

*Review*

## Media and democratic imperatives in Nigeria's fourth republic

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The media over the years have been globally acknowledged as the watchdog of the society and their information/monitoring roles considered a sine qua non for democracy and good governance. The media, popularly referred to as the Fourth Estate of the Realm, have been identified as a key institution that plays a critical role in defining the political, economic and socio-cultural reality of given nations. The importance of the media today is immense and indispensable. Never before in mankind's history, the media had such a noteworthy impact on our lives (behaviors) and environments-this perhaps is due to modern technology. In developing state like Nigeria, the media have been instrumental to the struggle for democracy in 1999 after a long period of military rule. Based on this backdrop, this paper examined the contribution or the role of Nigerian media to Nigeria's transition to civil rule (democracy) in May 1999. The paper adopted descriptive research method through the use of secondary sources of data and anchored on the precepts of the Agenda Setting Theory. However, the study concluded that access to media is enormous for the success of democracy because for any democratic regime to survive, adequate quality information is essential.

**Key words:** Democratization, democracy, imperative and media.

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, Sub-Saharan (simply 'Africa') has been partly transformed by the winds of democratic change (Diamond, 2010), sequel to the collapse of Soviet Unions in the 20th century. But democratic structures and processes in Nigeria's history had suffered debilitating distortion, and in some cases, total destruction during the prolonged period of military incursion into politics, which prevailed continuously since 1966 till 1999 before the country returned to another civil rule in May 1999

(Asobie, 2005). In all these years of dictatorship, Nigerians through the media clamoured persistently for a free debate on the grand norms, the fundamental principles and, the basic structures that would constitute the foundation for the practice of democratic politics in a post military era.

Meanwhile, the media systems in Africa are still as insecure and volatile as unstable political and social structures compared to the developed nations (Hutchten,

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1971). Apparently, the roles and priorities of the media in a developed nation like United States of America can never be the same in a developing nation like Nigeria with a fledgling democracy- a nation still scrambling for its own identity in the comity of nations. Though, the media as the Fourth Estate of the Realm carries an entrenched assumption that is often taken for granted. For not only is it made to appear as having constitutional backing, but also that our modern mass communication media as 'neutral' reporters and filters of news and information are an obvious necessity for democracy (Eziokwu, 2004), a condition for the nurturing and sustenance of democracy. The media are not only chief makers and movers of national development; they are also products and mirrors of the socio-economic and political structures of a nation. Thus, a meaningful appraisal of the role the media played in Nigeria's development must take into account ideological aspects of the relationship between the media as a watchdog and the historical and cultural settings of the country. Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of media in Nigeria's transition to democratic rule in May 1999.

### **The broader Nigerian context**

Historically, Nigeria is not only the most populous country in African continent, but also, the largest single geographical unit along the West Coast of Africa, and the largest black nation in the world (Egbon, 2002). Regrettably, the Nigerian state like many African states, right from independence has been confronted with the problems of economic development and that of nation building. Reflecting on the problems hounding the continent, Omoera (2006) notes that:

*Contemporary Africa is beset by a myriad of problems. From North to South, East to West, pervasive corruption, hunger, political, religious and ethnic crisis, unemployment, illiteracy, Human immunodeficiency virus infection and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) pandemic, internal and external brain drains, and so on, are plaguing the continent. The leadership is almost overwhelmed by these developmental needs and ever-multiplying challenges*

The aforementioned quote rightly captures the sorry state of affairs that the ardent political leadership in Africa may have foisted on the people and the society at large. As a political unit (in terms of democracy), African states (Nigeria) may still be said to be relatively young compared to the European nations simply due to persistent and long incursion of the military into mainstream politics. Thus, the exit of the military and politicians in uniform from Nigeria's political space served as a stimulus to the aspiration of the Nigerian populace for true political unit, which derives from a democratic process. The desirability of democracy over the pretense of the militarized politics was concisely noted by Igili(2005) as:

*Virtually all Nigerians believed that the exit which resulted to the return of democratic government will finally put paid to the leadership problems, which characterized the military regime. This explains the ardour with which the Nigerian populace embraced the return to civil rule in 1999*

