

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MASS MEDIA IN NIGERIA: A THEMATIC APPROACH***Jesse Ishaku and Samuel Asicus**

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Abstract

Mass media organizations globally, are beginning to be seen as industries that are into production, distribution and consumption of products just like any standard industrial organisation. However, the Nigerian mass media organisations are not an exception to this emerging or rather emerged trend in the field of communication. This paper aims to examine the political economy of the media, its relevance or applicability to the Nigerian media landscape as well as its implications on media practice. The study which was accomplished by a thorough literature evaluation that incorporates elements of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), as well as Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) found out that, commodification, structuration, spatialisation, and market concentration are some of the factors that characterised the political economy of the media not only in Nigeria but the world over. These characteristics frequently lead to deterioration of journalistic practices, hyper-commercialisation of news, reduction of independent media sources, concentration on the largest markets, risk avoidance, and reduced investment in less profitable media tasks such as investigative reporting, as well as the neglect of smaller and poorer segments of the potential audience and often a politically unbalanced range of news. The paper however recommends that media practitioners in Nigeria are supposed to share many of the aspirations of liberal accounts of a citizen-serving media. They should be able to challenge the ability of corporate ownership on which liberalism is contingent, advocating instead actions to create a more diverse, pluralistic and democratic media system catering for the widest range of public interests based on acceptable media standards.

Keywords: Political economy, Media, Commodification, Structuration and 'Spatialisation'.**INTRODUCTION**

Mass media can currently be compared with industrial organisations since they produce, distribute, and exchange products just like any other industry. The mass media, in addition to manufacturing and delivering goods, also disseminates ideas about economic and political structures. This second, ideological dimension of mass media production is what gives it its importance and centrality, and it necessitates a political as well as an economic approach. To truly understand the media, one must first understand the political and socioeconomic context in which they operate. This becomes obvious when the differences between media in democratic and totalitarian cultures are examined. The state's control of the media is a typical element of totalitarian regimes. Democratic nations, on the other hand, take pride in preserving press and speech freedom. Such cultures typically have a more diverse mix of public and privately owned media outlets delivering a variety of arts, news, information, and entertainment. Mass media organizations globally, are beginning to be seen as industries that are into production, distribution and consumption of products just like any standard industrial organisation. The Nigerian mass media organisations are not an exception to this emerging or rather emerged trend in the field of communication. Taking a cursory look at the Nigerian mass media, be it television, radio, newspapers and magazines as well as the movie industries, one may be right to say that they have taken a somewhat industry-like colouration. This is because, the media just like any other manufacturing industry produces news, programmes and other cultural products; distributes those cultural products through different channels for audience consumption.

While corroborating this assertion, Picard points out that, “the media are into manufacturing content of all kinds: news, publicity, advertisements, advertorials, entertainment, editorials, drama and documentaries among a myriad of other contents for the consumption of the society. The raw materials for producing these are sourced from the society; hence the media become indispensable industries in the society, actively involved in the production and distribution process to enhance consumerism” (Robert, Picard, 2003). This paper however, explores the political economy of the media, its relevance or applicability to the Nigerian media landscape as well as its implications on media practice. The paper also employs qualitative research method to collect and analyse secondary data from books, journal articles etc. by incorporating elements of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) and Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA).

Conceptualising political economy of communication

Political economy was influenced by Marxist economic thought, which examines how society's economic base determines the superstructure and, as a result, influences the cultural and political spaces within society; international division of labor, ownership, modes of production and the significance of class structures and struggles. Two academics served to adopt a political economy approach to media and communications and set the tone for the school of thought as thus:

1. Harold Innis: Harold Innis may perhaps be responsible for the first application of the political economy approach to the field of communications. Innis presented the idea of “knowledge monopolies,” to describe how through history, certain social groups had enjoyed control of various types of information.

