A Discourse on Mass Media and Ethnic Politics in Nigeria

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Abstract

There is a consensus among media scholars across the globe that the media usually take on the colouration of their operational societies. Media scholars also agree that the media can either make or mar the society depending on what use they are put to. Against this backdrop, this study interrogates the extent to which the mass media fan the embers of ethnic politics in Nigeria. This study which relies basically on extant literature and documentary analysis of published studies by media scholars is anchored on the Agenda Setting Theory. It argues that the media fail to 'de-ethnicise' themselves and be dispassionate in their reports, an act which translates to championing ethnic agenda and promoting disunity among the constituent parts of the country. The study concludes that it will amount to academic fraud or dishonesty for anybody to claim that Nigerian media champion national integration and cohesion without emphasizing their dysfunctional roles of championing ethnic agenda and division among the various sections of the country. On the basis of the foregoing, the study recommends among other things that the media put national interest above personal, ethnic or pecuniary interest for the purpose of national integration.

Keywords: Ethnic Politics, Nigeria, Mass Media, Agenda Setting and Ethnicity.

Introduction

In an ideal society, journalists and the media hold the government and its actors accountable to the people. This is because journalists are not expected at any point to act as or be seen as an appendage of the government. To this end, Section 22 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) guarantees the freedom of the mass media to uphold the responsibility and

accountability of the government to the people. However, even from the time the *Four Theories of the Press* were propounded by Theodore Peterson, Wilbur Schramm and Fred S. Siebert, it has always been established that the media take on the colouration of the society in which they operate. Corroborating the above observation, Udoakah (2017, p.57), argues that "it is a known fact that the type of journalism practice found anywhere in the world is largely a product of the social and economic organization of the society." This accounts for why the operations of the media in an authoritarian state like China will always be different from media operations in a democratic society like United States of America.

In Nigeria, it appears that only few journalists muster the intellectual and moral fibre to hold the government and its actors accountable to the people while many pander to the whims and caprices of the power that be in the reportage of their news and the result is the endemic nature of "brown envelope syndrome" and other associated vices. Scholars have argued that the media can either make or mar the society in which they operate depending on their activities. The ugly incident of genocide in Rwanda in 1994 where radio, government and its officials spearheaded the killing of over 800, 000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus has demonstrated that, indeed, the media can be a destructive tool in a society. Udoakah (2017), captures the power of the media to destroy a society more elaborately thus:

> Oftentimes, people underrate the potential of journalism. But journalism is a lethal weapon that can destroy society. Journalism practice, like medical practice, is a matter of life and death. But journalism exerts more power on society than medical practice, and, therefore, journalists should be treated with more care than those in medical practice. For instance, a doctor's error might engender *(sic)* only one or a few lives while wrong and inaccurate reports could

> destroy the whole community. A closer analogy to the effect of inaccurate media reports is an aircraft pilot's error, which could claim the lives of all the passengers on board (p.64).

Therefore, what is expected of the media in a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria is for them to 'de-ethnicise' themselves and take on the national posture. But is this feasible in a country where its component parts believe that notwithstanding the much shouted unity, its oneness seems to exist only in the imaginations of those shouting it? Thus, the media tend to make themselves ethnic warriors to champion the cause of the ethnic groups or political parties to which their owners belong. Therefore, what we have in Nigeria are Hausa Press, Igbo Press, Yoruba Press and the Minority Press (Udoakah, 2017), a situation Oso (n.d.) corroborated by arguing that Nigerian press was labelled in ethnic terms such as Ngbati Press, Igbo Press, Arewa Press and Niger Delta Press depending on the ethnic affiliations of their owners.