Constitutionally, the Federal Republic of Nigeria specifies the role of the media in Section 22 of its 1999 constitution as follows:

*The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people (FGN, 1999)*

This section of the constitution recognizes, among others, the role of the mass media in exercising a watchdog role over the affairs of government. For without free and open expression, citizens will not have access to the quality information they need to arrive at a rational judgment on national issues. Based on this recognition, the Nigerian media have cultivated a strong agitation and tradition that has been helping to ensure that the government lives up to its responsibilities. The drive for the progressive realization of rights and freedom, in the context of the right to development, is another hopeful sign for making that the constitution is justifiable to the people. In this respect, Ojo (2003) is of the view that:

*To all intents and purposes, the mass media need to be much more determined in the nascent democracy if they want to be reckoned with as a potent force of socio-political and economic transformation cum development of state*

In Nigeria, the performance of the mass media in the democratic process at various phases of our history has been well documented (Yusuf, 2001; Nwosu, 2003; Oso and Pate, 2010). Arguably, the mass media have remained in the forefront in the struggle to promote rights of our people through a credible democratic process (Pate, 2012).

### **Conceptual clarification**

It is necessary to clarify some concepts or terms that are central in this study, that is, democratization, democracy and media.

#### ***Democratization***

According to Bako (2008), is a process that invariably leads to the attainment and entrenchment of democracy (transition from dictatorial regime to a full liberal democratic political regime). In view of the

aforementioned, Adedeji (1998) argued that to build a truly democratic society, it takes a long time of determination and purposefulness of trial and error, uninterrupted by exogenous factors such as military coups. Thus, the process of building that democratic society is generally referred to as democratization. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, democratization represents the path through which society seeks to attain democracy. It is not an end but a mean toward a democratic end. Democracy can neither be attained nor sustained without democratization.

### **Democracy**

This concept has no universally accepted definition. It is a concept that means different things to different people, a method, a process, a system, an ideology, a platform for power contestation and not the least a class struggle. The concept that democracy is the government of the people, by the people and, for the people has evolved into gradual irrelevance as the realities of the modern states no longer suggest the idealist mode of participation. In fact, this definition has been described by Entwistle (1971) as a pedestrian definition of democracy which require, the direct, above and continuous participation of citizens in government. A kind of participation only applicable in relatively small city states without the complex intricacies of modern statehood.

In an attempt to avoid the problems associated with the lexical use of the concept (democracy), political and social scientists have offered a number of definitions and explanations on the concepts, for instance, Agbaje (1999) opined that democracy is a term that is used to describe an idea, process (series of event leading to change or a course of action) or system of government. It entrenches and expands the right, ability and capacity of people in any community to take control of their lives through participation, in discussion and decision on issues and events that affect them and their community. Similarly, Nwoye (2001) maintains that democracy signifies political system dominated by representatives either directly or indirectly chosen by the people.

This study conceived democracy as a set of ideas, institutions and processes of governance that allows the broad mass of people to choose their leaders and that guarantees them a broad range of civil rights with the inclusion of socio-economic concerns of the society. Also, it embodies fundamental human rights such as freedom of expression, right to life, right to dignity of human person, right to personal liberty, right to fair hearing, right to freedom of thoughts, consciences, etc. Democracy is also interchangeable used as civil rule in this study.

### **Media**

Media in this study is conceived as agents of information

communicated to large groups of people through a group of corporate entities, publishers, journalists, reporters, pressmen, newscasters and others who constitute the communications industry and profession. It also includes the ability to inform, educate and entertain the populace. The print (in particular) and electronic media shall be focused on.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The observation of the media as a powerful force in today's world and/or society led to theorists presenting hypothesis and testing different theories to explain the power of the press in the media as it relates to people's public agendas. Numerous theories such as social responsibility theory, general system theory, framing theory, communication theory among others have been used to explain the power of the press. But this paper adopted Agenda Setting Theory by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. This is because the theorists saw an association between mass media and society's opinion and as a result, theorized a cause-and-effect relationship between the power of the press and the public opinion.

