Influence of Media Owners' Interests on Investigative Journalism in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study focuses on the Influence of Media Owners' Interests on Investigative Journalism in Nigeria using two broadcast radio stations i.e. FRCN and Raypower FM as case study. The study used Altschull media ownership theory (1984) to explain the relationship between media owners' interest and investigative journalism. The researcher used survey method through a five-point likert scale to measure the extent of political, economic and religious interests of owners of the two stations. Findings show that media owners' political interest has the highest influence on investigative journalism in the two stations, attracting the highest mean of 3.900 for FRCN and the highest mean of 4.500 for Raypower radio. The economic interest is very high in Raypower as it attracted the second highest mean of 4.000 for being a commercial station. This is followed by religious interest which has the lowest mean of 2. 200. Contrary to that, religious interest in FRCN has the second highest influence as it attracted the second highest mean of 3.500. It is recommended that national assembly enact laws that will protect journalists from sanctions by owners whenever they air any stories that affect their interests. Also, journalists should exercise their editorial independence provided by section 22 of the 1999 constitutionby resisting unnecessary interference from media owners.

Key Words: *Impact, Media ownership, Interest, Investigative Journalism*

Introduction

Media ownership has been defined by scholars and other media stakeholders in a number of ways; some scholars describe whoever possesses shares of a medium as owner, some focus on whoever controls editorial contents, some on recruitment and firing or disengaging, some on who finances media operations, etc.Kanyiwedo (2013) defines media ownership as the paternity or possession of a medium of mass communication which givesproprietors the legal power to direct and influence the decision

of what stations broadcast. Ugwu (2015) views it from the financial commitment made by media proprietors. He defines the term ownership as the act of setting up or establishing a medium by a person or group of persons and or the government and financing its operations. To him, ownership is the legal right to possess and fund media stations. Gambo (2006) sees media ownership simply as investing in, financing and or controlling any medium for the dissemination of information, views, opinions and ideas within the confines of the laws of Nigeria.

Media ownership is a process whereby individuals or organizations control shares of media companies. Media ownership manifests itself in the form of private and government-owned media. Privately-owned media is owned by individuals or companies who invest in media companies as a business geared towards generating profit for the owner, while government-owned media are state-funded media institutions whose sole business is to collect information and make it available to the public (Busterna &Hansen, 1995).

Interest is anintrinsic motivation which promptsan individual to like or dislikea specific subject matter. Interest is conceived as a relatively enduring preference for certain topics, subject areas, or activitiesover others. It is a content-specific motivational characteristic composed of intrinsic feeling-related and value-related valences (Hidi, 2000). Colloquially, being interested in something can mean that we care about it, that it is important to us, and that we have (mostly) positive feelings towards it (Harackiewicz & Hulleman, 2010). In broadcasting, interest refers to intrinsic motivation which makes media owners to like or dislike, or to prefer certain issue over others.

Media scholars are of the opinion that ownership interests can constitute a big hindrance in mass media effortstowardsperforming watchdog function because most often those rich enough to set up media outfits also have political, social, business and/or commercial interests to protect (Sule, 2015).

This perhaps explains why Chukwu (2015) avers that media content is largely determined by interests and ambitions of their proprietors. Owners' interest is therefore a central factor that arguably determines how the mass media perform their roles. Ismaeli (2015) and Hanitzsch (2013) identify external and internal interests e.g. political, commercial, religious, cultural etc., that create a complex setting for working journalists. This paper focused attention on identifying how and the extent political, commercial and religious interests of owners influence investigative journalism.

