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Print Media Objectivity and Advertising Revenue: An Appraisal

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the interface between objectivity of print media and advertising revenue. It adopts the analytical approach in analyzing the perceptual influence of sources of advert revenue on print media content. The primary objective is to ascertain whether the source of advert revenue influences media content. It recommends, among others, that print media organizations should adhere to professionalism and ethical tenets in generating and processing message contents with a view to ensuring objectivity even in the face of pressure from advert revenue sources.

Introduction

There is no gain saying the fact that the market forces under which most news organizations operate create a conflict between journalistic values and

organizational revenue goals. The power of advertisers to influence media content is of particular concern to stakeholders in the media sector because of the implications on credibility of the news organization and integrity of journalism as a profession, further undermining the role of the press in the society.

Curran (2005, P. 122) writes that the principal role of the media, according to traditional liberal theory, is to act as a check on the state. The media, Curran further writes, should monitor the full range of state (and private sector) activity, and fearlessly expose abuses of official authority. But this could prove difficult to accomplish if the media are not free from the strangle- hold of advertisers and the state, who through numerous adverts, advertorials, supplements and other revenue- generating offers, covertly insist that their interest are protected. As Curran (2005, P. 125) avers, “the market can silence media watchdogs altogether”.

It is good to note that internal and external influences on media contents have been well documented by communication researchers. These influences, such as work routines, ownership demands and professionalism along with extrinsic factors of the media organization, such as government controls, audience and interest groups have all been carefully examined (Shoemaker and Reese, 1991). Similarly, Curran (2005, P.126) writes that there are many influences which shape the media, including the political commitments and private interests of media shareholders, the influence exerted through news management and the cultural power of leading groups in the society.

However, some areas of internal and external influences that continue to be of interest to mass communication researchers are advertiser pressure, balance of news contents and objectivity. It is against the backdrop of the foregoing that the problem which informed this topic of discussion is premised.

This paper therefore is a critical analysis of advert revenue sources and their implications on credibility of news organizations (print media), including on the integrity of journalism profession. Advertiser-driven news organization’s dependence on advertising revenue makes them highly susceptible to advertiser pressure. When this is the case, there is always a proportional higher tendency to play down on credibility and objectivity. For the purpose of this review, newspapers and magazines (print media) are the only advertiser - driven news media being examined. This is because the nature of each medium brings with it unique challenges for balancing profitability with

editorial integrity. The negative effects of advertising on news content smear the integrity, objectivity and credibility of a news organization and as well damages the reputation of the practitioners and further calling their ethical and professional standing to question.

Understanding objectivity in news reporting

The concept, objectivity deals with the quality of news story. Realistically, in the field of journalism, it has not been easy to determine what constitutes objectivity and or how objectivity can be achieved. While greater percentage of journalism scholars and practitioners insist that real objectivity does not exist, few others believe that objectivity can easily be achieved if reporters allow themselves to be guided by the journalistic ethics (Nwodu, 2006). What this means is that objectivity is highly relative. It is even said that there is subjectivity in objectivity. This means that the reporter often determines what is objective from a subjective point of view that is, based on what he sees as objective. Suffice it to say that, what tantamount to objectivity in the reportage of a specific event will definitely vary according to the individuals reporting the same event.

Again, while some journalists have complained of great pressure from different sources, others have complained about the human nature, which makes objectivity in news reporting impossible (Nworgu and Nwabueze 2005).

However, while objectivity at all time may be impossible, objectivity most time is possible. According to Nworgu and Nwabueze (2005, P. 24), "Sentiments should be avoided while reporting your news story". Corroborating Nworgu and Nwabueze's position, Ogunsiji (1989) writes that for a news story to be objective it must not be laden with the reporter's biases and prejudices; it must not be slanted or editorialized.

From the foregoing, it would not be out of place to say that absolute objectivity does not exist anywhere in the universe. The truth is that, as long as a report of an event is inundated with reporter's opinion, that report automatically loses its objective candour. This is also the case where prominence is given to just one side of a story.

To be fair to all the parties involved in a news story, equal attention (that is prominence) must be given to all concerned without which the news story could easily pass for anything but objective and balanced story (Nwodu, 2006). The apparent acute lack of balance in most news treatments in

Nigeria, according to Nwodu (2006, P. 19), “has remained a grievous offence committed by virtually all the government owned newspapers.” For instance, a governor in one of South-Eastern states of Nigeria was said to have suspended all the staff of the state government owned newspaper, for the singular reason that the paper wrote an editorial that purportedly said that the members of the economic team that approved the removal of fuel subsidy were not economists and incidentally, that governor as a member of the economic team is the only one who is not an economist. That a particular medium is owned by the government does not permit it to shut its eyes on objectivity, credibility, balance and integrity of the news organization. The snag is that, government does not consider ethical and professional imperatives of journalism practice provided it is portrayed in a good light and its bidding granted. This is one areas of influence on news organizations (print media) that is akin to advertiser pressure, which also erodes balance, credibility, objectivity and as well, smacks of irresponsibility.