The problem, however, is that in Nigeria the national newspapers seem to be only national in terms of circulation but are hardly national in outlook in terms of news reportage especially when their owners, their ethnic groups or political affiliations are involved. In view of the undignified stance of the media as seen in the extant literature, this study interrogates the role of the media on national issues when their proprietors or their ethnic, political or religious affiliations are at stake.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on the Agenda Setting Theory. In his book entitled: *Public Opinion,* Walter Lipmann propounded the theory in 1922 and argued that the media help in "putting pictures into our heads" (Lipmman, 1922 in Ojobor, 2002). The theory holds that the media set agenda on matters of

public importance through their reportage of events and personalities. McQuail (2008) in Popoola (2015, p.36) observed that Lipmann "pioneered investigation into understanding how the media shape the perception of the audience about issues in their environment." However, McCombs and Valenzuela (2007) argue that the first agenda setting study took place at Chapel Hill, North Carolina in 1968 which showed that those issues that received priority in the news become the issues that were prioritised by members of the public in the 1968 U.S. presidential campaign. Since then, the agenda-setting model has been replicated in more than 400 studies.

The foregoing explains why McCombs and Shaw (1972) in Ojobor (2002) argue that "the audience not only learn about public issues through the media, they also learn how much importance to attach to an issue or topic from the emphasis the mass media place upon it." That is to say that whatsoever the media attach importance to becomes important to the audience. This corroborates Cohen (1963) in Popoola (2015) who argues that "the media may not be particularly successful in telling their audience 'what to think' but they are stunningly successful in telling their audience what to think about." It is also in tandem with the status conferral function of the media through which the media confer social significance on members of the society because of the way they project them. Agenda Setting Theory is suitable for this study because Nigerian media through their reportage have the potentials of inculcating the spirit of unity and oneness into the citizens irrespective of their tribal, religious, regional and political affiliations.

Ethnic Politics in Nigeria from the Lens of History

It has been established that before the coming of the white man to Nigeria either for slavery or colonialism, various peoples that make up the entity today called Nigeria were existing independent of one another with different modes

of leadership, customs and traditions "within the framework of mutuality and self-generated ground rules" (Nwozor, 2014). However, on January 1, 1914 Lord Fredrick Lugard amalgamated the Northern and Southern protectorates not necessarily to ensure the unity of the people of Nigeria but for the administrative convenience of the imperial government in Britain because it was not ready to shoulder the financial responsibility of administering Northern Nigeria (Madiebo, 1980). The amalgamation of the various peoples of Nigeria was forcefully done without their consent or consultation let alone any appreciable effort to weld the various people together (Ademoyega, 1981; Nwozor, 2014; Adetiba, 2019) thereby leading to different agitations from various quarters with some calling for restructuring and others calling for self-determination or fiscal federalism among other requests as seen today in the country.

The imperial government introduced a seed of division in the land by dividing the country into three regions namely Northern, Eastern and Western regions ostensibly along the three major ethnic groups of Hausa-Fulani in the North, Igbo in the East and Yoruba in the West. Scholars argue that the balkanization of the country into three regions along ethnic lines marked the beginning of ethnic and tribal politics in the country as according to Mustapha (2006), "British colonial rule wove cleavages into the very heart of the Nigerian state" as a matter of both happenstance and deliberate policy because the tripartite arrangement which created three power centres namely Kaduna (North), Ibadan (West) and Enugu (East) suited the divide and rule policy geared towards keeping the country perpetually under the sphere of influence of Britain even after independence (Ademoyega, 1981).

In fact, Ezeani (2016) argued that the politicization of ethnicity and 'ethnicisation' of politics in Nigeria could be traced to Richards Constitution designed by the British Government to stop the ascendancy into power

Azikiwe's NCNC which, according to them, stood for *One-Nigeria* and had galvanized Nigerians across political, ethnic and religious divides. Dunu, Onoja and Asogwa (2017) in support of this observation argue that "the colonial master manipulated geographical boundaries and religious differences to reinforce separation between ethnic groups and transformed ethnicity into an identity by which to gain political power."