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2. Frankfurt School: Horkheimer and Adorno's work on the "culture industry" also plays a prominent role in the early development of political economy of communication. Frankfurt School theorists in the 1920s and 1930s lay much emphasis predominantly on Marxist analysis of social and economic processes, and the function of the individual and the group in relation to these processes (Nicholas, Garnham, 1979).

Mass media the world over are seen as businesses just like any other business in capitalist societies. The nature of the commodities produced by the media sets it apart from other industries or enterprises. Their products are also concepts that have been turned into cultural items (e.g. television shows, news stories, music). All definitions of critical political economy of communication touch on the dual nature of cultural objects as both commodities and ideas. Political economy of communication is defined as "an understanding of the basic features that underpin and shape the economic context and political consequences of mass communication. It is necessary however, to see mass media organizations as "first and foremost" profit based businesses producing commodities" (Graham *et al.*, 1974). Two definitions of political economy of communication, according to critical theorists, encompass the wide diversity of approaches to the discipline. Political economy, in its broadest definition, is the study of social relations, particularly power relations, which mutually constitute resource creation, distribution, and consumption, including communication resources (Vincent, Mosco, 1996). However, political economy can be applied to the realm of communication based on the three (3) concepts proposed by Mosco:

1. Commodification: This is the process of taking goods and services that are valued for their utility and turning them into commodities. It is the process of transforming use values into exchange values, transforming products whose value is determined by their ability to meet individual and social needs into products whose value is set by what they can bring in the marketplace.
2. Spatialization: This is the process of overcoming the constraints of space and time in social life.
3. Structuration: The third entry point is structuration, developed from Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration, whereby the interconnections of structure and action are understood to reproduce social life. He further examines aspects of the structuration of the communications industry in terms of the dimensions of class, control, gender etc.

Consequently, political economy is the study of control and survival in social life. Control refers to how a society organizes itself, manages its affairs, and adapts (or fails to adapt) to the changes that all civilizations must face. The term "survival" refers to how humans develop the materials they require to reproduce and maintain their society. According to this viewpoint, control is a political activity because it establishes society ties, but survival is essentially an economic activity because it involves production and reproduction processes.

Theoretical underpinning

This treatise is anchored on the political economy theory. Though different scholars in the field of political economy came up with different approaches to explaining the theory, Herman and Noam Chomsky for instance, captured it as

propaganda model (Edward *et al.*, 1988). "Political economy theory is a socially critical approach that focuses primarily on the relation between the economic structure and dynamics of media industries and the ideological content of media" (Denis, 2010). From this point of view, the media institution has to be considered as part of the economic system, with close links to the political system. However, the major proposition of the political economy theory are as follows:

1. Economic control and logic are determinants.
2. Media structure always tends towards monopoly.
3. Global integration of media ownership develops.
4. Contents and audiences are commodified.
5. Real diversity decreases.
6. Opposition and alternative voices are marginalized.
7. Public interest in communication is subordinated to private interests.
8. Access to the benefits of communication are unequally distributed (McQuail).

The Political economy of the mass media in Nigeria: A thematic analysis

The evolution of mass communication as commodities created and distributed by profit-seeking entities in capitalist enterprises has been the subject of much political economy research. Many public media institutions have been privatized, and the market model now rules most of the media landscape. It is undeniable that the general tendency of "marketization" has accelerated in recent decades. Communication and information have become key components of this "marketization" process, and have also developed as significant industries as well (Greg *et al.*, 2017). Despite promises of public access and control, new communication and information systems, such as the internet, are evolving as commercialized spaces. This process of commercialization has been followed by an ever-expanding consumer culture, leading to the coining of the phrase "cultural capitalism" to describe the current trend.

It is critical to understand that, in many countries; public media institutions like other public institutions have been privatized; opening up new markets for transnational media and entertainment conglomerates. In Nigeria specifically, the media before now were owned, managed and controlled mainly by the government until 1992 through Decree No. 38 which brought about the deregulation and privatization of the broadcast media. This period witnessed the proliferation of different private media organizations such as the AIT, Ray Power, Minaj System Television etc. To properly understand the concept of political economy and how it applies to the Nigerian media landscape, it will be imperative to demystify the discussion into different components. Consequently, the political economy of the media can be discussed through the analysis of media as a commodity and industry which has evolved through various concepts and levels of analysis (Janet, Wasko, 2005).