Statement of the Problem

Whether media ownership is private or public, the interest of the owner plays a central role in determining what the media managers do or fail to do. Hardly can an owner tolerate a manager who operates contrary to his interest. The close relationshipmedia owners, politicians and advertisersshare can influence media content. Again, type of media ownership determines the level of freedom and efficiency of the organization (Apuke, 2016). Sobowale (1985), for instance, observed that when the ownership of a country's media is vested in government or concentrated in the hands of a group, or an individual, the media tend to become mere megaphones of those in control. It is often said that "He who pays the piper dictates the tune," which literary means that a piper must play the tune to satisfy the person who has hired him. Media owners tend to see journalists as non-essential items on their cost sheets, so streamlining in the media business is often accompanied by lay-offs, salary cuts and widespread disregard for collective agreements which further weakens journalists. The independence of both the media and journalists, thus, rests in the hands of media owners, and by extension affects the freedom of expression of every individual (Hrvatin, Kucic, & Petkovic, 2004).

In view of the above challenge, media managers are often faced with the dilemma of balancing the media owner's interest withthepublic's interest without infringing on the laws of the land or the ethics of the profession. In view of the above, this study investigates the extent of

political, economic and religious interests of media owners using two radio stations as case study namely *FRCN* (publicly owned) and *RaypowerFM* (privately owned) with a view to suggesting ways to reduce the interest for effective investigative journalism.

Objectives of the Study

The paper measures the extent of political, economic and religious interests of *FRCN* and *Raypower* owners. The objectives are specifically to measure

1. the extent of political interest of *FRCN* and *RaypowerFM* owners
2. the extent of economic interest of *FRCN* and *RaypowerFM* owners
3. the extent of religious interest of *FRCN* and *RaypowerFM* owners

Research Questions

RQ 1. To what extent does political interest of owners of *FRCN* and *RaypowerFM*affect investigative journalism?
RQ 2. To what extent does economic interest of owners of *FRCN* and *RaypowerFM*affect investigative journalism?
RQ 3. To what extent does religious interest of owners of *FRCN* and *RaypowerFM*affect investigative journalism?

Literature Review

Studies have identifiedsome external and internal interests of media proprietors that create a complex setting for working journalists and influence investigative journalism. They are mainly political, commercial, religious and cultural (Ismaeli, 2015).
Media scholars have differed on the impact of owners' political, economic and religious interests. While some argued that political interest is dominant, others insist that the economic interest has more effect, while some are of the view that religious interest is

superior to the two other interests. However, the direction, nature and extent of this influence, impact and/or effect remains a source of disagreement (Okwuchukwu, 2014). It is in this line of thinking that this study measures the extent of media owners' political, economic and religious interests.

Political Interest

A study by Gerli, Mazzoni and Mincigrucci (2018), which investigated the constraintsand limitations of investigative journalism using in-depth interview revealed that a journalist finds it difficult to investigate a given event if it damages the political interests of his boss leading to strongly partisan investigative journalism often depending on strictly personal interests of owners. The study recommended observance of high level of journalistic professionalism and a law that protectsjournalists from owners' pressure.

Aghamelu (2013) studied the role of the Mass Media in the Nigerian Electoral Process and found that in the coverage of politics and elections, the greatest challenge of the Nigerian media is that proprietors who are mostly persons with political interests discourage them from adhering to the fundamental principles of balance and objectivity. In addition, the Nigerian media workers are poorly paid compared to the work they do. It recommended that the press should insist on acting professionally and insulate itself from undue owner's political influence.

Political influence on the media organization becomes manifest where news media subscribed to a specific editorial policy by showing their political/ideological inclination in their reportage and editorials. In order to advance their political interests, many politicians and even governments set up media organizations to champion their causes. Journalists are sometimes forced to protect divergent political goals and interests especially of their proprietors that often run counter to the ethics of their profession. It isalso true that journalists themselves may have a political stance that may or

may not play out in the news production (Hanitzsch &Hoxha, 2010). Political parties often act as patrons with the media as clients. This is true aspoliticians control the political and economic resources and allocate them to the media in exchange for loyalty, while media owners use their properties as a vehicle for negotiation with other elites and intervention in the political world (Wang, 2010).