Although the introduction of regionalism cannot be completely condemned as being totally bad due to the healthy competition it caused among the regions, it invariably, led to ethnic pride and then, ethnic chauvinism which became a means of political mobilization among the political elite. Nnuta and Ezeifeka (2017, p.50) argue that "practically every major national issue in Nigeria is cast in the mold of ethnicity, and this leads to contagious ethnocentric condemnation being a common feature in every national discourse." According to them, most Nigerians see themselves first as members of a particular ethnic group, then secondly as indigenes of a particular local government or state and thirdly as Nigerians. Omu in Oboh (2017) argue that "ethnicity usually undergoes an evolutionary process whereby it starts as a latent and accommodating feeling, and later becomes instigated or propelled as a weapon of hostility, conflict and bitter tensions."

The above observation corroborates Achebe (1983, p.5) who argues that "tribe has been accepted at one time as a friend, rejected as an enemy at another, and finally smuggled in through the back-door as an accomplice." Achebe argues further that he was an eye witness of the occasion in which Chief Obafemi Awolowo "stole" the leadership of Western Nigeria from Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe in broad daylight on the floor of the Western House of Assembly and sent the great Zik scampering back to the Niger "whence [he] came." This was corroborated by Daramola (2013) who contends that Chief Awolowo was accused of initiating ethnic politics due to his role in the cross carpeting

against Zik's NCNC that happened in the Western House of Assembly which he attributed to "his fear of domination and drum of ethnicity already being beaten by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe since 1934." Similarly, in the Eastern Nigeria, Dr. Eyo Ita, an Efik man suffered similar fate as he was removed from office in the 1930s (Daramola, 2013).

Scholars are of the view that much as the colonial masters could be blamed for ethnic and regional politics in Nigeria, three political elite such as Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and Alhaji Ahmadu Bello representing the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria seemed to have nurtured it. They argue that the political parties as at that time were formed along ethnic lines as could be seen from Action Group (AG) led by Chief Awolowo which arose from a Yoruba cultural organization -*Egbe Omo Oduduwa*, Northern People's Congress (NPC) led by Ahmadu Bello which arose from *Jamyyan Mutanen Arewa* and National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) led by Dr Azikiwe which arose from Igbo State Union (Ayatse and Akuva, 2013; Udoakah, 2017). Ebegbulem (n.d.) argues that just as it happened in the First Republic as seen above, three major political parties namely Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), Nigeria Peoples Party (NPP) and National Party of Nigeria (NPN) also held sway in the Western, Eastern and Northern parts of the country but with NPN having a more national outlook than others like NCNC in the First Republic.

However, it has been argued that the first time ethnic politics manifested in Nigeria was in 1941 in the election of the President of National Youth Movement in which Samuel Akinsanya (Yoruba from Ijebu) and Ernest Ikoli (an Ijaw man) contested. Whereas Awolowo supported Ikoli, Azikiwe supported Akinsanya but Ikoli eventually won (Akuva, 2010 in Ayatse and Akuva, 2013). Consequently, the election of Ernest Ikoli was interpreted as an ethnic prejudice against Ijebu Yoruba and the Igbo people who supported

Samuel Akinsanya which prompted Akinsanya and Azikiwe as well as their supporters to leave the party. According to Binebai (2010:52), Action Group led by Obafemi Awolowo was "the first noticeable Nigerian political party nursed and nurtured by ethnic jingoism and regional parochialism."

Ethnic Politics and the Media in Nigeria from the Colonial Period to Date

Available literature has shown that right from the pre-independence period in Nigeria, both the media and politics have tilted towards ethnic lines. Nationalism and the struggle for independence more or less became a struggle for which of the three major ethnic groups would dominate in the political arena. In fact, Madiebo (1980) argues that the growth of nationalism as well as the emergence of political parties were based on tribalism in lieu of national interest and consequently had no unifying effect against the colonial master. However, the nationalists united to fight the common enemy while retaining their ethnic jingoism. Lending credence to this, Daramola (2013) argues that "the Northern People's Congress was deeply rooted in ethnicity to the extent that North did not allow any of the political parties in the South to make in-road in the North." Accordingly, the Action Group and NCNC also dominated the South West and South East politics respectively, and maintained a strong grip over the political landscape of the regions. Golding and Elliot (1979) explain the role of Nigerian media in dismantling colonialism in the country and the dilemma of Nigerian journalists occasioned by conflict of interest between balancing the requirements of their profession and the politics of their country thus:

> Nigerian journalism was thus created by anticolonial protest, baptized in the waters of nationalist propaganda, and matured in party politics. The separation of politics and journalism has remained incomplete and the dual allegiances of journalists to professional and political goals

> have created conflicts whose resolution in daily practice underpins much of contemporary Nigerian journalism (p. 1).

The allegation of ethnic bias and polarization of the citizens levelled against the media notwithstanding, the contribution of the mass media to the political development of Nigeria is not in doubt as they have always been instrumental to setting agenda and mobilizing the citizens towards the actualization of one national goal or the other depending on the circumstances of the time. For example, Nigeria experienced its first nationwide strike which Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and his newspapers, *Daily Comet* and *West African Pilot* were accused of being responsible for and subsequently those newspapers were banned (Anibueze, 2005). (Udoakah 2017:42) describes the publisher of *West African Pilot*, Dr. Azikiwe with regards to his brand of journalism during the struggle for independence in the following words:

> The boldness, daring, and sometimes shocking directness of his editorials and news items radically differentiated them from those of his predecessors… His combative and provocative journalism was the principal source of his fame and power, and the most crucial single precipitant of Nigerian awakening.

Similarly, Richard Blaize, a Sierra Leonean galvanized the masses of Nigeria against colonial rule through his newspaper (Imoh, 2013). Richard Blaize's newspaper, *Lagos Times and Gold Coast Advertiser* founded on 10th November, 1880 was a force to reckon with in the nationalist movement and also reawakened the political consciousness as well as pointed out the lapses of the colonial masters (Okafor, 2002). In fact, Omu (1978) in Oso (n.d.) describes the early press in Nigeria as political press because since journalism was one of the few areas available to the indigenous elite then, it was utilised as a tool of mobilization and ventilation of the grievances of the elite against

the colonial government. According to Oso, between 1880 when *Anglo-African* first appeared and 1900, a lot of newspapers were published in Nigeria, many of which died in infancy but "left their foot prints in the sands of anti-colonial struggle". He regretted however, that much as not many of the proprietors of those newspapers might have willingly embraced colonialism like Robert Campbell, none questioned the basis for it but were rather clamouring for inclusion in the colonial government thus:

> What these proprietor-editors, as the other members of the African elite, were against, were their exclusion from the political decision making process and the virtual economic strangulation by the European trading firms. Their efforts and agitation were mainly directed at securing political and administrative reforms that would guarantee them a place and share in the colonial administration. In short, they wanted to participate as a junior partner in the exploitation of the unlettered 'native' masses. (Oso, n.d. p.17).

The scenario painted in the above quotation finds expression in Isichei's (1977) position that "imperialism makes its victims its defenders" as seen in the publications of *The Nigerian Pioneer* owned by Kitoye Ajasa which supported the colonial government to the extent that people saw the paper as the propaganda machine for the colonialists. Moreover, Horatio Jackson who took over *Lagos Weekly Record* when his father died was said to have described the paper as "a thoroughgoing lickspittle that was not even worth the paper it was printed on" (Ebeze, 2002). It is therefore not surprising that many of the newspaper proprietors were more interested in pursuing their selfish ethnic and clannish agenda rather than the national interest they appeared to be pursuing. For instance, Dr. Azikiwe's chain of newspapers made up of *West African Pilot, Eastern Nigeria Guardian, Southern Nigerian Defender, The Comet, Nigeria Spokesman* and *Northern Advocate* as well as

Chief Awolowo's newspapers namely *Tribune, Daily Service, Irohin Yoruba, COR Advocate, Midwest Echo, Middle Belt Herald, Northern Star* and *Eastern Observer* were established to fight national cause but eventually used for party politics and to champion ethnic agenda with Zik's press empire supporting NCNC and Awolowo's supporting AG (Udoakah, 2014 in Udoakah, 2017). Consequent upon the foregoing observation, Udoakah (2017) concludes that the establishment and proliferation of the early press prior to and after independence were motivated by politics more than any other thing.