Thus, the theory comes from a scientific viewpoint, which assumes that if people are exposed to the same media, they will place importance on the same issues. In its evolution, the agenda-setting perspective over the past 25 years has formulated a general umbrella for a number of research traditions and concepts in media and communication. However, scholarly research has been steady, since the McCombs and Shaw's seminal article in 1972, with the widely spaced key years of 1977, 1981, 1987, and 1991 each producing 17 to 20 publications. Quite the contrary, 1987 and 1991 shared the record for the publication of agenda-setting studies (McCombs and Shaw, 1993). The immeasurable sociology of news literature with its wide multiplicity of perspectives on the influences determining daily production of the news agenda is exceedingly relevant to this facet of agenda-setting research (McCombs and Shaw, 1993).

Agenda setting theory of the mass media attempts to determine how the popular agenda of the media affects society and attempts to explain why mass media has gained so much power over the thoughts of people everywhere. This theory conceptualizes and explains the different forces that dictate how important issues in the media are perceived by people in the society. McCombs and Shaw regarded Watergate scandals in USA as a perfect example of this theory. The theory also takes a back-to-the basics approach to communication theory and research. The agenda setting theory was first discussed during the 1968 presidential election. The theory is a robust and widespread effect of mass communication, an effect that results from specific content in mass media (McCombs, 2004). The agenda

setting theory with the prevailing selective exposure hypothesis, reaffirming the power of the press while maintaining individual freedom.

In their groundbreaking study, which was first discussed and measured during presidential campaign (McCombs and Shaw, 1993); they believed that the theory created a cause and effect relationship between the media and public agenda. They emphasized that the media influences the way the public think. The theory attempts to prove that the media is able of telling the public what current issues created by the mass media in a given society, that is, the theory was discovered to create public awareness of issues created by the mass media.

However, the critiques alluded to Agenda Setting Theory was that the theory was made in the 1970's before personal un-massed media devices were available to everyone. The power of agenda setting that McCombs and Shaw describe may be on wane, even though scholars argued that the changing media merely opens up the theory to new domains (Griffin, 2012). The issue is that the media may not have as much power to transfer the salience of issues or attributes now as a result of users' expanded content choices and control over exposure. With un-massed media, the agenda setting theory may lose its relevance completely overtime.

Despite the aforementioned critiques, the theory looks more central in explaining the topic of this paper because it set a nation's agenda and focuses public attention on a few key public issues. Not only do people acquire factual information about public affairs from the media, readers and viewers also learn how much importance to attach to a topic on the basis of emphasis placed on it in the news. The application of the theory presented to the public results from countless day-to-day decisions by many different journalists about the news of the moment while the public agenda is commonly assessed by public opinions.

## THE NIGERIAN MEDIA IN PERSPECTIVE

Basically, the media in Nigeria, as in other parts of the world, serve as a major medium of communication in the country. The different types of the media (print, electronic and now social media) create awareness and understanding of happenings among the 167 million diverse people of the country (Pate, 2012). These diversities cut across ethnic segmentation, religious affiliations, political orientations, social groupings and economic opportunities, among others.

Nigerian media started as a forum for debate, education and discussion of public issues which was aimed at public enlightenment and entertainment. Thus, the birth of Nigerian media as an institution that promotes public enlightenment through information dissemination can be traced back to 1859 (print media) and 1932 (electronic media) respectively (Nkwocha, 1999; Ojenike,

2005; Enemaku, 2005). The first print media-newspaper was established by Rev. Henry Townsend, with a publication called *Iwe-Iroyin*. The objective of this publication was to get its audience (people) to acquire the habit of seeking information by reading. With the upsurge in daily newspapers, the media became a platform for the expression of nationalists' consciousness. For instance, in 1880, a group of Nigerians established the *Lagos Times*, which immediately started as a series of confrontation with colonial forces.

