

Journalism and Media in Nigeria

Context, Issues and Practice

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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	viii
Introduction.....	1
CHAPTER ONE	
The Nature Of National Narratives: The Press and The Evolution Of Modern Nigeria	
- <i>Adebayo WILLIAMS</i>	17
CHAPTER TWO	
The newspaper as witness and window on society: A historian's reflection	
- <i>Ayodeji OLUKOJU</i>	31
CHAPTER THREE	
News and news reporting for sustainable democracy: A sociological Perspective	
- <i>Tokunbo Alex ADAJA</i>	40
CHAPTER FOUR	
Trends in beat reporting in the nigerian press	
- <i>Bisi Olawunmi</i>	56
CHAPTER FIVE	
Conflict sensitive journalism in the Nigerian context	
- <i>Jide JIMOH</i>	69
CHAPTER SIX	
Being "international": a critique of contemporary philosophies and Practices of Yoruba language Journalism in Nigeria	
- <i>Victor AYEDUN-ALUMA and Ganiyat TIJANI-ADENLE</i>	84
CHAPTER SEVEN	
Media ownership and objectivity: issues involved and the future direction	
- <i>Aminat ADEJOLA and Semiu BELLO</i>	101
CHAPTER EIGHT	
Media Ownership and The Marketplace Of Idea: Is True Democracy Possible?	
- <i>L. K. Mustapha, M. B. Ahmad And I. Y. Abubakar</i>	115

CONTENTS

CHAPTER NINE

Historical Analysis Of The Credibility Of Mediated
Communication in Nigeria

-*Lai OSO and Ganiyat TIJANI-ADENLE*..... 142

CHAPTER TEN

Ethics Search In Africa And The Potential of Personal Morals

-*Oladokun OMOJOLA* 167

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Press Freedom And The Nigerian Environment: The Fuss And
The Realities

-*Lanre AKINOLA and Kolade AJILORE* 181

CHAPTER TWELVE

Power, Sources And The News

-*Lai OSO* 201

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Legal Limits Of Criticism In A Civilian-Military-civilian Era:
1966 – 1979

-*Nosa OWENS-IBIE*..... 233

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Soft Sell Publications In Nigeria: Evolutionary Trend, Issues
And Prospects

-*Rotimi Williams OLATUNJI and Jide Peter JIMOH* 255

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ethical Challenges of Tabloidization and Trivialization in the
Nigerian Media Space

-*Olujimi KAYODE* 272

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Blogs As Alternative To Mainstream News Media

-*Olukayode AYANKOJO* 287

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Impoliteness In Pragmatism: Face Threatening Acts In Online
Posts By Internet Newspaper Readers In Nigeria

-*Babatunde ONI and Bayo OLOYEDE* 309

CONTENTS

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Re-defining The Public Sphere In The Digital Era

-*Olunifesi Adekunle SURAJ* 327

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Journalism And Mass Communication Education In Nigeria:
In Search of the Right Pedagogy

-*Dele ODUNLAMI* 352

CHAPTER TWENTY

Mass Communication Research Trends In Nigerian Universities
(1980-2006)

-*Balarabe MAIKABA* 363

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Influence Of Tv On Voters' Choice Of Candidates In The
Nigerian 2007 Presidential Election

-*Stella ARIRIGUZOH* 386

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Media And Politics: A Study Of Nigerian 2011 General Elections

-*Ismail Adegboyega IBRAHEEM*..... 410

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Politics, Continuity And Change In The Development of Radio
Nigeria Kaduna

-*Umaru A. PATE and Sama'ila SHEHU* 428

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Newspaper Readership in Nigeria: Challenges, Prospects and
the Way Forward

-*Idowu SOBOWALE, Niyi SOWUNMI and Richard EMMANUEL* 468

CHAPTER EIGHT

MEDIA OWNERSHIP AND THE MARKETPLACE OF IDEA: IS TRUE DEMOCRACY POSSIBLE?

L. K. MUSTAPHA, M. B. AHMAD and I. Y. ABUBAKAR

INTRODUCTION

There is a linkage between the mass media and the ideology of democracy. Theoretically and normatively, democracy presupposes the existence of deliberative and participatory involvement of the entire citizenry of a political system in the governance and management of the commonwealth with a view to maximising the welfare of the entire members. This contrasts with the paternalistic perspective of authoritarianism, which views the ruling elite as the most knowledgeable, qualified and 'divinely-ordained' to know what is good for the people and how social order can be preserved to meet the greater good of the citizens. Therefore, central to the power equation of any form of social ordering is the existence of information, which the mass media, have remained the main source. The centrality of information to governance at political, economic and social realms of the society confers on the providers the ability to manipulate desires, actions and the inactions of those at the receiving end.

Just as monopolistic marketplace consumers are at the mercy of the marketers, authoritative diffusion of information places the citizenry at the beck and call of the source. Extending the principle of economic monopolies to the study of information monopolies, Harold Innis

contended that control over communication media confers social and political power (in Meyrowitz, 1986). The danger of dominance over information as epitomized by authoritarianism and totalitarianism thus makes democracy and its allies, freedom of speech and of the press, alluring. In making information to become common currency of the social and political systems, the institution of the mass media succeeded the traditional oral system as the major source of information and public knowledge. The media consisting of a wide variety of printed, electronic as well as the new forms of communication apparatuses are not only pervasive in the contemporary society, but also central to the understanding of its happenings. The critical position the mass media occupy in democracy has, therefore, attracted a deluge of studies with differing conclusions. While the normative theorists view the granting of freedom of expression and of the press as a *sine qua non* for effective democratic governance, critical scholars assert that the media, by virtue of allegiances to the ideas and ideals of their owners and regulators, undermine democracy, particularly when examined from the political economy prism.

