a commercial enterprise by finding ways of generating money for themselves and the media organisation. News reports were sponsored or paid for by an individual, organisation or groups so that they can gain the attention of members of the public. The media operators shifted their interest from the audience to advertisers who offer money for their products to be disseminated as news. This practice is what is described as news commercialization.

This swift change became dominant among journalists in the broadcast media. The reason for news commercialisation according to journalists interviewed in studies carried out by scholars was ascribed to poor funding by the government as well as private owned stations and the need to generate money for sustenance and maintenance of the media stations. However journalistic ethics frowns at the receiving of monetary gifts and the likes in the practice of the journalism profession as it has a way of interfering and influencing their news reports. When news report is compromised in content and interpretation, the media loses the goodwill and confidence of the people.

This paper addresses the persisting trend of news commercialization in the media industry and how it negates the principles of news neutrality and worthiness which are pivotal to the concept of news making. According to McQuail (2010), News is considered neutral when it is unbiased and provides information that is crucial for citizen's participation in social, economic and cultural life. When information is forced on people, it loses its neutrality and value.

Empirical review of literature

Kibet (2015) in his paper 'Reflecting on News Quality', investigated the viewership of news program among audience in Kenya. He placed news as disseminated on television highly rated over news on print media. This increase in viewership of broadcast news was as a result of a number of factors ranging from news program as a viable source of information on current affairs at both local and international scene to the timing of the news broadcast which mainly fell into morning, lunch hour or evening news segments. This facilitated maximum consumption of news stories among the audience. It was concluded in that investigation that news reports have the highest time allocation and time spent by the audience and this is because of the quality of the news program.

In another study by Chioma (2013), in her paper 'News commercialization in Nigeria', while trying to determine the level of broadcast news commercialization, she conducted an interview on journalists from Silver bird Television, it was discovered that news bulletin of the station was divided into two categories: commercial and non-commercial news content. Commercial news as the name implies are news that have been paid for by an organisation, individual, government, and some other identified sponsors, while non-commercial news are hard news obtained through the investigative effort of its journalists or obtained from international news agencies for a fee. This study showed an increasing trend from commercial to non-commercial news dissemination in Nigeria.

Omenugha and Oji (2008) in a paper titled 'News commercialization ethics and objectivity in journalism practice in Nigeria, having interviewed the News Editor of Enugu State Broadcasting Service, was able to establish an increase in the percentage of commercial news reported by the broadcast station. According to the authors the reason for the hike in the dissemination of commercial news was as a result of lack of zeal for investigative journalism. Many journalists have turned to praise singing and propaganda leading the public to believe that such packages are news worthy.

Udomisor and Kenneth (2013) in a study to ascertain the impact of news commercialization in the Nigeria Broadcasting Commission revealed that news commercialization is a practice that has remained with the broadcast industry in Nigeria for a while. He further suggested that media professionals should be adequately paid so that they can turn their eyes away from advertisers seeking to determine the pace and flow of news because they pay for it.

Relatively, news commercialization as Esimokha (2016) describes it is a situation where journalists employed in a media organisation seek other means of generating income other than the conventional means of revenue generation, for the sustenance of the organisation and for themselves. This definition in his study refers to conventional means of revenue generation as the usual airtime purchase and revenue recruited from adverts that have for long sustained the media until the recent trend of monetizing news reports.

As established by scholars, news commercialisation is habitual among journalists in broadcast media organisations in Nigeria. Further study is however required to unravel the deception surrounding news reports, creating a lingering dilemma for news neutrality and worthiness in today's media practice.

Statement of the problem

The media should operate as a non-profit organisation that provides the public with undiluted information packaged as news, of events happening around them and are of interest to the people. Overtime the practice of having to generate income for sustenance of the media and journalist themselves started to influence news reporting. As a result of the mixture of the ethical responsibility of the media to the people and the generation of revenue for sustenance by media organisations, news has degenerated from an unbiased report to one that is paid for and imposed on the public.

This paper examines the deviation from the ethical parlance of news reporting to the current practice of news commercialization and reporting by media professionals as well as how and it affects the neutrality and worthiness of news stories disseminated under such unprofessional manner.

Theoretical framework

This paper is anchored on the social responsibility media theory. The tenets of this theory according to Anaeto, Onabajo & Osifeso (1998) include:

- That the media should accept and fulfill certain obligations to the society
- That through professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance, these obligations can be met.
- That the media should regulate itself within the framework of law and established institutions to be able to carry out its responsibilities
- That whatever leads to crime, violence and civil disorder should be avoided by the media
- That the society has the right to expect high standards of performance from the media
- Accountability of media should be to the society, employers and the market.