Oso (2012) identified another factor that affects investigative journalism in Nigeria i.e. involvement of media into politics. He described press and politics as intertwined and inseparable. He argued that, in Nigeria, politicians are fond of establishing media outfits to promote their political interest e.g. private radio like *Raypower*, *AlheriRadio*, *Star FM, Brilla FM, Cool FM and Rock City FM,* among others; and television stations such as *African Independent Television, DITV, Silver bird, Galaxy, Channels;*and newspapers like *Concord, the Democrats,MITV* newspapers, *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, *This Day, The Nation, Nigerian Tribune, Compass;* and Magazines like *The News, Tell and Newswatch* are often owned by politicians or businessmen who are closely associated with the government, former presidents, ministers, ambassadors, commissioners and other ex-government official, who in one way or the other still maintain their loyalty to the government in power. This ownership makes the media avoid exposing those that are connected to their owners and, thus, tobecome subjective.

Commercial interest

The proper functioning of an independent media organization, particularly in free-market economic systems, is directly dependent on advertising income. This makes advertising income crucial to the survival of commercial mass media in modern democracies.

A study by Sule (2015) using content analysis examined conflict reportage and National Development found that in Third World Countries like Nigeria, financing of the media is dependent on the ownership. Whether government or private enterprise, media owners

can exercise power at their disposal to put both financial pressure on their media organisations to conform to the policies and philosophy of the proprietors. Also, the technological equipment used for production by the media are very expensive to come by, especially for private proprietors and so limit the reach of most media organizations in Nigeria.The study recommendedthat for professionalism in reportage, there should be balance in presentation and accuracy of fact to check the menace. Okwuchukwu (2014) used in-depth interview to investigate the influence of media ownership and control on media agenda setting in Nigeria. The study found that often a proprietor's economic interests are very influential in determining media content and how it will relate to the government of the day. In public media, government officials interfere with the operations of some media outfits in Nigeria by deciding whose announcements or paid adverts are aired or whose face should appear on the pages of government control newspapers. It recommended that regulatory bodies should strive to defend journalists against undue pressure from proprietors.

Shoemaker and Reese (1991) pointout that the owners of media organisations have the ultimate power over the news content of the newspaper, contending that the primary focus of a news organization owned by private corporation is to make a profit and objectivity is seen as a way of attracting the readers desired by company. Though in some rare cases, the owner may choose to make the reader’s interest his or her priority. The content of the news is built into the economic objectives of the owner secondary to an ideology such as promoting a particular agenda. The organization cannot indefinitely ignore the economic goal especially when media firms are owned by stockholders, public service is usually sacrificed for the sake of profitability. This means the bigger the advertiser, the more muscle it has. Modern multinational manufacturers and advertising agencies, for instance, have considerable power to suppress public messages they do not like.

Guyot (2009) also argued that the main concern for editors, publishers, broadcasters and media owners is to avoid losing

advertisers or displeasing owners because stations use the advertising revenue forthe day-to-dayrunning of the stations and also provide funding for better facilities for the practice of journalism. This leads to increasing role of advertisers and other economic actorsmaking the media have more commercial, profit-making and entertainment-oriented content and fixtures. The drive for profit has encouraged the entry of speculators and increased the pressure and temptation to focus more intensely on profitability (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

Economic influences at the organizational level will not end up only with shaping news agendas, but there are instances where some advertisers would threaten to discontinue with certain media outlets because they got negative coverage. Some advertises request that a topic that portrays them in a bad light should not be covered or that some issues be covered in a certain way. This is particularly common with banks, which are major advertisers, thus forcing the media to succumb (Akpobo, 2009).

Religious Interest

Given the multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nature of Nigeria, the mass media are not neutral in their reportage of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria. Religious influence of the media owners and editors or reporters exerts much more influence on the media. A Christian journalist working in a Christian-owned media outfit cannot but be in favour of his religion when covering religious crisis that involves his religion and another. So also, a Muslim journalist working in a Muslim-owned media organization will certainly consciously or unconsciously be biased in favour of his religion, Islam, and against the other religion (Imo, 2005).