Udoakah, however, identifies two newspapers that were aggressive towards colonial administration – the *Lagos Weekly Record* established in 1890 by John Payne Jackson, a Liberian nationalist who lived in Lagos for twenty eight years and the *West African Pilot* founded by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe in 1937 after his return from Ghana then called Gold Coast. According to him, the aggressive approach adopted by some of the early newspapers made the colonial government to enact the Ordinance of 1903 and Sedition Offence Ordinance of 1909 all in a bid to "checkmate the growing political awareness at the time, the quest for independence and increased nationalist activities" (Udoakah 2017, p.41*).* *Lagos Daily News* owned by Obademi but popularized by Herbert Macaulay became the first daily newspaper in Nigeria and also a powerful nationalist newspaper that was so popular that it earned Herbert Macaulay the name "the father of Nigerian Nationalism" (Okafor, 2002; Ebeze, 2002).

The broadcast media (radio and television) were initially the exclusive preserve of the government but that changed with the liberalization of the broadcast industry in 1992 and the consequent granting of licence for private broadcasting in 1993. Today, Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and Federal Radio Corporation of Nigerian (FRCN) belong to federal government whereas state governments have their own radio and television stations as

well. Ray Power Radio, Minaj Systems Radio, African Independent Television (AIT), Minaj Systems Television (MST), Channels Television are among the private radio and television stations in the country. Both the broadcast media belonging to the government and those that are privately-owned instead of fighting the national cause all the time seem sometimes to be instruments for the projection of the ethnic agenda, political ambitions or the commercial interest of their proprietors. This finds expression in the saying that he who pays the piper dictates the tune and it is not surprising because Ojebode (2009) argues that even in the Western world, two factors guide their choice of stories to publish namely profit and patriotism and whichever one that supersedes the other takes the upper hand.

Do Media Divide or Unite Us?

The media have been described as the fourth estate of the realm. This means that after the three organs of the government such as the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, the media follow. By implication, therefore, just as each of the three organs of the government is empowered to hold one another accountable through the principle of checks and balances, the media are empowered to hold all the three organs accountable to the people. However, it does appear that the media in Nigeria are not living up to that responsibility as they have been accused of being partisan, ethnic-oriented as well as serving the commercial interests of their proprietors. Instead of being objective and national in the discharge of their functions, the media have been accused of being sectional, sentimental and opinionated. Could it be that the media have lost sight of the fact that they are expected to be at the forefront of national integration and cohesion? For instance, Aimufua (2007) argues that the Nigerian press was preoccupied with the practice of promoting nationality/sectional interests and ethnic loyalty between the period of Nigeria's independence in 1960 and 1966. The truth remains that what

Aimufua said about Nigerian media at Nigeria's independence is also true of the Nigerian media today. He argues that Nigerian press promotes regional, tribal and ethnic interests as according to him:

> The establishment of the mass media in Nigeria were *(sic)* along ethnic lines and their ethnic orientation has somewhat affected their functionalism. Also, the mass media played the leading role of promoting the political, social and economic aspirations of their tribesmen (p. 61).

