
JOURNALISTS' PERCEPTION OF EFFECTS OF NEWS COMMERCIALISATION ON ADHERENCE TO THE SOCIAL CONTRACT IDEOLOGY OF THE PRESS IN SOUTH EAST NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study attempted to ascertain Journalists' Perception of Effects of News Commercialisation on Adherence to the Social Contract Ideology of the Press. The objective of the study among others include to ascertain southeast Journalists' perception of the prevalence of news commercialization in the region. This study was anchored on the social responsibility theory. The mixed method design was adopted in this study, which involved the collection of both quantitative (Survey method) and qualitative data (In-depth Interview). The population for this study comprises all 983 registered and practicing journalists across the five South East States, the population which was arrived using the Census Principle also formed the sample size. In the qualitative sampling, five (5) participants were purposively selected from media administrators (both from the Print and Electronic Media) from each of the five Southeast States. Questionnaire and interview guide were used for data collection. Statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) was used to run the analysis of the data gathered: generate tables. It was found that, among others, news commercialization is high and reasonably widespread among journalists in the region as shown by 52.5% of respondents, the social contract ideology of the press is reasonably understood, at the elementary level by journalists in the Southeast region as 99.5% of the respondents agreed to this but the ideology of the press is not very well adhered to as shown by 39.9% of respondents in the Southeast region of Nigeria, news commercialization negatively influences adherence to the social contract ideology of the press among journalists in the Southeast region. Conclusively, the researcher found out that News Commercialisation has been institutionalised in the South East region and it has become a business or survival strategy for media houses. Based on the findings, it was recommended that, among others, orientation should be intensified at journalism schools and other allied training schools to educate journalists about the evil of commoditizing news and media houses, as institutions, should set examples by devising other survival strategies in a depressed economy without compromising the sacredness of news.

Key words; Journalist, News Commercialization, Social Contract Ideology

INTRODUCTION

The mass media in any society are seen as purveyors of cultures, morals and values which are passed down from one generation to another. The role of the media is to act as the society's watchdog, mount surveillance over the environment and correlate the components of the society to ensure effective functioning of the system and the political, economic, social, educational and environmental agencies of the mass media (Laswell, 1965). Among the mass media offerings mentioned above, news seems to be the mainstay of the mass media because of its place in the socio-political scheme of things, as well as their informative and normative roles.

News has been defined in many ways and it is generally believed that there is no consensus definition of what news is. News is seen as an objective account of either an event that has just occurred or about to occur; any event that is timely reported or what is new to someone (Anyanwu, 2019). The implication of the conceptualization above is that an event must occur or billed to occur for it to serve as prelude to news.

To commercialize news means to take 'any action intended to boost profit that interferes with a journalist's or news organization's best effort to maximize public understanding of those issues and events that shape the community they claim to serve (McManus, 2000)

The social contract of the press concern journalism's role in providing citizens with the information they need to make informed decisions when electing governments and participating in the public debate between elections (Schudson, 2008). It means journalism has an obligation to provide citizens with the information they need.

However, specific discussions of the journalistic social contract in Nigeria and the factors that affect its adherence are scarce or almost non-existent in Nigeria. This study therefore attempts to provide empirical evidence to associate news commercialization and social contract ideology in the Nigerian journalism landscape.

Statement of the Problem

The general inference among researchers is that news commercialization centre on financial gains, and the opinion is that matter how genuine and plausible the reasons for commercializing news might look, they are unacceptable and dysfunctional because they violate the ethics and code of conduct of journalists- - (Udomisor & Kenneth, 2013). Most possible ethical consequences of news commercialization that have received the attention of researchers are concerned with news content, particularly news objectivity, news distortion, fairness and balance, sensationalism, among others. However, if mass media are purveyors of cultures, morals and values, then news and all media offerings are social items and they affect the core essence of society's cultures, morals and values. If so, instead of the attention on how news commercialization affects news content and ethical conduct, have we looked at how news commercialization affects the responsibility journalists owe the society, contained in the social contract ideology?

Journalism's social contract refers to journalists' rights to free expression and publication, and their obligation to cover the world fairly and accurately, providing citizens with the information they need to perform their roles as citizens. This key ideology and concepts that it interacts with are gaining momentum in media studies overseas, but has received almost no attention in the Nigerian media studies, and that questions the awareness of Nigerian journalists to the social contract ideology. Previous studies have largely

confirmed the high incidence of news commercialization in Nigeria, but are Nigerian journalists even aware of the social contract ideology of the press. This research work tends to ascertain Journalists' perception of Effects of News Commercialisation on Adherence to the Social Contract Ideology of the Press in South East Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study was to examine the impact of news commercialization on adherence to the social contract ideology of the press in Southeastern Nigeria. But the specific objectives were to:

1. Ascertain Southeast journalists' perception of the prevalence of news commercialization in the region.
2. Find out the various ways that news items are commercialized by journalists in the region.
3. Examine the extent to which Southeast journalists understand the social contract ideology of the press.