Barde (2016) used Survey research method to find out the effects of media reportage of ethno religious conflicts on Christians and Muslims in Kaduna State. The study revealed that some media owners influence reportage in favour of their religions in order to enjoy support of their constituencies. This happens whether in peace

or during ethno-religious conflicts. It is recommended that media houses should crosscheck their news before reporting on ethno-religious conflicts so as not to be seen as being biased. Government should sanction any media house that indulges in biased reportage of ethno-religious conflicts Religious bodies should desist from inducing media reporters to report biased and exaggerated news on ethno-religious conflicts. Also, the study called for a paradigm shift in ethno-religious reportage by the mass media in order to play down conflict situations rather than escalating them in order to promote national development.

Another case raised is by Kaduna State governor in the 16th February, 2019 genocide on Fulani settlers in Kajuru Local Government Area of Kaduna State where certain media refutes the figure of lives lost given by the state government. Briefing State House reporters after a security meeting presided over by President Muhammadu Buhari at the Villa, El-Rufa'iexpressed concern and blamed Nigerian media for being partial in the reportage of conflicts involving two major religions in Nigeria i.e. Islam and Christianity (*Daily Trust* 20th Feb., 2019, 2):

> Some media are being grossly irresponsible; I don't know what their agenda is. But, I know there is a prevailing narrative in the Nigerian media that only certain lives are more important than others. We see that clearly in the slant of reporting and the denial. The fact that reporters are still asking me whether the killings took place or the figure is true, two days after we have proved all doubts is unfortunate.

The governor blamed a section of Nigerian media for supporting one religion over the other in their reportage of conflicts by avoiding anything that could portray their religions or owners in bad light even if it is true.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Altschull media ownership theory which was extended and refined byShoemaker and Reese (1991). The theory

argues that news content is built into the economic objectives of the owner as well as his ideology such as religion, culture or politics. They also aver that advertisers influence owners who in turn influence news content. The advertisers do that by specifically withdrawing advertising support from objectionable news content or by letting it be known that they do not want to support media that run certain types of articles or programmes. They conclude that owners of media organizations have the ultimate say over news content in their stations.

Media owners' influence has remained a contentious subject in media management with various interpretations and viewpoints depending on the position, interest, orientation and background of owners. The interests of such parties are usually of immediate importance. This theory is relevant because it tries to point out that owners' interests such as economic objective, culture, religion and politics play a role in shaping the news content of media. Those interests constitute the focus of this study.

Research Method

The study used Survey method usinga five-point likert scale questionnaire developed by Brown (2010) to research questions on the extent of owners' influence on investigative journalism.

Population

The population of this study is the entire staff of FRCN and Raypower FM numbering 4,100 employees comprising **2600** for *FRCN* (Bayero, 2018), and 1500 staff for African Independent Television/*Raypower* (Tyav, 2018).

Sample Size

A total of twenty journalists: ten each from FRCN and Raypower FM comprising five editors and five senior reporters working in the newsrooms were sampled for the study.

Sampling Technique

The researcher used snowballing sampling with heads of news of both stations as gatekeepers to select the twenty journalists that answered the scale. Given that the researcher is not familiar with most journalists working with FRCN Abuja network center, the researcher applied snowballing sampling using heads of news of both stations as gatekeepers to select specific respondents qualified for in-depth interview.

Data Presentation

Datafrom a five-point scale on the extent of owners' influence on investigative journalism in Nigeria was presented in excel below:

Table1: The extent of political, commercial and religious interests of media owners

S/No.	Items	Radio Stations	Response Categories					Mean	Rank
			Very high	High	Neutral	Low	Very low		
1	Extent of owners' political interests influence on investigative journalism	*FRCN*	4	4	0	1	1	3.900	1
		Ray Power	6	3	1	0	0	4.500	1
2	Extent of owners' economic interests influence investigative journalism	*FRCN*	2	1	2	4	1	2.900	3
		Ray Power	2	6	2	0	0	4.000	2
3	Extent of owners'	*FRCN*	1	6	1	1	1	3.500	2

religious interests influence investigative journalism	*Ray Power*	1	0	2	4	3	2.200	3
Cumulative mean for *FRCN*							**3.433**	
Cumulative mean for *Raypower*							**3.566**	

