

News commercialization, ethics and objectivity in journalism practice in Nigeria: strange bedfellows?

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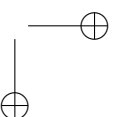
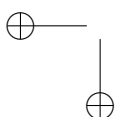
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JOURNALISM practice wields such enormous powers and calls for the highest standards of ethics and commitment to truth. Ethics and truth in journalism have assumed global concern as scholars recognize that their basic constituents of objectivity, accuracy, fairness and balance have merely assumed mythical qualities as journalists battle to assign credibility to their news stories. Tuchman (1978: 2) describes objectivity as ‘facticity’ (a mechanism which allows the journalists to hide even from themselves the ‘constructed’ and ‘partial’ nature of their stories). This view seems to have garnered force as increasingly scholars suggest that news even when professionally ‘selected’ is guided more by organizational needs than by professionalism. The journalist thus becomes ‘a walking paradox’ (Nordenstreng 1995) as one cannot fail to see that journalism is so full of contradictions that “we have to question even the most fundamental dogma of the profession – truth seeking – because the way it has been conceived and practiced in journalism serves as a deceptive filtering device preventing as much as helping the truth being discovered” (Nordenstreng 1995:117). News commercialization practice in Nigeria media industries adds to this contradiction and deception, creating a continuous dilemma for ethics and objectivity in journalism practice in Nigeria.

What is news commercialization?

UNESCO (1980:152) alluded to the commercialization of news when it wrote:

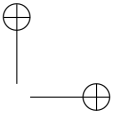
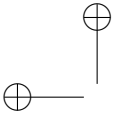
The news has become commercial product... important developments in the countryside are pushed aside by unimportant, even trivial news items, concerning urban events and the activities of personalities.



Though nearly three decades old, UNESCO's assertion certainly has currency in Nigerian media scene as news items have to be paid for by those who want to be heard. News is no longer about reporting timely occurrences or events, it is now about packaged broadcast or reports sponsored or paid for by interested parties. By this practice individuals, communities, private and public organizations, local governments, state governments and ministries, gain access to the mass media during news time for a prescribed fee. The message they wish to put across is then couched in the formal features of news and passed on to the unsuspecting public as such. Willie Nnorom (1994 cited in Ekwo 1996:63) defined news commercialization as "a phenomenon whereby the electronic media report as news or news analysis a commercial message by an unidentified or unidentifiable sponsor, giving the audience the impression that news is fair, objective and socially responsible". We must say that though this definition seems not to include the newspaper industries, news commercialization do occur there too as scholars have noted (see Oso: 2000).

News commercialization operates at two levels in Nigeria:

- At the institutional level, where charges are 'officially' placed for sponsored news programmes. For example, the Delta Broadcasting Service, Warri charges N20, 000 [80 pounds] for religious programme, N36, 000 [144 pounds] for corporate coverage and N25, 000 [100 pounds] for social events. Ogbuoshi (2005) gave the commercial rates of Radio Nigeria Enugu as follows: Commercial news (N47, 000 [188 pounds]), news commentary/political news (N52, 000 [208 pounds]), special news commentary/political (N60, 000 [240 pounds]). This commercialization at the institutional level is thriving because editors, publishers and owners of the broadcast stations/ print media see the organizations, or their investment, as a profit making venture that should yield the required financial return. Increasingly, commercial-oriented news stories are taking the place of hard news reports. Hanson (2005: 140) is right when he notes that: "reporters and editors are supposed to be concerned not with profits but rather with reporting the news as best they can. But that barrier is coming down, and editors are increasingly looking at their newspaper as a product that should appeal to advertisers as well as readers." Writing on the semantics of commercialization of news by



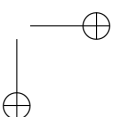
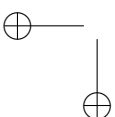
broadcast stations in Nigeria, Tom Adaba, a one time Director General of the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), one of the regulatory bodies in Nigeria, makes a distinction between the “legitimate sales of airtime for paid messages adjacent to or within breaks in the news” and “charging news sources for the privilege of covering and relaying their pre-paid views or messages as news”. According to him, in the first case, what the sponsors are buying is “the credibility of the newscast and newscasters to confer status by association on their company’s logo, message or product” while in the latter:

What the broadcast station is doing is selling cheaply the integrity of its newscast and newscasters by attesting to the “truth” of the claims of the so-called “sponsor”.... By also charging and receiving fees by whatever name called, to cover ‘news’ of company annual conference meeting, weddings, funeral, chieftaincy installation, town festivals, workshops and seminars, even events organized by charity organizations, stations are not only prostituting the integrity of news, they are insulting their audience and breaching the National Broadcasting Code (Adaba 2001:110).

