

COMMODITIZATION, COMMERCIALIZATION AND SYNDICATION OF NEWS: A DEMYSTIFICATION OF MEDIA ECONOMICS

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Abstract

This study examines the growing trend of commoditization, commercialization and news syndication with a view to demystifying the dynamics of media economics. The study adopted the Media System Dependency theory and the Social Judgment theory. The study observed that in a bid to weather the storm of the seeming harsh economic situations in Nigeria, media organizations are adopting the options of raising extra funds. Yet the study worries that it is this quest for funding that partly accounts for the growing trend of commoditization, commercialization and news syndication by some media organizations. Granting that media organization exist to make profit, the study contends that this should not be at the expense of the basic features of journalism which are fairness, balance, objectivity, accuracy, truth. It warned that credibility is fast eroding the journalism profession. Concluding, the study maintained that the media in the quest for maximizing profit should go about it with a high sense of responsibility. In view of the fact that society holds them in high esteem, while concluding among others that to stem the tide of commoditization, commercialization and news syndication, media organizations should develop alternative business options through the organizing of conferences and workshop and communication consultancy services.

Keyword: Commoditization, commercialization, news syndication, journalism, mass media, professional ethics, economics.

Introduction

Overtime, the activities of an organization are clearly influenced by their mission statement. It is expected that they are continually guided by this mission statement so as not to detail. What mission statement does is to check against any form of overzealousness, ensuring that organizations do not have a missed identity. Eventually an organization's brand and activities form a major part of the public's perception about them.

Accordingly, perception is everything in business. This explains the need for organizations to be cautious of their perception capital. In fact, it largely determines how favourably disposed or otherwise the public's relate with them. Obviously perception deficit could result in relationship loss. Moreover, the public's cognitive positioning about an

organization is among other intervening variables predicated on how much the organization has not only sustained and surpassed expectations but has maintained its integrity in terms of meeting needs as promised.

Over the years, there have been growing expectations on the media from the public. As societies began to develop, it became real that the media will continue to serve societies information, education and entertainment needs for a long time. It is against this backdrop that society has come to depend on the media for these essential needs. The society's daily activities get influenced by media content; whether it is about weather updates, traffic situation, daily happenings in the polity or economy. All these help individuals get about the days businesses. While society has enabled the media to operate, they (the media) have ensured that continued to carryout the three cardinal functions of information, education and entertainment.

Essentially one of the core functions of the media is that of news. The greatest service the media can give to the society is to function responsibly – good in news, in advertising, in editorial content and in features (Okon, 2007). Anything short of this takes the sheen off journalism. News should be sacrosanct. This is it should be as impeccable as to satisfy the curiosity of all and sundry leaving them with no doubt as to its veracity or otherwise.

It is the adherence to journalism ethics that puts journalists and of course the media in check. Exigencies can stretch the media beyond their bound. Journalism ethics entails that the right thing is done and in good conscience too. However, the task of being ethically fair in journalism practice is no mean task. This is especially against the backdrop of the fact that the media operate within a nexus of socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic paradigms. Beyond the task of carrying out their cardinal function is the need for sustainability.

Incidentally media organizations are set up like every other business venture. Businesses are profit based. However, drawing the line between profit maximization and maintaining high professional ethics is critical to the survival of every organization. It is this cautiousness that will guide practitioners in any field such that ethics and the core essence of their existence is not sacrificed on the altar of profit maximization. While nothing is wrong with maximizing profit it is the means to which organizations go about it that is a concern.

Statement of the Problem

The seeming inordinate quest to maximize profit and stay afloat the turbulent business tide is making media organizations stretch their bounds. The implication of this trend far outweighs the gains. Not only are the media likely to throw professional ethics to the wind, society could be worse off. There is an overwhelming dependency of society on the media for information. The information in this instance is one that is without any blemish; one that is devoid of any form of influence or interference; one that stands on its own. In recent times, information from media seems diluted, making the public wonder what to believe.