Although the media system operates with some implicit assumptions that seemingly guarantee accuracy, fairness and balance, not a few scholars believe that it is impossible to come off bias at individual, professional, organizational and ideological levels in the process of gathering, processing and disseminating information to the public (Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). The organization/operation of the media system along public and private models, vis-à-vis the increasing corporatization of the industry, raises the question of the conflict of supremacy between public interest and market efficiency. This paper, therefore, examines the normative and pragmatic relationship between the media and democratic society, the implications of the burden imposed by ownership and control on the ability of the Fourth Estate to foster "Great Community" of pluralistic groups as envisioned by the open marketplace of ideas philosophy and promised by social responsibility theoretical paradigm (Baran & Davis, 2010; McQuail, 2005; Severin & Tankard, 2010), and provides approaches for making the media the alluring promoters and sustainers of democracy.

Media, Society and Democracy

Media perform tremendous role in keeping society alive. Harold Lasswell offered what had become the most reverent roles of the media in the society when he offered that mass media perform the functions of surveillance, correlation and transmission, leaving the entertainment functions to the discovery of Charles Wright (McQuail, 2005). Other important and often cited roles of the media in the society are those offered by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948), consisting of status conferrer, enforcement of social norms, and narcotizing dysfunction. On the democratic plains, the media have been generally described as the oxygen and lifeblood of democracy. In order to build a healthy social order, the society needs information apparatuses that serve as conduits for exchange of ideas and appreciation of common interests. The complexity of modern society that makes direct contacts between the government and the governed impossible thrusts the media to the bridging position at the wake of industrial revolution. In order to facilitate factual exchange and reduce, if not possibly eliminate, information asymmetry between the leaders and the led, there is the need for a media system that is free and capable of discharging dispassionate duties to its stakeholders. Scholars, philosophers and politicians believed that media, due to their substantial power over public opinions, should serve the collective good of the society (Albon & Papandrea, 1998; Baran & Davis, 2010; Rosemberry & Vicker, 2009). This idea blossomed into libertarianism theory of the media.

Consisting of ideals such as social mobility, self-determination, free and open economic system and freedom of expression that were embedded in Thomas Jefferson's writing on Declaration of Independence, libertarianism was a fall-out of authoritarianism that conferred arbitrary power on feudal aristocracies (Baran & Davis, 2010; Rosemberry & Vicker, 2009). The lofty ideals making up libertarianism have been previously promoted by earlier writers such as John Milton and John Stuart Mill. Based on the rationality of the public and humans' natural rights, libertarianism presumes that human beings will arrive at truth when multiple voices contend in an unregulated arena. In *Areopagitica*, for instance, John Milton asserted that in a fair debate, good and truthful arguments will always triumph over lie and deceit (Baran & Davis, 2010; McQuail, 2005; Severin & Tankard, 2010). This position received additional support from John Stuart Mill through his book, *On Liberty*, where he argued that silencing an opinion may be akin to

silencing the truth:

If a mankind minus one were of one opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing the one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind...If the opinion is right they [mankind] are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if the opinion is wrong they lose, what almost a great benefit, the clearer perception and the livelier impression of truth produced by collision with error (Severin & Tankard, 2010)

The belief that human beings possess certain inalienable rights and are rational enough to make truthful decision, and perhaps the grandiosity of the authoritarian epoch, primed libertarianism to the position of the best political and economic philosophy in the post-independence America and other Western democracies. Libertarianism received a potent and grandeur impetus from Thomas Jefferson's reverence and preference of newspapers compared to government and the First Amendment to the U. S. constitution, which asserted that "congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech and of the press" (McQuail, 2005, p. 170). The radical libertarians (First Amendment absolutist) thus take no law to mean no law (Baran & Davis, 2010). Libertarianism, which was metaphorically described as free marketplace of ideas by an American judge in 1918, unfortunately equated free press with the idea of literal free market (McQuail, 2005). In this market, it was presumed that truthful messages will attract more audiences and profits, which will in turn attract more producers and lower the cost; while the producers of falsehood will lack patronage, become bankrupt and quit the market (Baran & Davis, 2010).

This idea was, however, punctured by some economy of news and information, particularly the public nature of media goods and intangibility of the content. The centrality of the media to proper functioning of the society, however, forbids leaving the institution [media] to the 'invisible hands of the market'. The mistrust of government, industry, particularly the activities of robber barons in the 1800s and the media, precipitated calls for media regulation (Baran & Davis, 2010). "Instead of being a vehicle for advancing freedom and democracy, the press was becoming... more and more a means of making money and propaganda for the new and powerful capitalist classes and especially the press barons"

(McQuail, 2005, p. 170) . The inability of the media to champion public interest, which, of course, is the *raison d'etre* of the First Amendment and a necessary condition in promoting democracy, signaled the insufficiency of libertarianism as a guiding principle for the media system. The media, in their bid to maximize profit, equate public interest with what the public wants rather than advance enlightenment. The need for government to intervene in the operation of the media during upheavals in order to protect the spread of hate speech as well as balance individual freedom and the collective interest of the public led to renegotiation of the freedom of expression (Baran & Davis, 2010; Rosemberry & Vicker, 2009).