The NBC code makes explicit that: “commercial in news and public affairs programme shall be clearly identified and presented in a manner that shall make them clearly distinguishable from content”. (NBC code) It is this passing off of commercial content as news within the Nigerian news media, the assigning of news quality to the commercial that raises ethical questions and challenges the notion of objectivity in Nigerian news reports.

- At the individual journalist level: News commercialization also operates at the level of individual journalists. This occurs when a journalist or group of journalists makes monetary demands to cover an event or report the event. Idowu (1996:198) citing Bamigbetan (1991) recounts a story that buttresses this:

The Rt Rev, Abidun Adetiloye, Anglican Archbishop of Nigeria, was sighted at Murtala Mohammed Airport, Lagos. Journalists crowded him, asking for interview on issues of national importance. The man of God spoke at length His views were newsworthy. But the journalists felt they needed something more to write the news. They asked for “transport money”. The religious man declined. Resulting in a mutual blackout.



This tendency of Nigerian journalists, known as the ‘brown envelope’ syndrome, has been widely condemned in Nigeria as a very unethical practice, yet Ekwo (1996: 65) makes it clear that, “the payment for news stories is approximate to official brown envelope or bribe offered to the media house itself as against the one offered to the individual reporter”

News commercialization – current status in Nigeria

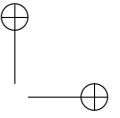
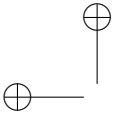
A recent interview the authors conducted with the News Editor of Enugu State Broadcasting Service (EBS) Enugu, East of Nigeria, shows the increasing rate at which news is being commercialized. He provided data on the commercial stories against the total number of news items in the three months (October – December 2007) news bulletin. Below are the details:

Tabela 1: Commercial news stories in EBS, Enugu Anambra State Nigeria (2007)

Month	No of news stories	No of commercial stories	Percentage of commercial stories
October	155	62	40%
November	186	89	47.8%
December	199	101	50.6%

The above typifies the trend in the broadcast stations and shows the alarming amount of stories which are in the news for their commercial value. In the newspapers, the so called specialized pages of the property, IT and computer businesses and finance pages are prime examples of commercialized spaces. The point is that no attempt is made to let the audience or readers know that these spaces are paid for and they end up holding them as sacred as they would news. Bako (2000) claims are very instructive here:

The average Nigeria regards whatever emanates from the press as the ‘gospel’ truth, which he swallows line, hook and sinker. For any reader, it would



be difficult to convince him not to believe what he read in the papers. Not even when an Apology is made for an incorrect publication could such a reader be convinced. To him, in such a situation, the journalist or the medium may have been bought over or pressurized either by an individual or the government to 'kill' the story. (p. 54)

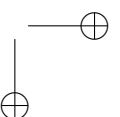
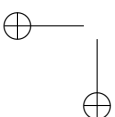
Understandably therefore, it is worrisome that commercial interests seem to have infiltrated in the reports of 'news', compromising both ethics and objectivity.

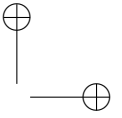
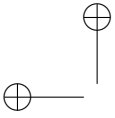
Why does news commercialization thrive in Nigeria?

Commercialization of news began in Nigerian media houses as the result of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced in 1986 and the eventual withdrawal of subsidies from government owned media houses (see Ekwo 1996, Ogbuoshi 2005). With the increasing rise in production cost and dwindling circulation, the media houses resort to all kinds of tricks including commercialization of the news to make money (Oso, 2000). The situation has led to a lot of compromise, with sensationalisation of news stories and half-truths reaching alarming stage. Citing an instance with the *Daily Times*, a one time leading newspaper in Nigeria, Idowu (2001:15) noted the situation became so bad that:

The workers threatened not to board the company's staff buses unless the company's name was wiped off from the buses. Even the company's cars were no longer branded. It was meant to be a precautionary measure to save the staff and the company's vehicles from being attacked by an irate public which could not reconcile itself to the half truths being published in the Times. The company heeded the worker's call.