Objectivity in news reporting: is it possible?

Some scholars, including many journalists argue that objectivity is impossible. Reporters, the reasoning goes, are warm blooded beings with feelings, opinions and biases that cannot help but be reflected in their scribbles. However, it is not a reporter’s point of view that determines objectivity; rather it is his/her integrity, heart, conscience, professionalism, and devotion to duty.

Anyone journalist who works for the news media has little trouble discerning what is objective and what is not. Only a person (reporter) without conscience, ethics, or sensibility to others could fail to be objective without knowing it. A reporter’s job is simply to report, not to express opinions or take sides. When a reporter departs from “just the facts,” he or she knows it no doubt. Whatever a reporter’s own personal views may be on a subject, he can write objectively on any subject by simply not injecting any of his biases into it.

Newspapers can provide more in-depth stories, great background information and a greater understanding of the overall issues of any subject while still retaining objectivity. It is this very objectivity that gives a newspaper the believability it needs to continue to publish with the respect of its readership (williamftorpey.hubpages.com/hub/obj...) (saharareporters.com).

Advertising as primary income source of print media

The concept advertising has been viewed from diverse perspectives by various scholars, professionals and bodies. One of the acceptable definitions is that given by APCON (Advertising Practitioner's Council of Nigeria) in its code of advertising practices, which states that advertising is a form of communication through the media about products, services or ideas paid for by an identified sponsor" (Advertising Annual, 2000). Nwabueze (2006, P.164) defines advertising as a paid form of non-personal communication through a medium aimed at promoting ideas, individuals, organizations, goods or services by an identified sponsor. Advertising is a large and competitive industry occupying a very important position in most developing and developed economies. With a plethora of brands on offer, the need to inform, persuade and convince the customers is becoming increasingly important. This is where the tool of advertising becomes crucially important.

Advert message (content) is relayed on a vehicle, a pipe that conveys it to the desired audience. This pipe or vehicle is the media. The consumer of media content could either pay for what he consumes as in satellite television or newspapers among others. The payment could be done on his behalf by advertiser, who pays for advertising spots inserted in the media to reach the consumer. Examples of this include terrestrial television and radio in Nigeria, whose income is largely derived from advertising revenue. However, there is a middle road characterized by the print medium (newspaper), whose income is a combination of daily title sales and advertising revenue. In this case, one can say that advertisers' money is largely subsidizing the prices of the titles of newspapers. The print media in Nigeria will probably cost three or four times their prices if not for the subsidy or advertising revenue.

Advertising has not only become an integral part of man's socio-political and economic life, but has also grown both as business activity and as a profession. It has become a conscious daily activity and experience which man cannot ignore whether as practitioner, advertiser or consumer.

When newspapers and magazines (print media) prosper financially, it is because advertisers recognize their worth as ad media. According to Agbanu and Nwamuo (2009, P. 210) revenue from advertisement represents a growing source of media finances in different parts of the world. Many corporate organizations in Nigeria spend millions of naira annually on advertisement.

As a communication phenomenon, advertising plays a key role in the development of human society. This vital role manifests easily in the sphere of information, which is central to the advancement of humanity (Okoro, 1998). As a channel for information dissemination on products, services, ideas movement and places, the importance of advertising to human society cannot be over emphasized. According to Belch and Belch (2001), the major tripod stand upon which every advertising industry leans on are advertisers (or clients), advertising agencies and media organizations. Newspapers account for more than 55% of all advertising spending in the United States; that is, more than \$50 billion a year, more than all other media combined (Baran 2004). In the United States, the biggest newspaper advertisers are retail stores and telecommunications, auto, computer, and entertainment brands (Moses, 2001).

Major media revenue in Nigeria no doubt, comes from advertising. Nwabueze (2011) writes that in Nigeria, advertorials (advertises written as stories or articles) yield much money for the print media. Nwabueze further observes that politicians use advertorials a lot to counter or oppose their opponents at state, federal or local government levels while other organizations use advertorials to promote their interests. The economics of demand and supply for advertising space in the media such as newspapers and magazines is critical to the health of news organizations.