The industrial revolution, eventual concentration of media ownership, and desire to make supernormal profit led to the vigorous calls for regulation of the media industry as self-regulation was proving ineffective. McQuail (2005), for example, asserts that limited investigative, critical and advocacy role of the journalists in addition to symbiotic relationship between journalists and the political and economic power centres reveal the gap between theory of liberal press and actual practice. Since profit making takes precedence over public interest, the ability of the media to fill the Fourth Estate vacuum and aid rationality of the electorate becomes doubtful. The weakness of the libertarian theory was aptly captured by Severin and Tankard (2010): "...human beings do not always deal with information in seemingly rational ways. Rationalization is itself an attempt to provide a rational explanation for an irrational act". This notion undercuts the 'rational man' philosophies upon which the libertarian theory was based.

Having settled the need for the intervention in the media operation in order to achieve the best result as envisioned by the founding fathers, the next question is: who should ensure that the media perform in tandem with the philosophies of the free marketplace of ideas - court, military, religion, the congress? (Baran & Davis, 2010). Another germane question is: who defines what constitutes proper conduct? Libertarianism, according to McQuail (2005, P. 181) also fails to clearly define who has the right to freedom and limits of freedom as well as situate the point at which government could legitimately intervene to protect essential interest. All these led to a proactive action among the media professionals, who loathe government control, and serve as precursor of social responsibility theory.

Social responsibility theory evolved as a compromise to wall off the government control of the media (Baran & Davis, 2010). It was synthesized from the report of the Committee on Freedom of the Press headed by University of Chicago's Chancellor, William Hutchins, and funded by Time Incorporation's Chief Executive Officer, Henry Luce (Baran & Davis, 2010; McQuail, 2005; Severin & Tankard, 2010). "The theory of social responsibility involved a view of media ownership as a form of public trust or stewardship rather than as unlimited private franchise" (McQuail, 2005, p. 171). It envisioned that freedom comes with responsibilities; hence media should serve the society in a way to bring about the Great Communities of pluralistic group as espoused by the Chicago School (Baran & Davis, 2010). Under this theory, the freedom of press exists to serve public interest as opposed to maximizing profit. Commercialism and sensationalism that have taken centre stage under libertarianism are expected to be moderated under social responsibility.

The theory also advances opportunities for marginal groups and diversity of the media content to reflect the societal diversity. In order to actualize the noble ideals of social responsibility theory, particularly the prevention of tyranny of majority, various considerations were examined - control by government agencies, existence of press council and self-regulation from the media. Considering the possibility of abuse of power by officials of controlling agencies, Hutchins Commission placed faith and burden of being socially responsible on media professionals (Baran & Davis, 2010). The media, in addition to providing information, entertainment and selling, are to serve as sphere for pluralistic debates. They should provide a forum for everyone who has something of significance to say in a forum, and be compelled if they failed to allow people to air their opinions (McQuail, 2005). "A key element of social responsibility theory is that if the media do not behave responsibly, the government should have ability to get involved" (Rosemberry & Vicker, 2009).

The appointment of government as residuary legatee under social responsibility theory shows the impracticality of the media to balance profit making and public service. Having established the influence of political, social and economic forces on media content, it follows that the media could not be totally trusted where public interest is concerned. Therefore, any philosophy that sees media ownership as trustee and

stewardship as enshrined in social responsibility theory could be considered a better option to one that considers the media as commercial concern. McQuial (2005, p. 164) succinctly concurs with this notion, saying that "the power of the media, like that of government, has to be used in a legitimate way, which is not far removed from the notion of responsibility" (emphasis in original).

Another support for social responsibility theory over libertarianism comes from the notion that there cannot be outright media freedom just as there cannot be a wholly free economic market. The existence of various consumer protection agencies, for instance, was an intervention to protect the market consumers (Baran & Davis, 2010). Various laws, such as defamation, obscenity, invasion of privacy, sedition, etc., aimed at regulating the practice of journalists are indicative of the impracticability of absolutistic freedom. Social responsibility theory, like libertarianism, is however, not flawless. For instance, the proliferation of new media technologies and concentration of ownership have been deemed to be capable of leveling the prospects of responsible media system. Also problematic is the controversy over who ensures that media act responsibly and what constitutes significant opinion worthy of media space and time. These place social responsibility theory on the spot and demand a revisitation of its assumptions to meet the contemporary media environment. The intervention of government in the capital market during the recent global economic meltdown was, however, a pointer to the fallibility of market system. If economic efficiency of the 'invisible hands' could not mitigate market failure, the media system, with its critical roles, could not be trusted to act perfectly in the marketplace of ideas.

Although the two theoretical positions on the normative role of the media in the society advanced above were undercut by the market's undercurrents, they strove to fulfill some utilitarian functions. Utilitarianism, developed by Jeremy Bentham, emphasizes great happiness principle, which presupposes the greatest happiness of those that a particular action affects. The fundamental assertion of utilitarianism is that only justifiable criterion of morality is the maximization of the aggregate

happiness of the society as a whole (Hasebe, 2008). The emergence of the two theories above can thus be claimed to be precipitated by utilitarian pull force. For instance, the basic principles of social responsibility theory as summarized by McQuail (1987) to include accepting and fulfilling certain obligations to society, being pluralistic and reflecting the diversity of their society, being self-regulating and being accountable to society among others. These principles agree with Jeremy Bentham who was averse to any form of control other than from the public as such control will be serving narrow interest. Though these different theories of the press exist at different points in time, with libertarian theory preceding social responsibility theory, the latter contains elements drawn from the former

Managing Mass Media

The institution of mass media provides information, education, entertainment and selling functions, thus fulfilling social, political and economic obligations. The media provide information required to function effectively in the economic and political market. While economic market necessitates information on consumers and investors' products, knowledge about candidates' issues and attributes is essential in the political market (Djakov, McLiesh, Nenova & Shleifer, 2001). The media system operates according to the principles guiding other establishments in the society albeit with inherent notion of public interest. Although there are specificities in media audiences and influence along the forms and formats types, media generally operate within the confines of political influence that closely relate with the system of governance and societal expectations (Singh, 2007).