Just as the organisation is subjected to economic pressure and tries all means not to sink, so too are individual journalists. The greatest problem besetting Nigerian journalists is that of poverty which scholars agree need to be addressed if the ethical professional standards are to be maintained. Rather than do so, however, the current practices in most media organisations in Nigeria seem to be encouraging unethical practices. Publishers in Nigeria, rather than pay attractive wages to the journalists, refer to their identity cards as a





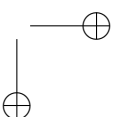
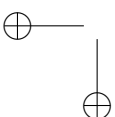
meal ticket. In other words, the journalists are encouraged to make money on their own in whatever manner they deem fit, thus encouraging the popular brown envelope syndrome within journalism parlance in Nigeria.

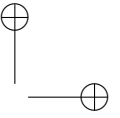
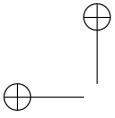
In some media organisations reporters are officially made to function as marketing officers in addition to main reportorial duties. “For instance, those in charge of specialised pages or columns are made to source for adverts or supplements to support ‘their’ pages or the pages are dropped and probably with the reporter. In broadcasting, producers are asked to scout for sponsors for ‘their’ programmes with a promise of commission” (Oso 2000: 30)

Another factor that allows news commercialization to thrive in Nigeria is the pattern of news reports and the means of newsgathering. A quick survey carried out by the researchers in a school of journalism in Nigeria to find out the major means of news gathering by Nigerian journalists saw slated, or ‘diary’, events topping the list (60%) followed by interview (32%). Investigative newsgathering recorded 6% while news breaks, or exclusives, were as low as 2%. This means that most times journalists are often invited by the high and mighty in the society to ‘their’ (slated) events. In many cases the journalists are so well-taken care of and they go home with ‘news’ often written by the people who invited them. It is not surprising that that Akinfeleye (2007) actually classified journalism practice in Nigeria as ‘cocktail journalism’, ‘journalism of next-of-kin’ and ‘journalism of the general order’. Writing on the tendency for Nigerian journalists to rely on interviews, Galadima and Enighe (2001) have described the Nigerian newspapers as “viewpapers”. By this they meant that there are more interviews than digging out of facts, and news sources may concede to favouring the journalists for their views to see the light of the day.

An irresponsible press?

The social responsibility theory of the press details the key journalistic standards that the press should seek to maintain. As summed up in McQuail (2000:150), among others, the media have an obligation to the wider society and media ownership is a public trust; news media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant, and the media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct. By this treatise, media ownership is a form of





stewardship rather than unlimited private franchise. In other words, the media are established to serve the intent of the public rather than personal interests. Yet the quest for personal engrandisement seems to have infiltrated the practice of journalism in Nigeria and beyond. Uche (1989:147) recalled the public accusation of Nigerian journalists as “politically and financially corrupt as one can find individual Nigerian newsmen who will take money or gifts for doing special favours...” Such acts of irresponsibility are not limited to Nigeria only. The media mogul Rupert Murdoch is often accused of running a media empire where journalism of convenience is the order of the day. Sparks (1999) makes it clear that

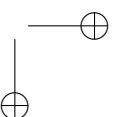
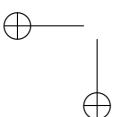
Newspapers in Britain are first and foremost businesses. They do not exist to report the news, to act as watchdogs for the public, to check on the doings of the government, to defend the ordinary citizens against abuses of power, to unearth scandals or do any of other fine and noble things that are sometimes claimed of the press. They exist to make money just as any other business does (p. 50).¹

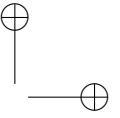
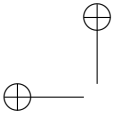
Driven by such commercial interests, journalists throw ethics to the winds in the bid to achieve fame and success. As Hanson (2005:140) recounts:

The Washington Post credibility suffered a major blow when the paper discovered in 1981 that a Pulitzer prize – winning story by reporter Janet Cooke was fabricated. And in the spring of 2003, the young New York Times reporter Jayson Blair created shock waves throughout the news business when it was revealed that he had fabricated or plagiarized at least 36 stories for the nation’s most prestigious newspaper.