The economic policies of the present government of Nigeria have put the economy on the part of enviable growth. With the fast growing rate of foreign direct investment, multinationals need to upgrade their operations and strengthen their firm's competitiveness. The fact that all of the multinationals are doing this at the same time, coupled with the forces of deregulation, which is breaking down the power of monopoly and unleashing new waves of competition, implies accelerated demand for advertising media space. You can imagine the number of advertising pages in newspapers today compared to five years ago.

Being that the major source of revenue for media houses is advertising, presently, most news organizations depend on advertisements for their continued meaningful and profitable existence. This, being the case, Itule and Anderson (2003, P. 432) posit "Expectedly, advertisers have capitalized on the difficult economic situation to inject their influence on the newsroom; a situation that lightens the border between advertisements and news".

In 2010, spending on advertising by various sponsors all over the world was estimated at more than 500 billion dollars. In the same year, Nigeria spending on advertisement in Nigeria was over 30 billion naira (Okolie, 2011). This shows that advertising is a major source of revenue for the mass media in Nigeria.

Advertising revenue and mass media survival in Nigeria

Most media outlets such as radio, television, newspapers and magazines would not be in business without revenue generated through advertising. It follows therefore that without access to advertising revenue; even the most popular newspaper or broadcast station will fold or go out of the market.

The viability and profitability of news organizations are essential to their survival and prosperity. Advertisers consider the audience as vital avenues for promoting the sales of their goods and services and try to generate fund for the media outlet. The wealthier the consumer (audience), the more revenue they can generate for advertisers and the more they will be willing to pay to reach them.

Two of the main reasons for the media's reliance on such sources are economy and convenience. For instance, Thisday Newspaper which succeeded in Nigeria, failed and wound up its operations in South Africa because of low rate of advert revenue, which led to low profit and finally to low patronage even though its cover price was two times lower than its competitors (Okolie, 2011). Another example of the impact of advert revenue on the survival of mass media, especially in Nigeria is the case of Minaj System Television Obosi, Anambra state, which folded its operations because of low advert revenue which befall it, among other things. The setbacks highlighted above, which were experienced by Thisday Newspaper in South Africa and Minaj System Television in Nigeria, underscore the importance of advert revenue to the survival of mass media in any country of the world (Okolie, 2011).

The importance of advert revenue in the survival of Nigeria mass media are highlighted below:

1. Advert revenue helps to lower the cover prices of newspapers and magazines. Print media products would be completely out of the reach of majority of people if they are not heavily subsidized with advert revenue. With lower cover prices, occasioned by advert revenue, the print media extend their readership and increase

profitability. This would also make them affordable to the majority of Nigerian audience thereby increasing patronage of the print media. From the foregoing, it is evident that without advert revenue, most newspaper and magazine outlets in Nigeria would find it difficult to survive. This is because if these publications try to make profit from cover price, the publications may be unaffordable to their Nigeria audience, thereby culminating in lower sales and lower profit to them. It will not be out of place therefore to assert that advert revenue is immensely subsidizing the prices of Nigerian newspapers and magazines.

2. Advert revenue helps the mass media in Nigeria to stay in business. Nigeria has no steady power supply. Thus, most mass media rely heavily on alternative power supply. This makes them to consume a lot of diesel and fuel, which they use in powering their stand-by generators. Without advert revenue, most media organizations especially privately owned ones may no longer be in business to compete with government-owned ones. This is because they may not be able to maintain their operational cost which is worsened by the ever-increasing prices of diesel and fuel, which they evidently need to power their generators during power outage as to remain in the highly competitive media market.
3. Advert revenue helps the mass media in Nigeria to expand and reach their target audience faster. The importance and survival of any mass medium is based on its reach and audience size. This can be achieved more often than not and faster too with advert revenue; the more their area of coverage, the larger their audience and the greater their chances of attracting bigger and richer sponsors. This would eventually lead to more profits, which they can use to increase and expand their area of coverage.
4. Advert revenue helps mass media in Nigeria to employ more staff who will help them in reaching out to their audience. Since advert revenue brings more money to the media, they will probably like to expand their operations. This is because the greater the coverage of a mass medium, the larger its audience, and then more attractive it is to advert sponsors.

5. Prompt payment of media workers' salaries and allowance would no doubt promote a rancor-free work place. When this is the case, media workers would no longer be looked at as beggars. It is with the help of advert revenue that media organizations achieve this. This is because advert revenue increases their profit thereby empowering and guaranteeing prompt and adequate pay packages for media workers. This would in turn encourage their staff to offer their best to their employees.