On the other hand, the first electronic media-radio station started in 1932 when the British Colonial Government opened a Radio Distribution Service (RDS) in Lagos to transmit British Broadcasting Corporations (BBC) programmes in Nigeria (Sulaiman, 2002). The RDS was later transformed into Nigerian Broadcasting Service (NBS) in 1951 and by 1957; the NBS was changed to a corporation status called Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) in order to shield it from government interference and undue propagation of the views of the ruling political party. Also, the first television station-Western Nigerian Television Service (WNTS) was established in 1959 by an opposition leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, who was denied access to national radio (Ojenike, 2005). Thereafter, each regional governments followed suit and established their own television stations. In this respect, the Federal Government in January 1<sup>st</sup> 1962 launched an interim service/a global network service which later matured into a fully-fledged government parastatal now known as Voice of Nigeria (VON) through Decree 15 of 1991 (Nkwocha, 1999; Ojenike, 2005).

Thus, with the trends of time, many private and government-owned media sprang up for political purposes. Therefore, ownership of media industry was more for political asset to the politicians than for the monetary gains that might accrue from such investment. The ownership of the media which had become competitive among political leaders proliferated after independence, leading to the establishment of conglomerates with politicians and political groups investing in and sustaining, several publications within such conglomerates across the length and breadth of the country (Duyile, 1987; Uche, 1989).

Infact, it must be noted that the Nigeria media have been squarely challenged owing to interplay of factors, such as inclination of the Nigerian state and its rulers/leaderships towards dictatorial tendencies, among others. But the proponent perspective is that Nigerian media have been playing a very significant role in setting the agenda for public discourse and molding the direction of public opinions on vital issues in the country.

## THE NATURE OF NIGERIA'S DEMOCRACY

Since 1960 when Nigeria gained its independence and

embraced the democratic option of government, much has been witnessed in the country's meandering road to full democratization.

Over the years, the system has encountered uproar characterized by controversies, military incursions, dashed hopes and leadership and systemic failures. On all occasions, the political class was at the receiving end. They have been variously accused of anti-democratic tendencies that tend to violate constitutionality, abuse of citizens' rights, promote non credible elections, and disrespect for the rule of laws; others are poor delivery of services, propensity for violence and the non-advancement and protection of individual and collective freedoms (Pate, 2012). Incidentally, these elements form the fundamental pillars that differentiate democracy from other forms of governance.

The psyche of most political and non-political elites has been infected with the militarist and regimented culture of arbitrariness characterized by executive fiat, absence of accountability and wanton disregard for the will of the people. Negative acts of political misbehaviours, electoral malpractices, tyrannical attitude, bad governance, disregard for the rule of law, massive stealing of public resource (corruption), propagation of blatant lies, increased deprivations, personal appropriation of state power and, gross ineptitude by elected officials seems to combine with debilitating poverty to overwhelm the general population and push it to hopelessness, frustration and possible violence outburst (Pate, 2012).

Indeed, the democratic space is heavily demonized by its immediate beneficiaries-the politicians to the vexation of the ordinary people.

### **NIGERIAN MEDIA IN THE ATTAINMENT OF NIGERIA'S DEMOCRACY IN MAY 1999**

Before and even since the creation of Nigerian state as a nation, the media has been in the forefront championing the economic, political and socio-cultural heritage of the nation's development through information dissemination to the people and the nation's at large.

Therefore, the history of Nigeria's political struggles to democracy would be grossly deficient without correctly situating the role of the media. For instance, during the colonial period, the media became the weapon for engaging colonial rule in the struggle for independence. They (media) were relevant in drumming support for political movements and in challenging colonial authorities. The fact that notable political leaders at that time were either journalists or owners of the media industries attest to the influence of the media during the colonial days. This is understandable when Uche (1989) argued that:

*The influence of the press in that period was such that it becomes debatable whether independence would be achieved sooner without the nationalistic involvement of*

*the press.*

However, the military incursion into politics brought the Nigerian media in direct collusion with the post-independence Nigerian state which, like in West African Countries, was essentially, arbitrarily violent (Ake, 1996). Violence not only became the means of enforcing legitimacy and political authority, but also a means of retaining power. But not unlike the media, the military, too, was caught in the web of politics, following the military coup d'état of 1966 (Madeki, 1998).