Notable too was the case of Patricia Smith, Award winner who had to resign from the *Boston Globe*. Hanson (2005:418) told how she apologized to her readers in her farewell column:

¹The Patten case recounted in Chambers (2000) is a good example of the dynamics involved in production of media content. Chambers recounts how Rupert Murdoch exercised control over his publishing company over the publication of the book written by Chris Patten which criticised the totalitarian regime of Republic of China. It is believed that Murdoch felt the book posed a threat to his commercial interest in China and therefore stopped its publication. This typifies not only how ownership could control media content, but also shows the economic gain that drives much of the media industries (see Chambers 2000, p. 96).





From time to time in my metro column, to create the desired impact or slam home a salient point, I attributed quotes to people who didn't exist. I could give them names, even occupations, but I couldn't give them what they needed most, a heartbeat. As anyone who has ever touched a newspaper knows, that is one of the cardinal sins of journalism. Thou shall not fabricate. No exception, no excuse.

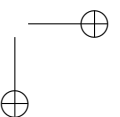
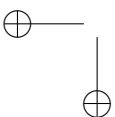
News commercialization could possibly make journalists commit the cardinal sin of journalism – fabrication – through inaccurate, unfair and biased news reports – a contradiction to what news *ought* to be.

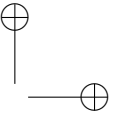
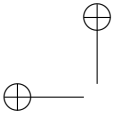
Nigerian news scene – has ethics gone with the wind?

One of the objectives of this study is to determine the degree of stoicism towards news commercialization in the Nigerian news scene. To do this, the researchers examined the news content of some national newspapers in Nigeria (January – March 2006 and October – December 2007, totalling six months) and looked out for stories indicative of other interests than pure news value. The news stories were judged based on Jamieson and Campbell (2001) parameters for analyzing news items in print and broadcast media. These include:

- The newsworthiness of the news
- The sort of claims made in the story
- Framing – the nature of the headlines, the values the headlines support
- Inclusion/exclusion of important or trivial issues and why
- The timing of the reports. Were they to favour a named source? Did other media report the story?

What follows is a discussion of some sample news stories.



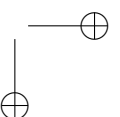
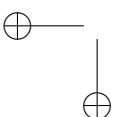


Sample one: The Zenith Bank Story

Zenith Bank Nigeria Plc operates in a competitive market. If we recall, bank consolidation in Nigeria put many banks out of business while leading to the merger of several banks to meet the recapitalization deposit required by the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN). Zenith Bank was one of the survivors and understandably may need aggressive marketing strategies to remain afloat. On December 6 2007, a survey of four Nigerian newspapers – *Vanguard*, *Daily Independent*, *The Punch* and the *Nigerian Tribune* – revealed that the Zenith Bank made the front pages of all four newspapers. *The Punch* devoted the whole of its front page to the bank with a screaming headline: **“Zenith floats Bumper Hybrid Offer”**. It carried no other story on the front page. *Daily Independent* ran a front page story with the headline **“Zenith Bank’s N130 billion offer opens today”**, And the same headlines also appeared in the front pages of both the *Vanguard* and the *Nigerian Tribune*. The similarity of these headlines is suspect. These newspapers are all national in circulation and therefore it is highly unusual that at their various editorial board meetings they all chose the same story – a promotional stunt of a bank – as their front page news. It heightens the possibility that the space has been paid for and the unsuspecting public is made to give it the high priority accorded to front page stories.