Being the 'Fourth Estate', the media are expected to serve as the custodians of common values and protectors of public interest, watching over the operation of the society such that no segment exercises undue power over the others (McNair, 2009; Mullen, 2009). Notwithstanding this axiomatic position, performance of the media is mostly confounded by the forms and orientations of ownership. While asserting that business and government interfere with what gets published and by extension what becomes common knowledge, Warren (2007) identifies seven forms of media ownership - international corporations, national corporations, small companies, government, community, individual and non-profit

organization. The two dominant forms of media ownership, however, are the government and private ownership (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001; Djankov, McLiesh, Nenova & Shleifer, 2001). Interestingly, these ownership types have theoretical underpinning in libertarianism and social responsibility as well as in market-base and public service models, with differing implications for societal democratic cultures. An implicit assumption of media ownership is that it bestows control of content that gets to the consumers and voters.

Government ownership and control of the media is based on the premise that public interest can only be served through the use of common wealth, rather than economic efficiency of the market system that governs private media ownership. Government-owned media outlets concentrate on the maximization of social welfare and societal harmony. By owning and/or controlling the media, government is able to reach the citizens and promote its policies and programmes. Media ownership from government perspective is aimed at affecting people by making them to contribute to building of the society, inculcating societal norms and values and socialization (Shmykova, n. d). This model of media organization has been described as the public interest model (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001; Leeson & Coyne, 2007). The public interest theory views the media as too important to be left to the vagaries of market forces. According to this perspective, the market is deemed to be incapable of meeting the societal information needs due to public nature of information, particularly the non-excludability characteristic of its consumption. The media are, therefore, to serve as public sphere to ensure impartial circulation of ideas and knowledge, promote active citizenship and social integration, and consider the audience as citizens needing diverse, substantive and innovative content to guide understanding of their worlds (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001). Because government is central to either the operation and control or both under this model, it holds no appeal for libertarians.

Private ownership as the alternative form of media organization rests principally on the strict rule of free market enterprise. This ownership form presupposes that "the news market is fundamentally the marketplace in which social, economic and political ideas compete for the attention of citizens" (Jacobsson, Becker, Vlad, Hollifield & Jacobsson, 2008). Since privately-owned media are motivated by interests that are determined by

desire to make profit, they sensationalize the news, entertain a lot and inform a little, thus creating less knowledgeable and politically apathetic body of public (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001; Leeson & Coyne, 2007; Meier, n. d.). They take public interest for what interests the public rather than what will informatively enhance the audience (McQuail, 2005). This situation has potential for erosion of robust democratic engagement that is essential for good governance in the society. Croteau and Hoynes (2001) have described this method of organizing media industry as the market model. This model, they contend, views media content like other market products, audience as consumers and profit as measure of success. Adherents of this model espouse libertarianism as the most desirable media orientation that can facilitate efficiency.

Resting on Milton's self-righting and Mill's marketplace of ideas philosophies, market model believes in the rationality of the audience to choose what they want and avoid what they loathe (Baran & Davis, 2010; Leeson & Coyne, 2007). This belief is not only utopian but at variance with the pragmatic realities. Heywood (1997), for example, submits that the market model, aside from resting on commercialism, panders to audience appetite and jettisons public interest. This model has also been dismissed for its dual products stance - selling content to audience and selling audience to advertiser (Hirst & Harrison, 2007). The greatest danger associated with private ownership and market model is the concentration of ownership that has resulted in market explosion and content implosion. This shrinking of the public sphere is deemed to be inimical to idea of diversity through homogenization of worldview and muting of voices in the marketplace of ideas (Meier, n. d.; Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Warren, 2007).

For some reasons, neither of the two forms of ownership is considered as panacea for robust democratic configuration of the society. Due to their wide reach and ability to structure the cognitions of their audience towards a desired agenda of the controller of the information, mass media are important tools for governance. "The mass media's powerful potential in advocating good governance, as well as its duality in the ability to divide and dominate society, grants mass media a deserving spot in any serious study of politics, government and governance (Singh, 2007). The complexity of media role in the society has equally led to the complexity of

views held of the institutions by scholars, politicians and other stakeholders. While some favour the organization of the media along public interest model, with government control, others align with the market model as the most authentic route to media-promoted democratic society. Yet many others chose a middle-of-the-line position, a mix of market model with public interest model.

While every divide of the media ownership type considers its model as the most expedient in maximizing societal media roles, experiences have shown that there is no easy fix for this contending arguments. According to Picard and Weezell (2008), "...ownership form itself is not a necessary and sufficient condition for good performance in the public interest, and both good and poor performance can result under all forms". Anderson and McLaren (2007) also offer that media owners influence public opinion through manipulation of information that inherently harbours their economic and political motives. If the axiom that the payer of the piper calls the tune is anything to go by, whoever controls the media surely uses them, to certain degree, for personal ends. Condemning government ownership, Djankov, McLiesh, Nenova and Shleifer (2001) hold that "a government monopoly in the media would distort and manipulate information to entrench the incumbent government, preclude voters and consumers from making informed decisions, and ultimately undermine both democracy and market". Also toeing this line of thought was Jeremy Bentham. He said: "the liberty of the press has its inconveniences, nevertheless, the evil that results from it cannot to be compared with those of censorship" (Hasebe, 2008).