Research Questions

The researcher was guided by the following questions:

1. What are Southeast journalists' dominant perceptions of the prevalence of news commercialization in the region?
2. What are the various ways that news items are commercialized by journalists in the region?
3. To what extent do Southeast journalists understand the social contract ideology of the press?

Operational Definition of Terms

In order to aid the understanding of the terms used in this study, the following terms will be operationally defined.

News commercialization: It means news paid for by the sponsors before it is reported by the journalist; it also has to do with media outlets raising revenue by charging fees for news reports they should normally carry for free as their social responsibility.

Journalists: Those who are in the journalism profession in the Southeast, Nigeria, namely reporters, editors, news producers, news managers among others who receive payment from sponsors of news to report events.

Perception: How Journalists in the South East view the concept of news commercialization and its interaction with the social contract ideology of the press.

Social contract ideology: South East journalists' rights to free expression and publication and the attendant obligation to cover the world fairly and accurately.

South East: It is one of the geo political zones in Nigeria; the region consists of 5 states namely, Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Conceptual Review

News

The multiplicity of opinions about news has resulted in the lack of generally accepted definition of news. However, there have been widely accepted ideas about what news is and the components that make up news is an objective account of either an event that has just occurred or about to occur; any event that is timely reported or what is new to someone (Anyanwu, 2019). The implication of the conceptualization above is that an event must occur or billed to occur for it to serve as prelude to news

News commercialization.

News commercialization means that news has become a commodity, which can be bought by those who have the money so that their voices can be heard; a commodity to be paid for by those who want to be heard.

News commercialization occurs in a situation whereby media agencies begin to raise revenue by charging fees for news reports they should normally carry free (Onoja, 1990) or a phenomenon whereby the electronic media report as news or news analysis, a commercial message by an unidentifiable sponsor, giving the audience the impression that news is fair, objective and socially responsible (Ekwo, 1996). Thus, it is only organizations and individuals that have money to spend that can gain access to the media during news time for a prescribed fee.

News commercialization operates mostly at the institutional level in Nigeria, where charges are officially placed for sponsored news programmes. For example, the Delta Broadcasting Service, Warri, charges N20, 000 for religious programme, N36, 000 for corporate coverage and N 25,000 for social events (Omenugha & Oji, 2008). The Federal Radio Corporation Nigeria (FRCN) Enugu charges for commercial news N47,000, news commentary and political news N52,000, special news commentary N60,000 (Ogbuoshi, 2005). This commercialization at the institutional level is thriving because editors, publishers and owners of the broadcast stations see the organizations and 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 due to monetary demands to cover an event.

Genesis of News Commercialization in Nigeria

Commercialization of news began in Nigerian media houses as a result of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced in 1986 and the eventual withdrawal of subsidies from government owned media houses; coupled 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 (Ekwo 1996, Ogbuoshi 2005, Onoja 2009). Arguing in favour of this practice, Broadcasting Organization of Nigeria (BON) says that they need the revenue to remain in business.

In the news commercialization discussion, Due to poverty and meager salary, with greater demands on the journalists to perform, they resort to all forms of unethical practices. It goes with the following names: brown envelop, African kola, transport money, assistance, *egunje*, etc. However, the proponents of news commercialization are arguing that news

commercialization helps to generate income for the media houses, helping them to work smoothly; it also helps to generate income for the individual journalists who otherwise might slump under the weight of the harsh economic realities. It has a psychological benefit for these journalists. They develop a sense of being appreciated by those in authority, who are even ready to offer payment. It helps to impose a form of forced taxation on the rich, as those who often pay for the “service” are the well to do in the society. It acts as a form of informal redistribution of income from the rich to the poor. It helps to create cordial working relationships between the media and the media users, especially the political class (Onyisi 1996).

Kenneth and Odorume (2015) explains that the National Broadcasting Commission, in exercise of its powers, wrote to all Broadcast media organizations on September 10, 2013 to put a halt to recent trends on the airwaves where broadcast stations take paid or sponsored announcements as news items within the news especially political and other related advertisements.