Fairness, balance, objectivity and truth are the time tested features of the journalism practice. Unfortunately these features that help protect the credibility of the media are fast eroding. Like the word that feels on the thorny ground, the media appear to be choked by the exigencies of the Nigerian environment. Unfortunately, media organizations are doing "all" they can to stay afloat. It is this desperation to stay afloat that seems to be making journalists relax their adherence to these sterling features of journalism practice listed above.

More so, one cannot expect much, considering the fact that the media are a colouration of the society they find themselves. It appears that the corruption malady, which has been the bane of our existence as a nation, has caught up with the media in Nigeria. Media practice is fast being threatened. Such trends as commoditization, commercialization and syndication of news are fast finding their way to journalism lexicon. In fact, this trend has attracted a number of research works on the seeming ailing state of the media. No society can survive when news becomes a commodity. Commodity in this instance is not likened to be a product but a trading tool to maximize profit. What this means is that news would have been taken beyond the reach of the common man but a status symbol that is like the exclusive preserve of those who can afford it.

Conversely, all of this has been occasioned by the poor rate of the ease of doing business in Nigeria. Operating a media organization is expensive. The fact that organizations cannot afford to pay their staff is a recipe for corruption. Arguably, this has turned many journalists to news merchant. For them, they must survive by all means, including compromising content and quality. Therefore, the core concern of this study is to examine the extent the quest to remain afloat in business is affecting journalism practice in Nigeria. To what extent is commoditization, commercialization and syndication of news affected by media economics?

Theoretical Framework

Every study leverages on a theoretical anchor. This study is not different. To this end the study is anchored on the Media System Dependency theory and the Social Responsibility theory.

The Media System Dependency theory was developed by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin Defleur in 1976 (Ball-Rokeach & Defleur, 1976). The theory is based on the classical sociological literature positing that media and their audiences should be studied in the context of larger social systems (Ognyanova & Ball-Rokeach, 2012). The theory maintains that the more a person depends on media to meet needs, the more important media will be in a person's life and therefore the more effects media will have on a person (Ball-Rokeach & Defleur, 1976).

Accordingly, the dependency on media is borne out of three relationships (Ball-Rokeach & Defleur, 1976; Rubin & Windahl, 1986) they are:

1. The relationship between the society and media: Within this relationship, media access and availability are regarded as important antecedents to an individual's experience with the media. The nature of media dependence on societal systems varies across political, economic and cultural system (Ball-Rokeach & Defleur, 1976).
2. The relationship between the media and the audience: The relationship is key as it affects how people might use a mass medium. The more salient the information needs, the stronger are the motivation to seek mediated information and the dependency on the medium. In this instance, the tendency that the media could affect audiences becomes greater. However this relationship also varies across media systems (Ball-Rokeach & Defleur, 1976).
3. The relationship between the society and the audience: The societies influence consumers' needs and motives for media use, and provide norms, values, knowledge and laws for their members. Social systems can function as alternatives to the media by offering similar services of the media (Ball-Rokeach & Defleur, 1976).

Suffice to say that the dependency on the media by the audience is borne out of their expectation that the media genuinely meet their needs. The higher the number of media and their functions, the higher the relationship. Also media dependency could heighten when a society is undergoing social change and conflict (Lowery, 2004; Hindman, 2004).

More so, the social judgment theory used in this is hinged on how individuals judge the message they receive. This is against the backdrop of the fact that every message from the media goes through some audience vetting. The acceptance or rejection of a message by the audience is a function of how the audience perceives the message. The theory was developed by Muzafer Sherif, Carolyn Sherif and Carl Hovland. These researchers argue that the social judgment theory extends its concern to the field of perception and persuasion, based on the attitude of the audience. Griffin (2000) cited in Udoakah, Senam & Udoh (2014) lists three attitudes that inform audience perception and position of a message. They are:

- (a) The latitude acceptance – it is made up of the items that audience members perceive as being acceptable.
- (b) The latitude of rejection – this comprises the opinions or information that audience members rule out as objectionable.
- (c) The latitude of non-commitment – this consists of the message or information which audience members find neither objectionable nor acceptable. This implies either the audience is yet to pass judgment for whatever reason or the issue is too insignificant for the audience's thought and judgment over it (Udoakah et al., 2014).