The inability of political elites to resolve differences and provide leadership after independence was responsible for the series of intervention by the military in governance. Politics has always been played with exclusionist tendencies, and elections have always resulted in widening the differences between political contenders rather than bringing them closer. The usurpation and sustenance of political power by the military became so fashionable for the most part of the independent era to the extent that the democratic rights of the people to freely determine how they chose to be governed, including freedom of expression, were substituted with the rule of the gun (Abayomi, 2004).

Towards the last decade of the twentieth century (1990s), the civil society began to gather fresh momentum against the perpetuation of militarism. The status of the civil society in Nigeria prior to this time has been described as an ironic phenomenon of a prostrate civil society resuscitated by doses of military robustness (Williams, 1993). But it can also be argued that the media was indeed crucial in catalyzing the popular struggle that engaged the dictatorship of the eras. During the reign of the militaries, pro-democracy platforms emerged from within the civil society, with the Nigerian media providing the necessary support for the pro-democracy coalitions. It is, thus, an historical fact that the tyranny of the headstrong military regimes of the 90s would not have been successful defied if the media had not offered its platforms to set the democratic agenda upon which the popular struggle for democracy was waged (Abayomi, 2004).

In this respect, all aspects of the transition to democracy (1998 to 1999) were extensively covered and intensely reported by the media following the de-freezing of the political space and the release of a transition timetable by General Abdusalami Abubakar on 20th July, 1998. Oseni (1999) argued that:

*The responsibilities (watchdog role) of the Nigerian media in these periods of transition include: keeping the administration to its word or promise on the hand-over of power to civilians; being strong in the face of danger; offering where necessary, alternatives to the transition agenda; serving as a feedback on government policies as well as expanding the score of the transition to morality, accountability, management of the national economy and the amelioration of poverty*

To keep the transitions on track, the *Tell* magazine, for instance, did week after week a countdown to the hand-over to an elected civilian president- in bold letters and boxed in every single issue it published between July 1998 and May 1999. This was a kind of advocacy advertising for the transition programme. Indeed, the Managing Editor of *Tell* magazine affirmed in an interview that:

*If General Abubakar reneged on the hand-over date, we would have gone back to the trenches to pick up guerilla journalism. We left our underground paraphernalia intact for most of 1999 (Interview, 2000 qtd. in Olutokun and Seteolu, 2001)*

To underscore their watchdog role, the media criticized General Obasanjo's donation of ₦130 Million to the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in the run-up to the December 5th, 1998, Local Government Elections. This is understandable when the Nigerian Tribune (1998) reported that:

*General Obasanjo should supply to the public 'a full disclosure of the identities of those involved (in aiding him)- to help members of the public in establishing the real character and motives of the contributors- in the final analysis, however, the authorities most seriously consider setting a ceiling on, the amount individual aspirants could spend in the course of seeking public office'.*

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was put on its toes by the media in the interest of fair elections. *The Guardian* (1999) newspaper reported that:

*INEC should put in place measures to avert rigging of elections; it should also distance itself from manipulation by security agencies, state administrators and bureaucrats*

In terms of balanced coverage, the competing political parties got fair coverage, although, the effect of bigger advertising spending by the PDP was felt in enhanced coverage but the regulatory guidelines of the Press Council and the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission prevented any serious excesses (Olukotun, 2000). Abuses and irregularities were fully documented and monitored by the media. For instance, the Newswatch (1999: 27) reported that:

There are irregularities in the run-up to the State Assembly/Governorship elections in Katsina state (under-age voting), multiple voting in Abia state as well as bribery stories in Delta and Ekiti states. By and large, the Presidential elections of February 1999 were intensely covered by both national and international media. Confronted with a choice, between accepting a flawed election and its cancellation, the Nigerian media mostly

advised a grudging acceptance of the results without glossing over the hitches and the flaws. Doubtless, the watchdog role of the media was at work throughout the transition and beyond.

On the other hand, while the media in Nigeria may want to play their constitutional role in instituting democratic values and strengthening the transitional project to the attainment of civil rule, we must also admit some of the challenges confronting them both individually and collectively. Some of the challenges are internally generated while others are beyond their margins. The greatest challenges faced by Nigerian media in its bid to strengthen the transitional project to effective civil/democratic rule is the behaviors of the Nigeria politicians, especially those in governments and particularly at state levels irrespective of their political party affiliation. Their on-tolerant behaviors to alternative views or options before and during the transition is frightening and threatening democratic process and values. The media find it difficult to effectively perform in such a climate. Instead, sycophancy and praise saying (Pate, 2012) dominate the media airwaves.