By ethical standard, the press is obliged to be responsible. It means even during news reporting journalists are expected to put the interest of the public into consideration. The act of imposing on the public information packaged as news, that have either been paid for or for which the journalist is being influenced to write as news, negates the dictates of this theory.

In a study by Apuke (2016), the social responsibility theory in media practice was justified because it reprimands and cautions journalists not to disregard his duty to the society. As

he puts it, the journalist must not ‘yellow journalize’ stories but engage in truthful journalism rather than a practice full of lies, deceit and subjectivity. The act of imposing on the public information packaged as news, that have either been paid for or for which the journalist is being influenced to write as news, negates the dictates of this theory.

Origin of News Commercialisation in Nigeria

The history of news commercialization could be traced to the Military administration of former President Ibrahim Babangida, after the deregulation of the broadcast industry in 1996. The highlight of the deregulation was the license given to individuals to privately own media institutions. Before that time only the government owned media stations at state and federal levels within Nigeria. Media stations at that time lacked adequate funding as there were shortage in funds generated for the payment of salaries and maintenance of equipment. Journalists who worked at that time saw a way out of these predicaments by finding a means of survival and generating individual income for their upkeep. With the increasing rise in production cost and dwindling circulation, the media houses resort to all kinds of tricks including commercialization of the news to make money (Oso, 2000).

Another reason that sparked the commercialization of news in Nigeria is the way news gathering and reporting is practiced in Nigeria. In a study by Omenugha and Oji, (2018), a survey carried out in a school of journalism in Nigeria to find out the major means of news gathering by Nigerian journalists, saw scheduled events topping the list (60%), followed by interview (32%), investigative news gathering (6%) while news breaks, or exclusives were as low as (2%). This means that journalists get invitation and attend scheduled events and thereafter give reports of such events as news. In most cases the journalist are given gifts and monetary packages to take home after attending such events. The inability of journalists to investigate situations, conduct interviews and embark on various fact finding mission, makes them vulnerable to advertisers who are willing to pay for news.

News Commercialisation in today’s media Practice- The Nigeria Experience

The significant change in the neutrality of news as a media report by supposed professionals in media practice began from the era of the deregulation of the mass media. In a study by Chioma (2013) it was revealed that as more private media stations were licensed at that time, the competition to provide advertisers, individuals and organisations varieties of media to choose from became intense as the private media depended on these commercial advertisers and sale of airtime for its revenue generation. According to Ekwu’s study as cited by (Chioma 2013p174), Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) and Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), at the time of the deregulation of the broadcast industry, were faced with the inability to pay salaries of workers, produce programmes or service available equipment, and a myriad of other problems, occasioned by the decline in government subventions. The management of these stations had to devise other means to make money to avoid a collapse of the system. This bail out technique actually paid off as money recruited from news reports that were paid for and other means, survived the stations at that time. No wonder the traffic of advertisement and sponsored programmes by highly influenced or celebrated individuals or socialites, religious organisation, ministries, compete for airtime spaces so as to send their packaged messages to their various audience.

Azeez (2009), stated that news organisation in our contemporary capitalist time are established with the motive of making money as against the motive of serving the interest of the public for which they are institutionalized. This practice collides with public interest as it tends to projects the voice of the rich louder than the voice of the poor and marginalized.

Croteau and Hoynes' study (cited in Kenneth and Odorume 2015) stated that commercialization of news by media institutions is not a new phenomenon but an accelerated one. It is no longer news that even some media houses in Nigeria makes it mandatory for journalists to add marketing roles to the reportorial roles. These findings provide a clear description of what news reporting has become in today's media practice. Most media institutions today package and report news paid for by financially capable individuals and organisations, with the intention of covering a very large audience. The neutrality in news gathered and reported by the media on the long run becomes a mirage other than a reality. News commercialisation has negated the core principles of journalism practice as being socially responsible to the people but rather as an income generated institution.