(a). Commodification: Media and communication resources have increasingly become commodities or items and services that profit-seeking businesses sell to purchasers or consumers. The evolution of various forms of "pay" television since the 1980s is an apparent example. Furthermore, commercial messages are becoming increasingly prevalent in the media

landscape. The Sean McBride Commission, established by UNESCO in 1980, stated in its final report that news had become commercialized, that important news in the country was being ignored while trivial news items concerning urban events and the activities of powerful people were given prominence and regularity by the nations' mass media (International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, 1980). The aforementioned assertion has become a core practice of the Nigerian media landscape since those who wish to be heard must pay for news items. News commercialization is a circumstance in which broadcasters begin to charge fees for news reports that would otherwise be broadcast for free. It is a phenomenon whereby the electronic media publish as news or news analysis a commercial message by an unidentified sponsor, giving the viewer the impression that news is fair, impartial, and socially responsible (Uchenna, Ekwo, 1996). News commercialization occurs at various levels in Nigeria, ranging from individual level to institutional levels where charges for sponsored news programs are officially set. For example, commercial news in Nigeria can cost N47, 000, news commentary and political news may cost N52, 000, special news commentary may cost up to N60, 000, and so on (Kate Azuka *et al.*, 2008). The media in Nigeria have since "commodified" its products and services in a bid to cope with the exigencies of survival. The issue of serving the interest of the public in terms of provision of information, education and entertainment had long been relegated to the background, and even where they featured; they must have some sort of political undertone. Let Them Pay (LTP) has now become the chief determinant of what constitutes news. Commercials also, have taken over a lot of time of media stations as it is one of their major sources of income. These profit-seeking concepts have now turned the media into a full-blown industry always working towards the maximization of profit rather than serving the interest of the populace. The Privatisation and Commercialisation Decree of 1988 alongside the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of the second military era of between 1983 and 1999 is probably what gave media commercialisation its present impetus in Nigeria.

(b). Spatialization: Political economy has long focused on difficulties connected to international communication, even before the present emphasis on globalization. This category includes not just the international expansion of media companies, but also the numerous political and economic difficulties that occur in the setting of a global communication system. However, through the widely discussed and embraced Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the world is witnessing a rapid transition in that direction. This phenomenon has resulted in significant changes in the way information is collected, processed and distributed. People can now communicate with colleagues in different countries in real time using technology such as instant messaging and video conferencing. Social networking services such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube etc. also allow users from all over the world to keep in touch and connect with one another on a regular basis. In Nigeria specifically, the media has been benefitting from globalisation and development in ICT. Although these achievements raised serious issues in the development of media and communication in Nigeria, ranging from cultural imperialism to the portrayal of Nigeria as a country characterised by poverty, diseases, plagues, hunger and deprivation etc., they have been found to add value to the way information and messages are being sent and received. Presently, almost all the barriers in information dissemination

and reception have been broken, ushering in a new form of communication where the audience is not seen as just passive receivers of the information but also active participants in information provision and dissemination. The emergence of citizen journalism which is now trendy is a very good case in point although it has its shortcomings. More recently in the history of the Nigeria media is the effort of the federal government which mandated the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) between 2004 and 2006 to embark on sensitization programs for stakeholders and media practitioners as well as work out modalities for the country's specific switchover date from analogue to digital broadcasting which was fixed for June 17, 2012, three years ahead of the global deadline (Samaila, Balarabe, 2013). Although this regulatory effort has not received the needed corresponding pace, it is quite imperative for the Nigerian mass media to be relevant and be able to cope with the exigencies of global and international communication.