But there are others who are pessimistic of outright private ownership, particularly given its bottom-line orientation. Baran and Davis (2010), for instance, aver that without some sort of regulation media were not likely to serve public interest as well as they should. Although there is theoretical logic in plurality of media that will diversify viewpoints, most studies claim that commercial media forces content homogeneity within the industry (Article 19, 2009). While recommending the imposition of public interest obligations on holders of private media licences, Cooper (n. d) bleakly concludes that "even if a marketplace of ideas were all we wanted, the commercial mass media would not produce it". A critical theorist and neo-Marxist perspective offered by Lesson and Coyne (2007) reinforces the

inefficiency of leaving media to the 'invisible hands' of the market, arguing that "market-based media can lead to unhealthy control of society by those in superior economic positions to the disadvantage of those who are not well off". This calls for a shift from normative expectations from the mass media to alternative exploration of what the mass media offer as their democratic contributions.

Ownership Structure and the Public Sphere

The Habermasian public sphere of the eighteenth century constituted a vigorous check on the government through the instrumentality of informed and influential public opinion accruing from direct communication, public assemblies and small-scale print media (McQuail, 2005). The public sphere provides avenues for the citizens of democracies to voice their opinions and arrive at the best of decisions for the generality of the public through their influence on public policy. According to Kellner (2000), "the principles of the public sphere involved an open discussion of all issues of general concern in which discursive argumentation was employed to ascertain general interest and the public good". He asserts further that "the public sphere thus presupposed freedom of speech and assembly, a free press, and the right to freely participate in political debate and decision making". Habermas argued that captious discussion of issues in the press has potential to transform the institution of the state (Grosswiler, 2001). These positions share a semblance with the Milton's open marketplace of ideas that undergirds the libertarian apotheosis. In Croteau and Hoynes' (2001) words, the media in public sphere model ought to be characterized by innovation, substantial coverage of issues, independence and diversity. The reality of the contemporary media, however, points to the promotion of the ideals that are antithetical to those theorized in the classical public sphere.

Undoubted means of affording public sphere by the contemporary media include those assumptions of the social responsibility theory such as diversification of contents, affordability of access to the media by every group in the society, limitation of unbridled profiteering among others. These are however not easy to come by given the domineering influences of the media owners to use them as vehicles for promotion of their worldviews (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001; Herman & Chomsky, 2002; McQuail,

2005; Warren, 2007). In *The Structural Transformation of Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas (1962) voiced the frustration of media-driven public sphere by contrasting "various forms of an active, participatory bourgeois public sphere in the heroic era of liberal democracy with the more privatized forms of the spectator politics in which the media and the elite control the public sphere" (Kellner, 2000). By way of addendum, Grosswiler (2001) associated the withering of the public sphere to extreme commercialization of the media, which transformed the hitherto space for rational-critical debate into the sphere of cultural consumption, where the media promote stage-managed politics that eulogizes the leaders but excludes most people from discussion and decision making (emphasis in original). The take-over of the public sphere by big economic and governmental organizations relegates citizens to the status of primary consumers of goods, services, political administration and spectacle (Kellner, 2000). Development of this nature made the neo-Marxist/political economists to be critical of media being a free sphere that allows the voices and faces of all.

Being a big business with substantial political and economic power, the political influence of the media has natural anchorage in the political culture of the state and ideologies of various owners. There may not be overt or blatant threat to media freedom, but subtle mechanisms exist to prevent the institution [media] from championing actions that will be critical of those who fund and regulate them. The products of the media industry though have element of naturalness they are constructions that have implicit purpose and shaped by various determinants which reinforce the existing values of a social system (Bilir, n. d). This perhaps accounts for the Marxists' opposition of the idea of media independent of capitalist liberal democracy given the political economy of the media that panders the institution towards the ideological interests of the dominant class in the society. The alliance between the owners of big media enterprises and those in control of political and economic resources of the state raises a big question on the ability of the media to arbitrate impartially in the public sphere (Bagdikan, 1998; Croteau & Hoynes, 2001; Herman & Chomsky, 2001). The neo-Marxist view of the media, as balefully rearticulated by Baran and Davis (2010), was as revealing as thought-provoking:

...media enable dominant social elite to create and maintain their power. Media provide the elite with convenient, subtle,

yet highly effective means of promoting worldviews favorable to their interests. Mass media can be viewed... as a public arena in which culture battles are fought and a dominant, or hegemonic, culture is fought and promoted (p. 34).

However, the engineering of consent, according to Herman and Chomsky (2002), has been the basis upon which many works on media democratizing potential were unfortunately based. The normative assumptions that the media mediate between the public and appointed representatives, serve as watchdog, participate and advocate on behalf of the public, according to McNair (2009), were pooh-poohed by the Marxians who contend that "freedom of the press, and the bourgeois notion of freedom in general, is essentially an ideological hoax, a form of false consciousness which merely legitimizes the status quo and distracts the masses from serious scrutiny of a system which exploits and oppresses them" (emphasis in original). The inability of the media to pragmatically function as impartial arbiter in the contentious public sphere can, therefore, not be divorced from their linkage to the political and economic structure of the society – the main crux of Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's polemical piece, *Manufacturing Consent*.

According to Mullen (2009) "an informed electorate, with access to accurate and unbiased information and news, is widely accepted as an essential precondition for effective functioning of a democratic society". But how realistic is this idea when the electorate are bombarded, unabashedly, with information and news that are laden with the propagandistic ideas? Herman and Chomsky (2002) articulate the dilemma imposed by the political economy of media ownership better through the propaganda model. They conclude that "...among other functions, the media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them. The representatives of these interests have important agendas and principles that they want to advance, and they are well positioned to shape and constrain media policy (p. xi). Through various case studies Herman and Chomsky were able to demonstrate how the U. S. media collaborated with the political and economic elite to propagate their interest with tacit support from the unsuspecting public.