However, it is important to argue that though Nigerian media may be complicit in the disintegration of the country, their role in national integration is not in doubt. For instance, Aimufua (2007:39) recognizes the role of the media as a *homogenizer* which according to him "is an important aspect of the project of inculcating a sense of national identity in the populace." He argues further that even though the Nigerian press is generally believed to be partisan and divisive, what cannot be denied is the fact that the press has used some specific events and developments in the country to bring Nigerian people of diverse backgrounds and orientations together. Among these events are Nigeria's victory at FIFA Under-17 World Cup tournament in China in 1985 and Nigeria's hosting of 27th Summit of Heads of State and Governments of the Organization of African Unity in June, 1991. Arguing in the same line of thought, Aimufua, 2007, p. 66) observes that "nationally, the media are an important integrative agency. They are a powerful force as an educator, agitator, mobiliser, motivator and entertainer. Their power can be great and immeasurable. They can create a feeling of involvement and participation."

Olayiwola, (1991) recognizes the role of the media in entrenching national integration when he said that the duty of fostering national cohesion and engendering a sense of belonging in Nigerians lies on the shoulders of the

press. Similarly, Olayiwola (1991) argued that during the colonial days, the press engineered sustained public debate, political protest; advocated for administrative and political reforms and served as "a seething critic of the excesses of the colonial order." According to him, during the period of nationalism, the press served as political mobilizers and recruiters arousing the political consciousness of the people as well as propagating the idea of nationalism.

Various scholars such as Malaolu (2004), Ngara and Esebonu (2012), Alemoh and Ukwela (2019) among others have given detailed accounts of excruciating conditions under which the media have had to work in Nigeria. Some media men were either beaten, arrested or jailed at one time or another and sometimes involved in extreme cases of martyrdom. Among the newsmen assassinated were Dele Giwa, the founding Editor of *Newswatch Magazine* killed in 1986 through a letter bomb, Okezie Amurube, the Publisher of *News Service* who was shot dead by policemen attached to Enugu State Police Command, Bagauda Kaltho, a reporter with *The News Magazine* who "was bombed to the death by Abacha's Libyan-trained goons" (Malaolu, 2004, p.68) and Tunde Oladepo, a correspondent of *The Guardian* who was shot dead by gunmen.

Others are Bayo Ohu of *The Guardian*, Edo Sule Ugbagwu of *The Nation* among others. Some of those jailed include Oluwaniran Malaolu, Editor of *The Diet* Newspaper, Chris Anyanwu, Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of *The Sunday Magazine*, Kunle Ajibade, Executive Editor of *The News Magazine,* George Mbah, a reporter with *Tell Magazine*, Ben Charles-Obi, Editor of *Classique Magazine*, Tunde Thompson and Nduka Irabor, *The Guardian* newspaper's Foreign Correspondent and News Editor, respectively. Even with the existence of laws liberalizing journalism practice and the much professed democracy in the country, Dunu and Ugbo (2014) lament that "journalists'

experiences keep oscillating from favourable to awfully unpleasant." The foregoing instances of official brutality against the media were a tip of the iceberg of the terrible experiences of Nigerian journalists who had at one point or another put their lives on the line just for the sake of the nation.

Concluding Remarks

To insist that Nigerian media are purveyors of division, discord, sectionalism and ethnic agenda is tantamount to academic dishonesty. It will also amount to academic fraud to portray Nigerian media as the architect of national cohesion and integration without highlighting areas they have performed *dysfunctionally*. Therefore, it is safer to say that the media in the country can build and also destroy as postulated by the extant literature on the topic under consideration. That is to say that Nigerian media are a reflection of the Nigerian society as well as a product of its history and circumstances. Since the media can set agenda and also cause positive changes to occur in a society as seen today and in the past, the media should place national interest first before personal, ethnic, political, pecuniary or commercial interests for the purpose of integrating the various sections of the country. The media should also hold the government accountable to the people taking into cognizance the constitutional provisions which empower them to do so. It will be a welcome development if the media would be bold enough to keep the present leaders of the country on their toes so as to right the wrongs of the past which gave rise to various agitations that tend to divide than unite the country. This they can achieve by highlighting our similarities and the common ties that bind the country together as well as the mutually beneficial gains that would accrue from the continuous corporate existence of the country.

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