(c). Structuration: The aspects of structuration of the communications industry can be examined vis-à-vis dimensions of class, ownership and control, gender, etc (Vincent, Mosco, 1996).

i. Class dimension: No political economics of media can escape discussing the link between the base and superstructure from the standpoint of social class. The basic problem with the base/superstructure paradigm, as with the related culture/society dichotomy, is that it is unable to fully deal with the number of distinctions that are necessary, in this case between the material, the economic, and the ideological (Graham, Murdock and Peter, Golding, 1973).

Karl Marx, one of the pioneers of sociology, established two related theoretical notions called the base and superstructure. Simply put, base refers to the forces and relationships of production - all of the people, their relationships, the roles they play, and the materials and resources used to create the products that society requires. On the other hand, superstructure refers to all other components of civilization. Culture, ideology, norms and expectations, people's identities, social institutions, the political framework, and the state are all part of it. The superstructure, according to Marx, emerges from the base and reflects the interests of the ruling class that dominates it. As a result, the superstructure justifies how the base functions, and also justifies the ruling class' dominance. It is pertinent to note that, neither the base nor the superstructure is naturally occurring or static. They are both social products, and they are both the result of a series of social processes and interactions between individuals that are always unfolding, moving, and evolving.

In any case, how can the media sector be evaluated through a Marxist lens? To begin with, the superstructure uses media to cement its dominant position in society, whether deliberately or unconsciously. This occurs either because media outlets are owned by the dominant class or because people in power use media outlets for propaganda and identity building in order to maintain their position in society. Secondly, the production of media is an economic process. To make movies or print newspapers, for example, a large amount of machinery is required. As previously said, there is a continuing battle between those who own (the superstructure) and appear to have influence over the outputs and those who run it (the base). In the end, the superstructure wants to amass wealth and

maintain power, but to do so; they must not only dominate the communication industry, but also ensure that the masses consume their outputs in order to continue producing revenue.

ii. Ownership and control dimension: Closely related to the class dimension is the issue of media ownership and control. The ownership of the mass media in Nigeria has somewhat identical historical origins when compared to the “filters” above. Looking at the current ownership pattern of the Nigerian media will show that there is a split between public and private ownership. There is the emergence of community broadcasting and as well the ownership of electronic media by different institutions. It is worthy to note that, media and information control have been a cause of contention for governments all around the world at some point in their history especially in developing countries like Nigeria. The problem of media control is linked to the interests of owners and punitive legislation that make it impossible for the media to carry out its statutory duties without being inhibited. The most common laws include libel, sedition, slander, official secrets, and national security. In Nigeria, three different types of governments (colonial, civilian, and military) have all held power at different times, and all three have enacted rules that limit journalistic freedom. To retain control, media outlets have been denied advertising revenue, while journalists have been killed; injured, harassed, jailed and imprisoned, draconian laws and decrees to silence the press have also been enforced.

The harshest types of media emasculation in Nigeria's history occurred during the era of military dictatorships. “Arbitrary arrests and detentions, extrajudicial killings, corruption, disproportionate use of force, torture of detainees, harassment of journalists and democracy activists, and arson attacks on media buildings characterized the period of military dictatorships” (Richard, Joseph, 1997). Decree No. 1 Constitution (Suspension and Modification) of 1984, Decree No. 2 State Security (Detention of Persons) of 1984, and Decree No. 4 (Public Officers Protection Against False Accusations) of 1984 were among the institutional measures implemented by the government to limit the press “excesses”. These Decrees according to media analysts and commentators, were a “Sword of Damocles that hovered directly over the heads of journalists during the 18 months of Buhari’s rule” as so many journalists and social critics were detained for writing or saying what the government considered “security risk.” For example, two journalists of the Guardian newspapers, Nduka Iraboh and Tunde Thompson were jailed. The most brutal assault on a journalist aside from the murder of Dele Giwa under the regime of Babangida took place in Port Harcourt where Mimieri Amakiri was shaved with a broken bottle on the order of the then military governor Diette Spiff (Lai, Oso, 2013). Similarly, there are other mechanisms of control that block freedom of expression and of the press, in addition to government control of the media through laws, decrees, and the courts. “Co-opting,” is one of these additional methods of control. The government employs special treatment to acquire the country's most powerful journalists... and then appoints these media critics to high-ranking positions within the administration. Journalists who are “co-opted” are reduced to mere stooges of the government. During Nigeria’s many years of military rule, however, this strategy was used (Luke Uka, 1989). It is not surprising, then, that the Guardian’s editor had to write an article reassuring his readers that his proprietor's acceptance of a government ministerial appointment had no bearing on the newspaper's objectivity in dealing with