The Social Contract of Journalists

Journalism’s “social contract” refers to journalism’s role in democracy, primarily its obligations to inform the public and scrutinize government. The notion of a contract, however, entails the exchange of rights and obligations for mutual benefit. In this exchange, journalism enjoys the rights to free expression and publication, and it is obliged to cover the world fairly and accurately, providing citizens with the information they need to perform their roles as citizens (Sjovaag, 2017). The notion of a social contract of the press is primarily rooted in liberal philosophy, though there is also a moral side to the contract that can be traced to republican theories of democracy. The question of reciprocity is central to the research on journalism’s social contract, primarily on the relationship between journalists and audiences, an area of research that is gaining attraction as networked public spheres grow in importance as new venues of audience participation.

Simplified, ‘the social contract of the press’ means journalism has an obligation to provide citizens with the information they need. It remains the primary justification for hithe power and privileges of the journalistic institution and can be found in many professional codes of ethics (Stromback, 2005).

The social contract does not stop the press from doing business. The professional ideology of the press is rooted in the fact that news is not only a public service but that it is also, and perhaps primarily, a business.

Theoretical Framework

Social Responsibility Theory

The social responsibility theory came as a result of the libertarian theory. The theory came into existence the middle of 20th century. In Okunna’s (1999) word, social responsibility is a modern theory because it was promulgated in the twentieth century. The theory came into limelight because the press abused the freedom given to them, which they enjoyed as a result of the free press. Under every free press objective flow of information ought to be which gives citizens avenue and opportunity to express themselves well as air their viewpoint. But due to sensationalization and yellow journalism this free flow of information was deterred in the libertarian system.

Against this backdrop, social responsibility theory rests on the concept of free press acting responsibly, bearing in mind public interest as against his personal interest. The press, which enjoys a privileged position under the government, is obliged to be responsible. The theory urges media practitioners to ensure representation of all facts not siding or becoming sensational in reportage but being balance and unbiased. Journalists who subscribe tenaciously to this theory will know that he owes the public nothing but the truth and reporting event objectively as the profession demands. This implies that a journalist ought to protect his image by being fair, objective, unbiased, thereby reporting events/occurrences as it happens without icing or decorating it.

The theory is relevant to the study because it reprimands and cautions journalists not to disregard his duty to the society; he must adhere to the social contract and engage in truthful journalism rather than journalism full of deceit, lies and subjectivity that may arise as a result of reporting paid news. Although the media needs financial independence to maintain objectivity considerable in news reporting, nonetheless, as social institution, the mass media exist to serve and service the social system, and as such, priority should be given to what the public considers as common good.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The mixed method design was adopted in this study. The researcher collected both quantitative and qualitative data.

In the quantitative category, the survey method was adopted while the qualitative approach used in-depth interview.

Area of Study

This study was carried out in the Southeast region of Nigeria. Southeast is one of the six geopolitical zones in the country. It consists of Abia state, Anambra state, Ebonyi state, Enugu state and Imo state. The local language in this region is Igbo.

Population of the Study

The population for this study comprises all registered and practicing journalists with the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) across the five South East States. The total figure was derived from the Nigerian Union of Journalists' (NUJ) Secretariats in these Southeastern states. The total number of registered journalists in these five chapters was 983 which constituted the population for the study. The specific population of journalists for each state is as follows;

Imo – 141

Abia – 120

Anambra – 352

Enugu – 150

Ebonyi - 220

Sample Size

Quantitative Sample Size

The Census Principle was used, the study sampled all the registered and practicing journalists across the five South East States. All the 983 registered journalists across the five Southeast

Qualitative Sample Size

The in-depth interview participants in this study were 25 (twenty-five) media administrators (Media Owners, Director Generals and Managers of Media outfits) from across the five Southeast States. Five participants were drawn from each of the five Southeast States. The choice of 25 participants is based on convenience and is the prerogative of the researcher and not because they are the representative of the population.

Instrument of Data Collection

The questionnaire and the interview guide were used. The questionnaire was used to elicit data from survey research method.

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS.

983 copies of Questionnaire were administered to 983 registered journalists across the five Southeast States. However, 866 copies of the questionnaire were completed and returned, but 817 (83%) returned copies were valid and were used for analysis. For the in-depth interview, five (5) participants were purposively selected from media outfits from each of the five Southeast States, summing up to 25 participants.

ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Table 1. News commercialization is done in the journalism landscape in the Southeastern region

	Frequency	Percent
Probably not	13	2
Maybe	20	3
Quite likely	358	43
Definitely	426	52
Total	817	100

Source: Field Survey 2024

The analysis on Table 1 reveals that the dominant impression among journalists in the Southeast region is that news commercialization is definitely done in the journalism landscape in the region. Having sampled opinions from journalists, it can therefore be inferred that news is definitely commercialized in the Southeastern journalism landscape

Table 2. The various ways that news items are mostly commercialized by journalists in the region

	Frequency	Percent
At the institutional level	519	63
Valid At the individual journalist level	298	37
Total	817	100

Source: Field Survey 2024

The analysis on Table 2 reveals that the news is mostly commercialized in the region at the institutional level where charges are officially placed for sponsored news programmes, such as religious programme, corporate coverage, social event, news commentary and political news, special news commentary, etc. However, news is still significantly commercialized in the region at the individual journalist level, especially when a journalist or group of journalists makes monetary demands to cover an event.

Table 3. The extent to which journalists understand the social contract ideology of the press

	Frequency	Percent
Very well	336	41
Fairly so	200	25
Valid Slightly so	254	31
Not at all	27	3
Total	817	100

Source: Field Survey 2024

The analysis on Table 3 reveals that the social contract ideology of the press is reasonably understood by journalists in the Southeast region, with a cumulative percentage of 99.5% have varying levels of understanding of the ideology, with the majority (41%) have very good understanding of the ideology. The implication of the data above is that given that the journalists from the region have sufficient understanding of both the social contract ideology and news commercialization, they stand in good position to know the effect of one over the other.

Discussion of findings

Dominant Perception of the Prevalence of News Commercialization in the Region

The researcher inferred that the dominant perception of Southeast journalists about news commercialization in the region is that it is reasonably widespread. First, the analysis on Table 1 reveals that the dominant impression among journalists in the Southeast region is that news commercialization is definitely done in the journalism landscape in the region; with majority (52%) insisting that it is ‘definitely’ done. Having sampled opinions from journalists who are mostly experienced and educated, it can therefore be inferred that news is definitely commercialized in the Southeastern journalism landscape. It is also a thought that was reflected by many of the participants in the in-depth interviews, with one describing the situation as:

...worrysome, especially when journalist would normally cover events that should [ordinarily] serve as news and the journalist asks for a handout, and sometimes, they don’t ask but they behave it (AN5).

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMEDATIONS

Summary of the Research

The discussion of findings was that News is definitely commercialized in the Southeastern journalism landscape; and commercialization is high and reasonably widespread among journalists in the region.

News items are commercialized by journalists in the region at institutional and individual levels.

The social contract ideology of the press is reasonably understood, at the elemental level, by journalists in the Southeast region. The only snag is that ‘social contract ideology of the press’ is largely an unfamiliar concept, as it were, to them as it ‘sounds too academic’. Of the three elements of the ideology, one that is best understood by the journalists in the region is: the provision of citizens with quality information they need to perform their roles as citizens, in a way that cannot be compromised and is morally justifiable.

The social contract ideology of the press is not very well adhered to in the Southeast region of Nigeria even if a sizable proportion of the journalists believe that the ideology is well adhered to in the region.

News commercialization negatively influences adherence to the social contract ideology of the press among journalists in the Southeast region as news is commoditized at the expense of providing citizens with quality information that they need to perform their roles as citizens, in a way that cannot be compromised and is morally justifiable. There is, however, still a very strong case among a large proportion of the journalists that news commercialization does not negate the social contract ideology of the press in the journalism landscape in the region.

The element of the social contract ideology of the press that is more affected by news commercialization is the provision of citizens with quality information they need to perform their roles as citizens, in a way that cannot be compromised and is morally justifiable. It is a conclusion that is heightened by high mean value of 3.50.

Conclusion

It is believed that news commercialization center on financial gains, and the opinion is that no matter how genuine and plausible the reasons for commercializing news might look, they are unacceptable and dysfunctional because they violate the ethics and code of conduct of journalists.

News commercialization has been institutionalized in the region and it has become a business or survival strategy for media houses and it occurs at institutional and individual levels.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. There is the acceptance of news commercialization as a tradition among journalists in the region, to the extent that new journalists hardly consider it as unethical. That is why orientation should be intensified at journalism schools and other allied training schools to educate journalists about the evil of commoditizing news.
2. News items are commercialized by journalists in the region at institutional and individual levels. Media houses, as institutions, should set examples by devising other survival strategies in a depressed economy without compromising on the sacredness of news.
3. The ‘social contract ideology of the press’ is largely an unfamiliar concept, as it were, to them as it ‘sounds too academic’. That explains why it should be thoroughly incorporated into the curriculum of media programmes and media owners should always drive it home to their staff.

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