6. Advert revenue helps the Nigeria media, especially the privately owned ones, to guard their freedom. It is a common parlance that he who pays the piper dictates the tune. Since the private owned media in Nigeria do not rely on government budget (they rely on advert revenue), they can constructively criticize and publish the short comings of the government. This would equally help them in planning their agenda setting function objectively. Press freedom is better guaranteed by independence of the media. Advert revenue would certainly help Nigeria mass media to access the privileges and rights accorded to them in the newly passed Freedom of Information Act, passed in 2011. This would further help them in their search for information because they will have enough funds to go round the locations where news occurred, and get first-hand information instead of relying on their usual "reliable source". But can it be said that advert revenue help Nigeria mass media to be objective in their reporting? This is one area this paper is out to analyze, that is, trying to determine the interface between advert revenue and objectivity of the print media.

Appraising objectivity of print media reporting in the face of advert revenue

With a large portion of print media revenue coming from advertising, it is no surprise that advertisers sometimes attempt to influence editorial policy especially with regards to stories that have the potential to adversely affect their businesses. Pressure from individual advertisers can sometimes sway weaker or smaller newspapers to change some editorial content. The effect of such pressure, as one might imagine, depends almost entirely upon the proportion of a newspaper or magazine establishment's revenue that an individual advertiser provides; the relative editorial strength and independence of the publication's owners, and the newspaper's standing in

the community. It becomes obvious here that credibility, balance and objectivity are being jettisoned for profitability.

Machesney (1997, P.13) writes that, “as ownership concentrated nationally in the form of chains, journalism came to reflect the partisan interest of owners and advertisers, rather than the diverse interests of any given community”. This also underscores the claim that objectivity is being compromised on the altar of advertising revenue pursuit by news organizations.

In the words of Baran, (2004, p.118), “conglomeration has led to increased pressure on newspapers to turn a profit, sometimes at the expense of their journalistic mission”. In essence, the above practice no doubt has an ill-effect on objectivity; hence the news media focus much on profit and by the dictates of the source of their revenue, which more often than not is from advertising.

Baran further posits that some papers now permit (and charge for) the placement of pet obituaries alongside those of deceased humans. Baran adds that the greatest fear expressed by critics is that the quest for profits at all cost is eroding the “firewall”, the once inviolate barrier between newspapers’ editorial and advertising missions. There’s a lot more pressure to increase the profit margin of the papers and so that has led to a lot more interplay between the newsroom and the business side of the paper (Vane, 2001).

As Risser, (2000, P.26), observes “money is the first thing we talk about. The readers are always the last thing we talk about”. This is coming from the heels of Risser’s reaction to hyper-commercialization of the newspapers as he further posits that “there can be no more damaging blows to the newspapers role in our democracy than the loss of reader’s confidence”. As a medium and as an industry, newspapers are poised at the edge of a significant change in their role and operation. The changing relationship between newspapers and readers is part of this upheaval.

Still harping on the impact of advertising revenue on the objectivity of print media, Johnson (2011) has this to say:

In the tick of the enormous National and International denunciation that trailed the recent reprehensible jamboree called 2011 National Honours Awards and also in response to the Punch editorial written in reaction to the same subject, I sent the following comment to the punch newspaper for publication in its MY NEWS DOT COM Segment: “Excellent point of view

expressed by the Punch in its editorial of November 16, 2011, titled RESTORING THE DIGNITY OF NATIONAL HONOURS's.

Johnson further observes that this position resonates with vast majority of Nigerians who condemn the chicanery that the national awards have become. However, if The Punch felt so strongly about its position as published, it should have adopted an advert blackout mechanism (instead of going ahead to even publish a bulky supplement of congratulatory adverts on the subject) or could even have mobilized the Nigeria print media to reject all congratulatory adverts in protest of the charade. Unless we match words with equal action, we would all be equally complicit in the same situation we intend to change.

The Punch's refusal to publish the comment against the National Honours Award has a serious implication on the residual measure of confidence in the news outfit for objectivity reportage and commentary. The mission statement of *The Punch* as always found in its page 2 states thus; "We are guided by the principles of factual, balanced and fair reporting and commentaries. We believe that these principles and ethical conducts are the basis of public trust and confidence". It is however glaringly clear that advert revenue leads to a detrimental compromise on the objectivity, balance and fair reporting of news organizations no matter what they profess as their mission.