government issues. Furthermore, government-created regulatory agencies can be a source of media control. Where the decree that establishes such regulating agencies (such NBC, NPC) has flaws or loopholes, they can be exploited to suppress freedom of expression. It is suspected that the administration may purposefully leave gaps in laws and decrees in order to use them to silence any opposition. For instance, the offices of African Independent Television (AIT) were unjustly sealed off for almost 24 hours by NBC officials in October 2005, who claimed that AIT had unethically broadcast horrific video signals from the Bell view plane accident scene. AIT's network license was also revoked by the federal government in May 2006, and the media firm was given a 21-day ultimatum to remove its transmitters and relocate its operations from Asokoro, Abuja, Nigeria (Okwuchukwu, Okafor Godson, 2014). Despite the fact that the broadcast media in Nigeria was deregulated by Decree No. 38 of 1992, the media in Nigeria is still prone to various forms of control ranging from overt to subliminal controls.

iii. Gender dimension: Gender equality has become a heated topic all across the world in recent years. In the vast majority of cases, gender does not pose a social hazard. The preconceptions associated with it, on the other hand, have proven effective in developing and initiating conflicts within civilizations. As a result of this social construct, studies on these domains have indicated that there is some discrimination and injustice. When gender issues are explored in politics, reproductive health, and education, among other areas, the picture becomes clearer. However, media issues are no exception. Gender refers to “socially and culturally formed beliefs, expectations, requests, and judgments based on gender differences” (Sharon *et al.*, 1995). It clearly demonstrates that sex stereotypes are not a natural outcome. Culture and society, rather, shape it. Gender relations in Nigeria, are marked by a great deal of imbalance, which disadvantages women. Despite the fact that this is the twenty-first century, tradition, culture, religion, and other factors have continued to expand the gap between men and women in Nigeria by placing women in a subordinate position to males. The Nigerian men have always believed that Nigeria belongs to them and women are at best the rent-paying tenants. Over the centuries, women have struggled to say no to this misconception. In the Nigerian media landscape, men produce the vast majority of messages. Since its inception, men have dominated Nigeria’s mainstream media, and the apparatus of bias and gender inequality is written all over the establishment. Very little attention is paid to real-life issues that shape the quality of life, things that dominate the minds and hearts of the populace. As a result, publications that feature a large number of women are easily labelled as women's publications. The media continues to be selective in its coverage of news, relegating and obscuring women’s issues. The media is eager to put a woman's picture on the cover of a newspaper for her beauty and elegance in order to sell newspapers, but it is always lacking in substance when it comes to allowing women’s voices to be heard

iv. Market concentration: While a competitive marketplace is the avowed goal of capitalism, there is an inevitable tendency for markets to become concentrated, due to any number of factors. Media in Nigeria also are into stiff competition among themselves because of over concentration in the urban centres. This is because media organisations believe that the kind of audiences they needed in order to market their products live in the cities and most business moguls and corporate

organisations that the media needed adverts from also stay in the urban centres, hence the media concentration. Media market concentration also means that the ownership and control of the media organisations rest with only a few individuals that are affluent in Nigeria. Although media scholars in Nigeria such as Professor Umaru Pate and Professor Lai Oso and the host of others have clamoured for democratization and participation of rural communities in the production, distribution and consumption of media products which is in line with the Community Radio Policy of 2006, the call still remains a mirage.