Udoakah et al (2014) explain that audience members' perception and eventual acceptance or rejection of a media message is within the latitude of how the message appeals to their perception. The perception or positioning audience members hold about the media determines the level of cognitive mapping such information would earn.

Accordingly, Perry (2002) submits that there is a nexus between the social judgment theory and ego-involvement. Ego involvement relates to how crucial an issue is in the life of the audience (Udoakah et al., 2014). They explain that "where the mass media content is of significance to the audience, it becomes pertinent for the audience to be engaged in the cognitive process of arriving at the appropriate judgment" (p.5). The relevance of these theories to the study is that society's information, education and entertainment needs are accessed through the mass media. They hold the media in high esteem and will continue to long for these needs in so far as these information are in line with their perception and cognitive mapping. Yet this is further driven by their rating of the level of integrity with which this information comes. Audience members are more likely to withdraw should what they perceive to be true from the media be falsehood.

Literature Review

The Media and Society

The relationship between the media and society is symbiotic. This is in the context that one benefits from the other. While the media is a creation of the society, the society depends on the media for their information needs. Mass media are playing significant role in strengthening society, promoting knowledge, globalizing the world and disseminating information (Ibaningo, 2017). They have become as indispensable as food and clothing. No doubt media are giving our lives some shape.

Shabir, Safdar, Imran, Mumtaz & Anjum (2015) consider the media as “watchdog of democracy, society, national integration, people’s personal information and ideology of the country” (p.589). They wield considerable measure of influence on society. For instance, Van Dyk (n.d) maintains that media have power to control to some extent the mind of readers or viewers, but not directly their actions. Stressing that except in cases of physical, coercive force, the control of action which is usually the ultimate aim of the exercise of power, is generally indirect, whereas the control of intentions, plans, knowledge, beliefs or opinions – that is mental representation that monitor overt activities is presupposed (Van Dyk, n.d).

Moreover, the mass media serve as the conduit for the various forms of interaction among different facets of society (Udoakah et al., 2014). They maintain that “the mass media are a major force that stimulates national, international, socio-economic and global understanding” (p.1). In the same vein, Udoakah et al (2014) believe that the indispensability of the mass media is in their agenda-setting role for society. They submit that:

The mass media are fundamental in ensuring purposeful and peaceful co-existence in the society. They are indispensable to the success of every human endeavour through their agenda-setting role, they (mass media) set the hierarchy of current issues, determine the extent of transmission and establish the terms of reference and limits of debate, which ultimately influence people’s actions, reactions, decisions and judgments on the issues so raised.

Consequently, the media have been known to be social engineers, galvanizing the social process. Defleur & Dennis (1994) cited in Okon (2007) note that “the media should act as the means through which group norms are expressed, social controls are exerted, roles are allocated and above all, the entire social process is carried on” (p.33). That the media are called society’s watchdog is drawn from their surveillance function, the surveillance role of the media presupposes that they are the eyes and ears of the public (Josephat, 2008). The media provide vital information and alert members of the public about the happenings of events in and around them. The media consistently survey the environment and convey salient or mediated messages to the audience in order to reduce uncertainties and consequently react to conflict or change in rational way (Tsegysu, 2015).

Meanwhile, the media are often touted as the fourth estate of the realm. The concept of fourth estate of the realm is used to recognize the mass media roles in deferring the public interest, fulfilling the watchdog role of government activities and making meaningful impact on the process of policy making (Nwabueze, 2014). Nwabueze (2014) explains that “the media provide relevant information about society without which the other three estates of the realm cannot function effectively. The concept of fourth estate recognizes the political significance of the mainstream media in any society, particularly on governance” (p.39).

It is imperative to note that the relevance of these media functions to society persists in so far as the media continue to carry them out with some sense of responsibility. There is a great deal of fiduciary relationship between the media and members of the society, to whom

the media operate. This relationship therefore entrusts a commendable level of responsibility on the media (Udoakah et al., 2014).