Supporting the above ideas, Mullen (2009), citing a retinue of scholars, elaborates how the elite fix the societal ideology, leaving benighted citizens to consider the status quo as natural. He writes: "...in capitalist, liberal democratic societies...the notion that there was an open 'marketplace of ideas' created a misleading impression that the general public was free from manipulation. In reality, however, the corporate sector and their political allies have long conspired to ensure that some ideas are elevated and others are excluded from the 'marketplace'". To make the system look perfect and natural, Herman and Chomsky (2002) said that the media accept dissent and inconvenient facts under propaganda model; these facts are, however, kept within the margin to create an impression of pluralistic system and never allowed to be large enough to ruffle the dominant agenda of the elite. In an earlier opinion that lends credence to the Propaganda Model, Gurevitch et al., (1982) contend that:

...media professionals, while enjoying the illusion of autonomy, are socialized into and internalized the norms of the dominant culture; the media taken as a whole, relate interpretive frameworks consonant with the interests of the dominant classes, and media audiences, while sometimes negotiating and contesting these frameworks, lack ready access to alternative meaning system that would enable them to reject the definitions offered by the media in favour of consistently oppositional definitions (Mullen, 2009).

Besides case studies used in justifying the plausibility of propaganda model, Herman and Chomsky also explicate on how the structural factors act as filters to shield the audience from having access to 'inconvenient facts'. The structural factors include ownership and control, dependence on other major funding sources (notably, advertisers), alliance and mutual interest between media and those who define the parameters of news, ability to complain about media treatment of news (that is, produce 'flak') and the use of national ideology (e. g. communism, anti-terrorism, etc.) as a control mechanism (2002, p. xi). News must be taken through these filters and only items considered to have been cleansed are fit for publication (Mullen, 2009). In effect, media owners influence the content of the media through funding, appointment of desirable personnel and provision of platform for ideological interest groups (Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Meier,

n. d.). Democracy is, therefore, considered to be diluted "when big business rules the life of the country through the means of production exchange, the press and other means of publicity, propaganda and communication (Meier, n. D).

Where is Democracy?

According to McNair (2009, p. 238) "democracy . . . contributes to good government only to the extent that it is reliably and accurately informed, and that the choices made by citizens in election and other contexts are thus reasoned and rational". It follows that the most important role of the media in democracy is providing objective, neutral and balanced information to the citizens. Availability and accessibility of information is central to the contemporary society for political and economic imports (Article 19, 2009). Since most citizens rely on the mass media to comprehend happenings in their fleeting worlds, they (the media) are thus expected to contribute, through their messages, to the building of strong nations, internalization of values and norms as well as nationalistic bonds (Shmykova, n. d; Warren, 2007). These and other fundamental liberties underpin the call for freedom of expression and of the press. Aside from providing platforms for debates and expression of opinions, the media are credited with the roles of advocate and watchdog, to watch over the government on behalf of the citizens. In monitoring the exercise of power, journalist, in the words of McNair (2009; p. 239) should ask questions such as: "Are governments competent, efficient, and honest? Are they responsible to the people who elect them? Are their policies and programs based on sound judgment and information, and designed with interests of society as a whole in mind?" This normative power of the media professionals perhaps provides the awesome supports the media usually curried every time and in all climes. But the lacuna between the ideals expected of the media and the operative realities call for critical analyses at intellectual and professional levels.

The complacent claim that the media system is the lifeblood and oxygen of democracy will either lead to democratic anaemia or democratic asphyxiation if the structural impediments obliterating the path to the public sphere are not dislodged. Doubts about the ability of the media to cause change have been ventilated by many scholars and researchers of note. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948), for instance, concluded that "since our

commercially sponsored mass media promote a largely unthinking allegiance to our social structure, they cannot be relied upon to work for changes, even minor changes, in that system". They submitted further that "...social objectives are consistently surrendered by commercialized media when they clash with economic gains".

Even the new media that are seen as liberating forces have been considered to be impotent to the extent that they challenge the interests that brought them into existence and sustained them. Herman and Chomsky (2002) warned that Internet may be additional and valuable arsenal in protest and dissidents' communication, its value can be delimited by knowledge and access. Providing basis for the belief that Internet will change the sphere of democracy, Baran and Davis (2010, p. 34) offer that citizen are usually euphoric about communication evolution: "The great 'democratizing power' envisioned for the Internet and World Wide Web is very much like that predicted with the emergence of inexpensive urban newspapers in the 1800s, radio in the early 1900s, sound motion picture in the 1920s and television and cable television in the middle decade of the last century". If the earlier media that were highly eulogized at their entry can slip off the democratic path, Altschull (1984) offers how the new media will toe their paths:

The history of the press demonstrates that newspapers and the more modern variations of the press have tended to serve the selfish interest of the paymasters, while at the same time perpetuating the image of a press operating in the service of consumers of the news. To expect that the new media will make a dramatic U-turn and scoff at the wishes of the paymaster is to engage in the widest kind of utopian fantasies (Severin & Tankard, 2010, p. 320).