Similarly, the corrupt practices of most Nigerians and business groups that remained cogs in the wheel of the nation's development rendered the media impotent in discharging their roles effectively. Another challenge is the weak attitudes of the media to adequately scrutinize and report the quality of intending contestants, their manifestoes and their fulfilled promises due to 'power that be' from either the governments or individuals. Also, the commercialization policy in the media industries imposed serious threat to most private media houses. As a result, Pate (2012) argued that the airwaves are exclusively appropriated by governments, their organizations, money bags, business groups and big social institutions. Another challenge is the poor training of media personnel and equipment. This has hindered their expected functions of effective coverage, reporting and disseminating value-added information to meet the needs of the people and global trends.

In spite of the fact that the media are to support the governments' programmes, provide the citizens with information, present issues that should not trivialize or disparage groups, and reflect the diversity of peoples and cultures of Nigeria for peaceful co-existence. However, considering the ownership and control of the media industry by the governments (federal and state) and the political elites the press personnel had to contend with interference that impugned professionalism and media ethics in favour of the owners.

This made Abayomi (2004) to assert that the media (print and electronic) remained un-deregulated under the exclusive control of the government and politicians. For instance, during the campaign periods for the most elections in Nigeria, the incumbent governments and the oppositions uses media in deformation of characters and hatreds campaigns. Thus the operational modalities in

terms of control and ownership of the media industries by the government and politicians have restricted the autonomy of the media and freedom of the press in the country. In this regard, both the military and civilian governments have shown its fang (incisor) against an errant media.

## CONCLUSION

The Nigerian media could not be said to be a stranger to democracy. There is always a relationship between the political system and the environment in which the media operate, since the media do not exist in a vacuum. Accidentally, the Nigerian media have been molded with an environment that is characterized by instability, repressive legislation and restriction of access to information.

The transition of political power from full-blown military dictatorship to civil rule/governance following the election of 1999, only paved way for the democratization processes aimed at transforming the various institutions that were suffocated in long years of military rule. The Nigerian media emerged as a crucial part of the apparatus for vetting and legitimizing elections. They provide information to the voters about candidates, the electoral process, actual voting dates and the rule of the games.

Thus, the Nigerian media need to overcome some of the above mentioned challenges that limit their performance as a credible institution entrusted with the role of serving as the watchdog of the society without flouting the media ethical standards and squander imperatives for objectivity. In this respect, the media personnel, stakeholders-politicians and Nigerians should take steps of reposition themselves for the purpose of building enduring and stable democracy for sustainable development in Nigerian society.

The media through investigative journalism should be able to expose scams and they should not simply collect money and broadcast dubious claims that have been perfected as conducts for the siphoning of public resources/interests. Also, credible feedback mechanisms and standard public-opinion monitoring systems should be institutionalized to properly inform, educate and guide media programming patterns and contents. Many of the broadcast stations may be reformed out of business. A media house is a change agent whose management dynamic in-flow of innovation, creativity, drive and energy to keep pace with contemporary democratic challenges in the society.

Nevertheless, the planning, organizing and managing of the media in consonance with the peculiar needs, aspirations and, cooperate existence of Nigeria as a country should be the beacon light of our media practice. Moreover, proper training will imbue the media practitioners with the moral courage that will enable them

to persist without fear of danger or intimidation in pursuing that which they believe to be the best in the public interest. Thus, they can then be able to withstand assaults of manipulation from the powers that be without compromising their principles. A continual assessment of both moral and ethical performance of media practitioner is also of vital importance, especially in Nigeria of today, which is still in search of her national identity. Finally, media offerings should be so crafted to the extent that the society gives evidence of media sincerity, patriotism, wisdom, humanity and the right to claim that their efforts, through their professional practice indeed embrace the hopes and dreams of what most Nigerians can share.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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