Demystification of Media Economics: Imperatives for Journalism Practice

Media organizations are set up essentially to provide society with certain basic function, among which are listed above. Most media organizations are established like some business. Aside the government owned media houses that survive through government funding, most private organizations run many mainly from their various commercial activities. It cannot be contended that fact that media business is no mincemeat. The cost implication is enormous to stay in business. Staying in business means maximizing profit. Finding is vital for the survival of any business, including the media in any economy. This explains why Udoakah (1993) cited in Okon thinks funding is critical for organizational survival. Udoakah (1993) notes that:

The media when established cannot survive without funds; funds for materials and production, personnel and administration. These funds come through sales and advertisement revenue and subvention from other sources. With this inbuilt relationship, the operators of mass media organizations tend to produce protective rather than critical reports about the economy.

Although the latter part of this quotation will be discussed subsequently, the above statement reechoes the essentiality of funding for organizations.

The media as an intrinsic part of the society is a microcosm of the society. So that it cannot be extricated from society's economy. Again, McBride et al. (1980) explain the relationship between communication media and the national economy, noting that:

Both in its structure and its content, communication intermeshes with, and is dependent on, the economy in many ways. A constant flow of information is vital for economic force with incalculable potentialities ... it is a decisive factor in development. As an element of increasing importance in all national economics, communication represents a growing segment of a country's national product and has direct repercussions on productivity and employment.

To buttress this, McBride et al. (1980) again stressed that:

There is a coherent correlation between communication and the economy stemming from the fact that information is now a specific kind of economic resource which just performs an essential social function but which is today unequally distributed and sadly used ... communication is the sine qua non of all economic activities between nations.

The point to draw from these statements is that the communication sector is increasing becoming one of the most essential sectors of the nation's economy. By implication it does not only contribute to the growth of the economy but it is also prone to economic dynamics.

In terms of capitalization, setting up a media outfit is a function of the fiscal and monetary policies of a given country (Okon, 2007). McBride et al cited in Okon (2007) again explained the line between the media and economy, noting that:

The many interlocking between the media and other industries have fostered rapid mutual growth which has most often required a very high level of investment ... the huge size and spread of these components and their growth rate within the overall industrial complex has had a number of divergent effects on the social, economic and political development of every country.

Unfortunately, the Nigerian economy at the moment seems to be stifling the smooth operations of business. This trend is pushing many organizations out of business with many media organizations being affected. Owolabi & O'Neill (2013) observe that the mortality rate among media organizations is high due to the fact that the media in Nigeria operate in a very unfriendly economic climate. This has left many publications struggling for survival and in chronic situation premature death becomes inevitable (Owolabi & O'Neill, 2013). Imperatively, considering the cost intensive nature of running a media organization and how much profit they make through advertisement, one wonders the possibility for survival of these organizations. For Okoro & Agbo (2003) the cost of doing media business is outrageous. The latest equipment in newspaper technology include colour print rotary machine for printing newspaper, colour print Heidelberg machine for printing magazines, McCain automatic saddle stitchers for trimming, counting, binding and wrapping copies. Other equipments required for pre-press section include the traditional and modern vertical camera, film processors, plate makers, colour separation equipment, optronics colour setter, scanner, photocopier, colour printers and a network of computers that are configured into Local Area Network (LAN), computer graphic equipment and computerized guillotines among others (Okoro, 2006, cited in Owolabi & O'Neill, 2013). All of these are for a newspaper organization alone; that of the broadcasting media like radio and television are far expensive. The epileptic power situation seems to have forced organizations to manage their power generation. So that for a broadcast station to continue to transmit they need at least two 500KVA standby generators and borehole. This is apart from office accommodations, staff remuneration and vehicles.

Consequently, as demands for information increases, so the need to keep them increases. Because it will require experienced personnel to mount the airwaves as On Air Personalities (OAPs), the issue remuneration of staff cannot be treated lightly. In this light, Salihu (2004) stressed the need for finding the right set of staff who can deliver on the mission and vision of the station, while helping them maximizing profit. According to Salihu (2004).

The challenges of management of broadcasting stations include finding right caliber of staff who can deliver on the mission and the vision of the station. Since the inception of the NBC, followed by the subsequent increase and geometric multiplication of stations in Nigeria, the pace of training of required manpower to man the stations has not been able to catch up with the rate of increase in the number of stations.