Sample two: The Denmark Cartoon crisis

Early in 2006, a full-ledged crisis erupted in Maiduguri, North of Nigeria over a cartoon in a Danish newspaper that allegedly discredited the Prophet Mohammed. The crisis spread to other parts of the country, notably Onitsha in the Eastern part of Nigeria. It is pertinent to mention here that Nigeria is polarised along northern and southern axis, with many crises in the country following the pattern. Scholars are concerned that during such crises in Nigeria, the press present one-sided views probably as a result of the ethnic proclivity or having received some form of gratification from one side. As Ekwo (1996) writing on the ethical implication of news commercialization notes: “in communal conflicts, only the faction that is able to pay to be mentioned in the news is heard while the other side is kept in the dark, even when

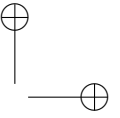
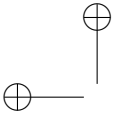


they have a more genuine course” (p.66). The researchers examined the *Daily Champion* newspaper reports of the Denmark cartoon crisis. *Daily Champion*, owned by Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu may be considered a paper dedicated to the cause of the Easterners if we go by the words of Prof Iyara Esu, the former Vice Chancellor of University of Calabar. He described the *Daily Champion* as “the major newspaper we have east of the Niger, a paper that is indigenous to our people, that is the voice of the people, this part of the country” (cited in Omenugha 2004: 67). This assertion seems to have gathered a truism from the news reports available to the researchers. The *Daily Champion* reports was biased in favour of the Easterners [Igbos], whose interests it obviously set to protect. We may need to consider some excerpts of the crisis as reported by the newspaper:

- When Daily Champion went round town, it was discovered that shops belonging to Igbos and Christians were the worst hit as the fire was still raging in some stores located on Ahmadu Bello Way where tyres, batteries and household products were sold (Daily Champion February 20 2006, p. 5)
- Chief Peter C Okpara described the attack as the worst ever on Igbo and Christian investments in Bornos in 30 years he has resided there. He said the attack was selective and targeted against Christians and Igbos (p. 5)

Such positions are consistent in the newspapers. As truthful as this may seem, the inherent problem is the sectional interests inherent in these ‘truths’. Issues that should be looked as a national problem become reduced to ethnic or religious problems. It is worthy to note that there were reprisal killings of the northerners in Onitsha, East of Nigeria, but the *Daily Champion* reports the killings as the Igbo’s response to the killing of their ‘kinsmen’ in the North. The observation of the researchers is in accord with previous research carried out on similar issues. Omenugha (2004:74) after analysing the press reports of the Hausa/Yoruba ethnic clash of 2002 sums up:

It is clear that Nigerian press reports operate within certain ideological frameworks. It is these frameworks which are explored, relived, made explicit for the readers in repeated mulling of tales. The newspapers are interested not



in reporting the truth as it is, the events as they occurred, but to reconstruct and reaffirm their ethnic and cultural positions and identities.

The scenario seems not to have changed. Ethics seems to have gone with the wind.

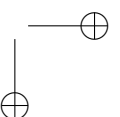
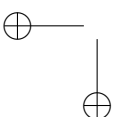
News commercialization: Any gains?

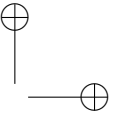
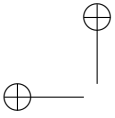
At a recent workshop organised for working journalists in Anambra State of Nigeria by the State Ministry of information, one of the authors was privileged to participate as a resource person. As is usual with such workshops, the question of ethical conduct of journalists came up. The journalists made no pretence about their receiving forms of payment for themselves or for their media houses to publish stories. According to them, how could they do otherwise when:

- They receive poor and irregular salaries
- Some media houses do not have salary system at all. Therefore a journalist's chances of survival depend on how much s/he gets from news sources.
- The harsh economic situation has a telling effect on their job.
- The Nigerian society is corrupt, increasing their difficulty in being ethical in an 'unethical world' such as Nigeria.
- Publishers complain of high cost of production and as such use such excuses to deny them their due wages.