To assume that a media system, which cannot be detached from the social, political and economic elite in the society, is free and will always be there to help democracy grow is to engage in a wide reverie. From the lens of propagandistic media of the twentieth-century Harold Lasswell and Walter Lippmann have advocated for benevolent technocrats to look over the media if their roles should be maximally and positively harnessed (Baran & Davis, 2010). In *Agents of Power*, Herbert Altschull (1984) argued that "an independent press cannot exist and that the mass media are agents

of those who hold the economic, political, and social power in any system (Severin & Tankard, 2010). Jürgen Habermas also manifested pessimism about the modern day democracy, where the media manipulate rather than help the public in the formation of rational opinion (McQuail, 2005). Concern about the inability of the media to serve public interest will continue in this hypercommercialized era that thrives on sensationalization of news. Baran and Davis' (2010) posers substantiate the claims of this subsection: "What do you do in a democracy if you can't trust the people to cast informed votes? What good is a free press if it is literally impossible to effectively transmit enough of the most vital form of information to the public?"

Future Direction

Democracy can only flourish if citizens are equipped with information to make rational decisions. The media in general and journalism in particular can help in building successful democracy (Rosemberry & Vicker, 2009). According to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "the establishment, maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press is essential to the development and maintenance of democracy in a nation for economic development" (UNESCO, 2011). Meier (n. d) holds that those who control what is read, heard, seen and what is not read, hear or seen control knowledge, culture and values of a society. The journalism theory of democracy, according to Gans (2003), operates on this basis of the positive side of Meier's notion: journalists inform citizens; citizens are assumed to be informed if they pay attention to the news; better informed citizens are more likely to participate in politics; and more participation will improve democracy (Rosemberry & Vicker, 2009; p. 115). Notwithstanding the flaws inherent in the forms of contemporary media organization, quite a number of opinions still believe that a good configuration of the industry can move societies towards political maturity (Baran & Davis, 2010; McQuail, 2005; Singh, 2007).

There is an agreement among scholars and practitioners that media role to individual and society is problematic but not beyond control (Bara & Davis, 2010). Having diagnosed the maladies that hinder the optimization of Fourth Estate's roles in promoting and building enduring democracy, it is essential to examine those aspects that can give the media a new breath of life. A common denominator of a large percentage of contemporary global

citizens is the new media technologies. The Internet and its social media offspring hold great promises for the reinvigoration of the public sphere. Consisting of both miniaturized hardware and unfathomable software such as mobile phone, digital pad, social media sites and other online platforms, social media inform, mobilize, entertain, create communities, increase transparency, and seek to hold government accountable (Ghannam, 2011). Unlike the traditional public sphere that is subject to stringent regulations, the digital public sphere is expansive and poses great challenges to authoritarians willing to gag their users.

The recent uprisings in the Arab nations symptomatized the capability of the new media for political mobilization. This feat shows that the days of behemoth communication media in the hands of government, political party and corporate monopolists is gradually being eclipsed by the social media use (Ghannam, 2011). By facilitating ease of communication among the citizens of the globe, new media platforms afford users, particularly bloggers, not only the opportunity to express their opinions but also the chances to challenge corrupt and capricious authorities (UNESCO, 2011). Social media also facilitate interactive journalism, which could be awakening to the political apathetic and become a launching pad for deliberative democracy (United States Department of State, 2011). And when citizens get necessary information, they tend to embrace political actions that impede the ability of government to take them for granted (Djankov, McLiesh, Nenova & Shleifer, 2001).

The problem associated with using new technologies by the uninitiated however calls for caution. The fact that users of Internet oftentimes engage in anonymous journalism by using pseudonyms does not absolve them of responsibility to the society in terms of factual information and accuracy of their reporting (United States Department of State, 2011). The use of new technologies by political dissidents to bring repressive regimes into the limelight is undoubtedly a gallant stride (UNESCO, 2011), empowerment of individuals to creatively harness these tools for quality and objective content creation and accrue necessary literacy of the newer information milieu is no doubt a daunting challenge. This in part explains the focus of the year 2011 Press Freedom Day, with the theme Twenty-first Century Media: New Frontiers, New Barriers – dealing with SWOT analysis of the new media and the role of literacy in maximizing the strengths and

opportunities while minimizing the weaknesses and threats (UNESCO, 2011). The idea of tackling problems associated with media use of individuals and media role in the society using media literacy approach is not, however, a novelty. Challenging the need for technocratic control of the media as advocated by Lasswell and Lippmann in 1927, John Dewey reiterated the importance of education as the most effective means of walling off democracy from the threats of totalitarianism. He said:

Newspapers needed to do more than simply serve as bulletin boards for information about current happenings. ...Newspapers should serve as vehicle for public education and debate. They should focus on idea and philosophy and less on description of isolated actions. They should teach critical thinking skills and structure discussion of important issues (Baran & Davis, 2010: 85).

Since democracy is said to be anchored on informed citizenry it has a natural relationship with literacy. Media literacy entails "the process of assimilating and using the codes involved in the contemporary media system as well as the operative skills needed to properly use the technological systems on which these codes are based" (Pérez Tornero & Varis, 2010: 29). Media literate persons, according to Kaiser Family Foundation (2003), "can speak critically about what they see, hear and read in books, newspapers, magazine, television, radio, movies, music, advertising, video game and the Internet and new emerging technology". Media literacy, therefore, aims at helping people to become sophisticated citizens as opposed to being sophisticated consumers (Lewis & Jhally, 1998). Media literacy goes beyond becoming critical and rational users of media message; it also entails knowledge about message creation using the traditional as well as new forms of communication media. Baran and Davis (2010) raise the importance of media literacy in the contemporary society:

If literacy – traditionally understood to mean the ability to read and write – increases people's control over their environments and lives, it logically follows that an expanded literacy – one necessitated by a world in which so much 'reading' and 'writing' occurs in the mass media – should do the same.