All of these boil down to funding. Like a drowning man, the media is reaching for any thing just to stay afloat. To get a chance to perform whatever functions they want to perform in the society, mass media enterprises must first establish itself as viable ventures, able to stay afloat economically (Hulteng, 1979, cited in Owolabi & O’neill, 2013). In the same vein, Omu (1976) cited in Owolabi & O’neill (2013) reiterated that “for media industry to carry out its expected roles of informing, educating, entertaining, surveillance and contributing to the general socio-economic development of a nation, it must first build strong resistance to economic adversity” (p.248).

Beyond all of these demands on the media to be economically viable is the attendant implication. Many scholars have argued that, the quest to stay afloat in business by the media is not bad in itself but the means with which they are going about it seems to be gradually taking the sheen off journalism practice. Owolabi & O’neill wonder how the media will survive under this pressure to stay in business and still be socially responsible to the public. Osonik cited in McBride et al (1980) argue that social responsibility is possible when the media are well managed and staffs are financially independent. Noting that:

Journalistic ethics cannot be confined to proclaiming principles and demanding that journalists respect them. What is needed are constant efforts to increase the actual opportunities for free and responsible work in the media ... The extent to which those who work in the media can help their creativity and assert their moral and professional qualities depends on the way the institution is managed, on the financial resources made available on the editorial policy and on many other concrete conditions.

It is observed that the worst hit of this media quest to stay afloat in business is the failing quality of the news. News is the most essential product of media organizations. Irrespective of the pressure, the press are expected to jealously guard the sanctity of the news. News must be truthful and objective representation of the society (Ojobor, 2002, cited in Ibaningo, 2017).

Arguments are rife that the consequences of media’s quests to stay in business have given rise to such concepts as commoditization, commercialization and news syndication. All of these are illicit measures adopted by the media to fund themselves. Most disturbing of this unfortunate trend is its implication for journalism practice in particular and the society in general. At such point news becomes a commodity for sale, then there is the tendency that its core features that make it news in the first place could be compromised. Some workable definitions of news will suffice to give us a grasp of this discussion. Okon (2007) gives the following workable definition of news:

- News is any accurate fact/idea that will interest a large number of people.
- News is anything timely that is stated by the news stall because it is of interest or significance to their readers or it can be made so.
- News is an accurate, unbiased account of the significant facts of a timely happening that is of interest to the readers of the newspaper that prints the account.
- News is the report of current ideas, events or situations that interest news consumers and profits those who own the newspaper, magazine, radio/television stations or other medium of mass communication.

What we have today as news seem to fall short of the basic values of timeliness, proximity, prominence, consequence and human interest. In so far as the news makers could pay for what they want to see, hear, when they want to, who is involved. Unfortunately what has brought us to this point many argue is the privatizations of the media in Nigeria which has been largely criticized for a shift from (broadcasting) in national interest to broadcasting in commercial interest (Chioma, 2014). Accordingly, one of the major “pains” of liberalization in Nigeria is news commercialization. Private (broadcast) stations are established along business lines and in other to maximize profit the news that should ordinarily be covered under public service considerations is commercialized (Oketunmbi, 2006 & 2007, cited in Chioma, 2014).

Commercialization, commoditization and news syndication are processes that aim at transforming a non-trading or non-profit making organization into a profit driven enterprise (Oketunmbi, 2006 & 2007). News commercialization and commoditization has to do with a situation whereby media organizations generate income from the news by selling airtime for news instead of reporting the news based on accepted news values. Very disturbing, however, is the fact that the situation has given rise to compromise with news sensationalism pervading our airwaves. Idowu (2001) cited in Ibaningo (2017) argue that “the situation is so bad that commercialization at the institutional level is thriving because editors, publishers and owners of the broadcast station/print media see the organization, or their investment, as a profit making venture that should yield the required financial returns” (p.19).

More so, Hanson (2005) confirmed the trend, when he noted “reporters and editors are supposed to be concerned not with profit but rather with reporting the news as best as they can” (p.140). Again Amadi (2003) gives a vivid description of how much the journalism profession has been affected by the trends of commercialization, commoditization and news syndication and the economics of mass media. Amadi notes that:

As a profit making venture, more often than not, the profit or pecuniary motive is allowed by both the practitioners and their sponsors to becloud the purpose of critical reasoning which is expected to be the preoccupation of the media. For example, the media owner who initially knew that critical and insightful contents were crucial in media practice would change to frivolities as soon as he realizes that critical content will not attract mass patronage – mass patronage on which higher profit in terms of advertising revenue depends.