Advert revenue played out a strong influence on the print media during the 2011 general election in Nigeria. The newspapers seemed to favour the People's Democratic Party's candidates because of huge expenditure on newspaper advert by the party. The newspapers sacrificed fair, objective and balanced reporting on the alter of explicit or implicit support for the Goodluck/Sambo presidency. This might not detract from the share of advertising voice as it often depends on the budget of the individual candidate and their parties (and we all know the PDP broke the bank and spent fortunes in that regard). Many observers would remember how news and reports of the Jonathan/Sambo candidacy always seemed to dominate and overshadow all else as if to complement the size of the PDP candidates advertising spend, while news and stories on the opposition always appeared to fade into obscure corners of the newspapers (Johnson, 2011).

This trend was so alarming that Aljazeera broadcast a video titled "Cheque Book Journalism: Why Nigerians Distrust Their News Media" (reported at the time by Sahara reporter at <http://saharareporters.com/news...> 2011). This

is a serious indictment on fair reporting balance and objectivity. The media as watchdogs of the society certainly have no less than a principal role to play in the reform of the process, and this role must not be dimmed by pursuit of advert revenue.

Earlier this year, September to be precise, a transit outdoor media company in Boston, the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), in protest of what it considered insensitivity to the Islamic faith, rejected several subway adverts worth millions of dollars paid for by American Freedom Defense initiative (<http://saharareporters.com/news>). Also in an observation exercise carried out by *Thisday* Newspaper, six Nigerian newspapers recorded 726 pages of ads (representing ad spend rise of over 100 percent) from congratulatory messages alone between Monday 14 and Wednesday 16 November, 2001 (Johnson, 2011).

This is in spite of the implication on credibility, objectivity, integrity, balance, fair reporting and ethical position. Though advertising revenue is essential for the survival of a print medium, there is need to exercise caution in the type and volume of adverts accepted, in order for the medium to maintain a professional outlook with its ethical tenets intact, and also remain dedicated to its purpose of existence. For instance, Kasoma (1999, P. 449) provides an example of the need to remain focused in the face of advertising requests when he gave an instance with the training newspaper of the Department of Mass Communication of the University of Zambia:

Lusaka Star, the department's teaching newspaper which circulates in Zambia's capital city, has had to turn down some advertisements in order to keep its 50-50 ratio. The 12 page tabloid, with a circulation of only 5,000, has carried up to six pages of advertising to the surprise of the other newspaper managers. Infact, Lusaka Star could increase its advertising hold to more than fifty percent but has a deliberate policy of keeping it a fifty percent maximum in order to give adequate space to students to practice news and features reporting.

The postulation above shows that newspapers can indeed shun certain adverts and still survive, especially, if the publication carries contents that attracts large readership and by extension, neutral advertisers content objectivity must not be slaughtered in the alter of advert revenue.

No doubt, adverts are the life blood of the media and are therefore difficult to turndown for any reason. It goes without saying that it is not an easy responsibility to be a watchdog of the society. But as Johnson (2011) observes, it makes little sense to write damning editorials about the awards in one breath, and in another, stretch out hands wide open to accept all the congratulatory ads. This, according to Johnson, does not only portray hypocrisy and demonstrate absolute lack of readiness to take a decisive action in a bid to change what we claim we hate, but goes also to highlight the dastard effects of advert revenue on the principles of factual, balanced, objective and fair reporting professed by the media in Nigeria.

Johnson further avers that it might have been painful, but imagine the strong message the media would have passed across to the international community if some or all the newspapers were to have rejected the congratulatory ads, or better still, refuse to publish as part of a “Day without the Press”, in protest of the sham awards ceremony. That, according to Johnson, would definitely have put the Nigerian media on the right side of history (Johnson, 2011).

Conclusion

The print media should stick to objectivity no matter the pressure coming from advertisers. This is because of the crucial role of the press in any society, especially in ensuring that democracy thrives in a nation. As Kasoma (1999, P. 446) observes;

If democracy involves making one’s view known to other people, particularly those in government, the press is again indispensable in enabling people individually and collectively to do this. If democracy means making government accountable for its actions or the lack of them to the people individually and collectively, the media of public communication are a major and reliable vehicle for such accountability. If democracy as a political process must be seen to be done rather than done not to be seen, then again the media are indispensable

The print media cannot achieve the tasks presented above if the quest for advertising revenue is allowed to erode objectivity of news content. Adverts are essential but a line should be drawn between a professionalism of a print medium and its relationship with advertisers. The relationship should be mutually beneficial to both parties (advertisers and print media) without one party imposing its selfish interests on the other.

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