To the supporters of news commercialisation, totally condemning the trend is tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bath water. News commercialisation, they argue:

- Helps to generate income for the media houses, helping them to function smoothly;
- Helps also to generate income for the individual journalists who otherwise might slump under the weight of the harsh economic realities;





- Has a psychological benefit for these journalists. They develop a sense of importance as they feel the job is being appreciated by those in authority, who are even ready to offer payments;
- Helps to impose a form of forced taxation on the rich, as those who often pay for the ‘services’ are the well-to-do in the society;
- Acts as a form of informal redistribution of income from the rich to the poor. Since media personnel tend to earn less than most of the rich who patronize them, accepting ‘brown envelopes’ from these publicity seekers makes it possible for money to circulate more in the society;
- Helps to create cordial working relationships between the media and the media users, especially the political class. (Onyisi 1996: 86ff)

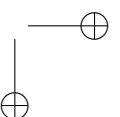
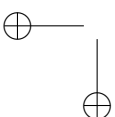
These assertions mostly centre on financial gains and poverty, and so “until the problem of poverty is seriously addresses with concrete solutions, no constitution or code of ethics or any other body or association for that matter can adequately discipline or regulate the conduct of journalists in Nigeria” (Adelusi 2000:43). There is no doubt that both the media industries and the journalists are facing hard times. But should their desire to survive make them employ deceit? Do the ends justify the means? Ethics is personally determined and as such these questions are to be answered on individual note.

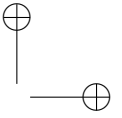
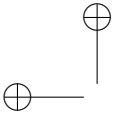
The issue is that the dysfunctions brought by news commercialization may far out weigh the merits claimed by their proponents.

Ethical Implications of news commercialization

With the growing concern for news commercialisation, which many believe negates all fundamental principle of fairness, equity and balance required in journalism practice, many scholars have explored its ethical implications. These are outlined here.

- Commercialization of news violates the ethics and code of conduct of journalists, which states: it is the duty of the journalist to refuse any reward for publishing or suppressing news or comment.

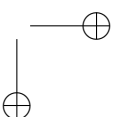
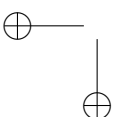




- News commercialization has affected information flow tremendously. As the majority of news is paid for, therefore, the news that sees the light of the day has to be induced by somebody or an organization, while those news that are genuine and authoritative are dropped because there is no inducement where such news emanates from. The greatest flaw in the practice of news commercialization as Ekwo (1996) surmises is that “news is narrowly defined against the weight of the news source’s purse” (p. 69).
- News commercialization makes the news susceptible to abuse by interest groups who can pay their way into the media to project an idea they want people to accept whether it is positive or not.
- News commercialization can lead to news distortion. The person who pays the piper often dictates the tune. Since the media would not like to lose a major customer, they will do all within their reach to satisfy such client that pays them enough money to have to his/her view projected. In return, the client may dictate how and what he or she wants out of the news packaging of the media house. This can extend to dictating to the media what makes news, thereby emasculating opposing views. This is often flagrantly displayed during election times as contestants often buy over one media house or the other, which at every news hour seize the opportunity to praise the ‘client’ and crush his/her opponents.
- With the zeal to acquire more and more money through commercialization of news, many news organizations have lost their focus on investigative journalism. This has led to loss of variety in the news, monotony, etc. Many have lost their mission turning to praise singing and propaganda, which has dire consequences for the Nigerian society (see Ekwo 1996, Lai 2000, Ogbuoshi 2005).

Conclusion

The issue of news commercialization cannot be discussed without recourse to the views currently gathering momentum that news be seen as a construction. This is because as argued:



There seem to be no such person as the 'individual' communicator. She or he has to cooperate with colleagues, has to take the specific needs, routines and traditions of the organisations into account, and is limited by the social, economic and legal embedding of the media institution (van Zoonen 1994: 49).

But would these considerations be at the expense of ethics, in other words, "the shared normative values which any society holds dear, and are used to judge the behaviour or performance of any member of that society?" (Omole: 2000). How Nigerian media institutions and journalists are to be judged depends upon how much they are seen as credible before the eyes of the public. As a British journalist once said, "credibility in the minds of the audience is the sine qua non of news" (Smith, quoted in Glasgow Media Group 1976:7). News commercialization leads to loss of credibility. Today many enlightened Nigerians drift away from the local television news stations as they seek other credible sources for news.

No matter the constraints within which the journalism profession is practised, societies should have the right to reserve spaces free of commercialization, where citizens can congregate or exchange ideas on equal footing, and where those with money do not necessarily speak with the loudest voice. The news space could be just that, but that cannot be without an allegiance to ethics of journalism profession. Ethics cannot continue to be "an unwanted child of business".

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