On the contrary as conceptualized by scholars on the concept of news commercialization, Rauf et al (2013) is of the opinion that the major boost for the growth and development of the Nigeria Broadcasting industry was the deregulation of broadcast media landscape, via the promulgation Decree No 38 of 1992 (now act of parliament), establishing the Nigeria Broadcasting Commission (NBC). The consequences of what looked like a succor and relief to the financial incapacity of media institutions was a change from the ethical, objective, timely and accurate report of news to the new norm of sponsored news stories. The implication of this is that only the rich will get their ideas communicated, (Kenneth and Odorume 2015). It goes further to say that media practitioners who provide information in the form of news that is based or determined by financial prompting and rewards, negate the recommendations of the social responsibility theory as well as the objectives of the profession.

The whys and wherefores of News Commercialization.

According to Onyisi.s study (1996) (as cited in Chioma 2013) explains that there are two basic schools of thought, one who argues that journalists accepts the brown envelop when offered as an expression of their consonance with African culture while the other school of thought is of the opinion that the brown envelop is an act of bribery. The consequence of such thought is that when news is paid for either at a billed rate by the media organisation or as compensation for the journalists, such a report is bought and forced on the audience. Therefore advocates of news commercialization have adduced some reasons for such practice which include as follows;

- generation of revenue for stations to enable its operations by the management.
- to checkmate unnecessary demands by the media to publish what is not in the interest of the public.
- to give media organisation some form of autonomy since there is less reliance on the government for subventions.

▪□ To earn legitimate income for journalists who take 10% of any money accrued from adverts they attract to the station.

Criticism of news commercialisation

Critics of this gesture disagree with the first school of thought but rather contend that the negative effects of news commercialization far outweighs such reasons advanced above by proponents. This paper aligns with critics of news commercialization as a result of its negative impacts on many planes. Ekwo' study (as cited in Uganda 2011) identifies the following platforms as demerits of commercialisation to include:

- the absence of news neutrality and objectivity
- it is against media ethics,
- it creates problem of censorship
- affects the flow of information,
- obstruct national development
- Turns news to commodity money can buy.

The above listed underscores the reason why the National Broadcasting Commission in exercise of its powers wrote to all Broadcast media organizations on September 10, 2013 to put a halt to recent trends on Nigeria airwaves where broadcast stations take paid or sponsored announcements as news items within the news especially political and other related advertisements. This practice clearly breaches the general guidelines on news as encapsulated in section 5.1.3 of the Nigerian Broadcasting code which states that;

“news, in all its forms, is universally accepted as sacred, sponsorship of news casts, commentaries, analysis, current affair programmes and editorials detract from the integrity and predispose a bias in favour of the sponsors, therefore news programmes shall not be sponsored in any manner including the use of commercial backdrops”, Tsebee and Akpobo (2015).

Despite the stand of National Broadcasting Commission on this issue, broadcast organisation still find it difficult to comply with the directive because of the enormous challenges in keeping their stations running. Therefore it becomes imperative to suggest more measures to curb the commercialization of news.

Conclusion

This paper has revealed that media priorities have tilted towards from the ethical value of fulfilling the right to information of the public to the advertisers and sponsors of news reports who generates money for the media. News is no longer about reporting objective stories of events and happenings but rather a packaged report sponsored or paid for by interested parties.

From the findings of this paper, journalist opinions agreed that news commercialization pose a great threat to the practice of the journalism profession. Journalists and media institutions have continued to blame the current and alarming disposition in news reporting on the emerging economic crises, which makes them to combine their reportorial duties with marketing responsibility.

News commercialization rather than being suppressed is gradually taking over the objective and unbiased principles of news coverage and reporting. Findings revealed that only sponsored information finds its way to the public.

Recommendations

The need to nip in the bud the practice of news commercialisation by media practitioners is long overdue. This practice is capable of destroying the integrity of news men and their media institutions as well as misleading members of the public. Therefore, following measures are suggested:

- The broadcast regulators, Nigeria Broadcasting Commission should introduce stiffer measures in internal monitoring of news broadcasts to ensure that it is unbiased and free from personal motives or intentions and solely in the interest of the public. This will further enhance the transparency and accountability of journalists.
- The media organisations should ensure that journalists are assigned their reportorial duties only and not saddled with the responsibility of generating adverts. This ensure that enough time is given for investigative news sourcing and bring credible and news worthy stories to the audience.
- The journalists must at all times uphold the ethical values of the profession and shun all forms of bribery, reward or gratification that may entice them and make them give preference to paid news. But they may not know this in the absence of a standard training system.
- For news to be neutral, the sanctity of news reports should never be tampered with. Public opinion and the interest of the public must be considered to ensure that news disseminated is news worthy of the audience time and contributions.

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