There is no gainsaying that the disadvantages of this trend far outweigh its advantages. Discussing the implication of news commercialization, commoditization and syndication, Omenugha & Oji (2008) cited in Chioma argue that “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 (p.23). In such a scenario, development journalism is resigned to the saddle. It is also not in contention that this trend de-democratizes the media, leaving them at the whims and caprices of the hegemonies and power bookers. News is reduced to a mere manipulative tool, which is not healthy for national development.

Conversely, this touches on the concept of adherence to professional ethics guiding the journalism practice. The issue of ethical consideration in journalism has received great attention among scholars over the years (Tsegyu & Asemah, 2014). Accordingly, the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) has stated its professional code of practice. The code deals with editorial independence, accuracy and fairness, privacy, privilege/non-disclosure, decency, discrimination, rewards and gratification, children and minors, access to information, social responsibility, plagiarism and copyrights (Tsegyu & Asemah, 2014). A situation where journalists and media organizations continue to flout journalism ethics portends some severe consequences for society. Journalism practice wields such enormous powers and calls for the highest standards of ethics and commitment to truth. Ethics and truth in journalism have assumed global concerns, with many scholars emphasizing the need for journalists to be cautious of their basic constituents of objectivity, accuracy, fairness and balance merely assumed mythical qualities as journalists battle to assign credibility to their news stories (Omenugha & Oji, 2014). Further implication of this is that the trend is fast rubbing off on one of the greatest assets of journalism, which is credibility. Little wonder, Ajia worries that credibility is fast eroding in journalism practice, noting that:

Nigerian journalists have been found wanting, both in expertise and in credibility; several people who are practicing journalism in Nigeria did not receive adequate training. Due to lack of manpower in the media industry in Nigeria; many untrained journalists have also found their way to this noble profession. Again, some practitioners came into the profession because of their closeness to those at the corridor of power. Such people are the ones flouting the ethics of the profession with impunity (p.56).

Amadi (2003) contends that all that matters for this set of journalists is their livelihood. No radicalism, clairvoyance, intellectualizing or hindsight is worthy if it will in terms of running counter to what the media owner wants ruin the source of livelihood (Amadi, 2003).

Conclusion

It is no longer in-doubt that journalism is fast giving in to the lures of commercialization, commoditization and news syndication. What is more worrying is the grave danger it poses for the journalism practice in particular and the society generally. While the alibi is the harsh economic situation in which the journalist and media organizations by their trade, it follows that without due adherence to professional ethics, journalists could be cheaply swayed. Obviously, media organizations are in business to maximize profit, but such should be guided with some utmost sense of responsibility. Society holds the media in very high esteem and the media being cautious of the sensitive position they hold in society, must thrive to maintain credibility. They are one of the major drivers of democracy. The media must democratize communication and the airwaves, making it accessible to all and sundry. This should be the case especially when events meet the criteria for news values.

Recommendation

Drawing from the arguments raised and conclusions made, the following recommendations are here put forward.

1. To stem the tide of commoditization, commercialization and news syndication, media organization must strive to be economically viable. The economic viability is a shift from the order of only generating revenue through sales of airtime through news and advertisement to developing alternative business options. This could include organizing conferences and workshop for organizations and consultancy services among others.
2. The adherence to professional ethics cannot be overemphasized. Until journalists and media regulators ensure strict adherence and compliance to journalism code of ethics, profession could just be grappling with this trend for a long time.
3. The employment of professional as journalists by organizations will be far reaching in stemming the tide of news commoditization and commercialization in a far journalism practice in Nigeria.
4. The audience must insist on credibility from the media. When organizations that are into commercialization and news commoditization no longer get patronage from the public, they could adjust their mode of operation. Audience members can do this by withdrawing access to media contents and reporting suspected cases of news commoditization and commercialization to the NBC.

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