The implication of the political economy of the mass media in Nigeria

More than any other work, the political economy of media demonstrates the corporate media system's incompatibility with a viable democratic public sphere, as well as the corrupt policymaking process that allows the system to exist in favour of the ruling class. One of the world's most renowned communication scholars, McChesney has compiled his two decades of research into a single volume. It is jam-packed with facts, evidence, and well-thought-out arguments. According to him, the political economy of media is an in-depth examination of the decline of journalism, the hyper-commercialization of news, the internet, and the rise of the modern media reform movement (Robert Waterman, McChesney, 2000). Be that as it may; the implication of political economy on the media can be explained under the following (Graham *et al.*, 1973):

i). *Constriction of choice in leisure and entertainment*: The process of creating mass media output is divided into two parts. For owners, investors, and managers, media products are commodities that must be packaged, promoted, and marketed in the same way as other commodities. During economic downturns, cost-effectiveness criteria are likely to be decisive, resulting in a production marked by a systematic rejection of the unpopular and a return to formulae with proven market and profit potential. This process will be demonstrated using a television illustration. Nigeria is currently experiencing a recession, which has had a significant impact on how and where media products are produced, distributed, and consumed. This suggests that media organizations are responding to financial pressures by producing fewer new programs and instead relying on repeats of previous successes or on programme formats that are inexpensive to broadcast but have proven audience appeal and thus high revenue potential. Even the times that media organizations open and close their stations, as well as the length of their programmes, have recently been reduced.

ii). *Control of information and the consolidation of the consensus*: The media's limited range of information is restricted and regulated in the same way that leisure facilities are. The variety of interpretive frameworks, ideas, concepts, facts, and arguments that people use to make sense of their lives is heavily influenced by the media's willingness to provide that information as well as the economic interest that can be derived. Nonetheless, the crux of the system is that information is a commodity that must be packaged, distributed, and sold in whatever form in order to ensure economic survival. News becomes a method of dealing with social change, a reassuring reaffirmation of the existing order. The ideals of impartiality and objectivity that arose from nineteenth-century reporting innovations and the resulting

fourth estate-watchdog ideology, which requires allowing both sides to have their say and, in turn, set the agenda of public debate, have been watered down. In order to translate impartiality and objectivity into operational rules, media organizations rely on "accredited spokesmen," elite sources, and central institutions. McQuail however, *summarises the implication of political economy of the media as thus*: "the consequences are to be observed in the reduction of independent media sources, concentration on the largest markets, avoidance of risks, and reduced investment in less profitable media tasks (such as investigative reporting and documentary film-making). There is also the neglect of smaller and poorer sectors of the potential audience and often a politically unbalanced range of news media" (Denis, 2010).

Conclusion

Recently, mass media and communication systems have clearly emerged as key economic and political institutions in advanced capitalist societies, necessitating the same level of attention as industrial production, exchange, and distribution institutions. The media's political economy views the media as a profit-seeking organization rather than a public-interest organization concerned with survival and power relations. It investigates the power dynamics at work in the creation, distribution, exchange, and consumption of media and communication resources within a broader social context. Political economy is still relevant because it emphasizes issues such as class power, gender, ownership, and globalisation/digitisation, but not to the exclusion of other relationships. It also emphasizes the complex and contradictory nature of such relationships. Most importantly, the political economy of the media calls into question the development of media and communication, which undermines the development of equitable and democratic societies characterized by the free flow of information of public interest. Be that as it may, media practitioners in Nigeria are supposed to share many of the aspirations of liberal accounts of a citizen-serving media. They should be able to challenge the ability of corporate ownership on which liberalism is contingent, advocating instead actions to create a more diverse and democratic media system. If advocates of free markets are correct, there should be a diversity of media catering to the widest range of interests, demand should drive supply, and competition amongst suppliers should benefit consumers with falling prices, greater innovation and increasing quality. But, in many instances, a multiplicity of media outlets coexists with a continuing, often woeful lack of diversity.

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