There is also a class of those who believe in the need for regulation as media system cannot be trusted with the onerous task of rising to the defence of masses in this age of hypercommercialism. Like those calling for media control in the age of propaganda and yellow journalism, this group believes leaving media to themselves will not bring out the best in their performance. Since pressure on commercial media prevents them from guaranteeing diversity, Article 19 (2009) calls for policies and regulations that create space for independent voices. Albon and Papandrea (1998) also cautioned that the media, particularly broadcast media, should demonstrate their public trusteeship by providing equitable access to all political parties. Even great scholars who have championed the idea of freedom of expression and of the press were not left out in calling for moderate intervention and or/regulation of the media. John Stuart Mill was reputed to have endorsed the idea of government intervention to provide information to the public, just as Jeremy Bentham advocated partial regulation of the media by an independent judiciary to curb the risk posed to public interest by the private media power and correct the structural distortions limiting the media market efficiency (Hasebe, 2008).

Theoretical and professional approaches to correcting the inadequacy of media system in democracies are also germane alternatives. Since regulation is considered to be a violation of basic fundamental rights to free expression and the possibility that regulators may misuse the powers are factual threats, a new paradigm of journalism coming from the inside seems important. The evolution of social responsibility theory as a compromise between regulation and professionalism in the 1940s reminds one of the capacity of media scholars and professionals to bring sanity to the Fourth Estate. The emergence of public/citizen journalism heralds the dawn of a new media environment. A departure from journalism of information to journalism of conversation as promised by Schudson's Trustee Model (McQuail, 2005) should be vigorously championed in order to redeem the image of the media as champion of democracy and attract renewed confidence from the public. Trustee model challenges journalists to provide news according to their professional judgments of what citizens should know (McQuail, 2005). Efforts should be made to update social responsibility theory as it did not envisage the possibility of merger and mega media corporations as well as the possibility of interactive social media that have now become modern day's reality.

Media professionals would need to do more to assert themselves as watchdogs of the economic, political and social powers; advocates of the masses and defenders of democracy, which confer the enviable position of the Fourth Estate of the realm/fourth arm of government on the institution of journalism. Although assuming independent control and autonomy over their works like other professionals could be Herculean for the media professionals (Baran & Davis, 2010), taking advantage of the new media to reach large number of citizens could serve as avenues to do more for the society and democracy. Organizing themselves into a corps of democratic defenders through community journalism can provide them with power to watch not only over the government and big corporations, but also over commercial media. This watching the watchdog role would surely serve as moral suasion to the politicians, governments, corporations and corporate media. By scanning their environment and creating community consensus about important issues, media professionals would be contributing to democratic rationality of the citizens and thus helping democracy to grow. Using the analogy of the dentists' calls for fluoride in community water system thus improving dental problems and reducing dentists' work, Shaw and Martin (1992), cautioned that if journalists enter the news arena aggressively and as professionals rather than conduits, they could revive audience interest in the declining industry. Given the power of the media to build consensus around community issues (McCombs, 1997; Lopez-Escobar, Llamas & McCombs, 1998; Shaw & Martins, 1992) and the assumptions of Gans' journalism theory of democracy (Rosemberry & Vicker, 2009) the possibility of the media to contribute to building a virile democracy still exists.

Conclusion

To the extent that democratic governance presupposes the existence of rational and informed citizenry, democracy and the media are like Siamese twins. Not only are the media providers of information, they are transmitters of values that bind society together. From the days of *Acta Diurna* to the contemporary new media technologies, the media system has been acknowledged as the controller of happenings within the political, economic and social systems. Human history is replete with how communication media have been used to conquer and rule empires and

control the remote from the centres; wage war and promote ideologies; and challenge tyrannical authorities. The media of communication have been described as doubled-edged sword, capable of serving good measures and inappropriate as well as inordinate agenda (Singh, 2007). Whoever controls what becomes or does not become common knowledge in the society is the one that controls knowledge and culture. This is why ability of the mass media to lubricate or clog the wheel of the societal democratic progress remains contentious, particularly given the influence of the powers that finance and regulate them.

The argument over whether to trust the media with societal democratic development has not subsided and will never be, but palpable, if not apparent, doubts exist when realistic/pragmatic roles of the media are compared with the idealistic/normative roles. The aphorism that absolute power corrupts absolutely seems to underline the fear of whether to trust the media with one omnipotent body or not. Having toyed with both government-centred and market-centred and both models, opinions still differ on who should be trusted to make the media work. While the claims of capitalists look plausible, those of the political economist are equally germane. For media to function in support of democracy, therefore, a blend of the market and cultural roles of the media offers a manageable option. Therefore, the media professionals need to roll up the sleeves in confronting the problem of apathetic citizens who have been turned into automata by various infotainment products.

The arrival of the social media will no doubt mushroom participatory media consumption of the audience and give democracy a new face. But could the hardware and software of the media be trusted with building critical and active citizenry? There is the great need to aggressively pursue intellectual and professional paths that can assist the creation of the Great Communities of pluralistic groups which democracy epitomizes. A rethinking of normative theoretical role of the media in the society is more than anytime desirable. This should come from collaborations among the media scholars, media professionals and organizations, governments, as well as the civil society bodies. The gains of the social media, particularly their mobilization potential, cannot be equated with a feeling of arrival at democratic El Dorado. There is an urgent need to nurture the new media to become part of the democratic nature. A caution from George Washington

University don, Marc Lynch says it all: "the impact of the new media technologies will likely be best measured in terms of the emergence of such kind of citizens and networks over the next decades, not in terms of institutional political changes over months or years" (Ghannam, 2011). A combination of these novel media, programmatic media literacy and robust intellectual and professional engagements on societal issues will no doubt stand the media out as deserving of the Fourth Estate.

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