Standard/Decision Mean =3.00

Table 1 showed that the extent of influence of *FRCN* and *Raypower* owners on radio investigative journalism is very high, because the cumulative mean of 3.433 and 3.566 respectively is each higher than the standard/decision mean of 3.000 as showed in table 1. It was also observed that political interest has the highest influence on investigative journalism for both stations as it attracted the highest mean of 3.900 for *FRCN* and the highest mean of 4.500 for *Raypower* radio.

For *FRCN*, economic interests have the least influence on its investigative journalism, as it attracted the least mean of 2.900, while for *Raypower*, economic interests have the second highest influence on its investigative journalism as it attracted their second highest mean of 4.000.

For *FRCN* religious interest has the second highest influence on its investigative journalism as it attracted their second highest mean of 3.500, while for *Raypower*, religious interest has the least influence on its investigative journalism as it attracted the least mean response of 2.200. In summary, the extent of influence of *FRCN* and *Raypower* owners on radio investigative journalism is very high especially as they both influence political interest on their investigative journalism.

Discussion

The discussion is anchored in Media Ownership theory developed

by American scholar, J. H. Altschull in 1984 which states that the overriding determiner of media content is the ideology of those who finance them.

RQ 1. To what extent does political interest of owners affect investigative journalism?

Table 1 shows that the extent of *FRCN* and *Raypower* owners' influence on radio investigative journalism is very high, because the cumulative mean of 3.433 and 3.566 respectively is each higher than the standard/decision mean of 3.000. It was observed that media owners' political interest has the highest influence on investigative journalism in the two houses, attracting the highest mean of 3.900 for *FRCN* and the highest mean of 4.500 for *Raypower* radio. This agrees with Oso (2012) who argues that, in Nigeria, press and politics are intertwined and difficult to be separated, and that politicians are fond of establishing media outfits to promote their political interest. Also, for *Raypower*, the economic interest has the second highest mean of 4.000, reason being that private stations rely more on revenue from adverts for running their day-to-day operations (Sule, 2015). Also, most free-market media are finetuned to jointly maximizethe needs of advertisers and their own interests as a normal condition of operation (McQuail, 2010).

RQ 2. To what extent does economic interest of owners affect investigative journalism?

However, the economic interest of owners of *FRCN* on investigative reporting is low, as it attracted the least mean of 2.900 –reason being that it is a publicly owned station, which is financed by government and few adverts from corporate bodies and individuals. Just like *Raypower*, *FRCN*also does not give much consideration to profit whether owners' interest is at stake or not. This assertion is supported by the Senior Special Assistant to the President on Media and publicity, Garba Shehu, who argues that Buhari's campaign team did nothave enough advertising money. Even when it had little money to spend on advertising, the *Nigerian Television Authority*

(NTA) was not willing to give them a slot. He cited example of a particular night, when he called *NTA*, which had 16 slots of one minute adverts and he requested to buy just one minute for the Buhari campaign, but *NTA* refused, saying thatall 16 had been sold (Shehu, 2015).

RQ 3. To what extent does religious interest of owners affect investigative journalism?

For *FRCN*, religious interest has the second highest influence on investigative journalism as it attracted the second highest mean of 3.500. Given the multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nature of Nigeria, stations are instructed to give equal opportunities and equitable airtime to all religious groups in the community, warning that religious broadcast shall not contain an attack on, or a ridicule of another religion or sect (NBC section, 4(4)). Therefore, any investigations capable of subjecting any religion or religious leaders to ridicule is always avoided.

Religious interest, on the other hand, has the least influence on *Raypower* investigative journalism, as it attracted the least mean response of 2.200. This is because most private media owners consider religion as another means of revenue generation and treat it as such without consideration to differences in sects, groups or orientation. *Raypower* welcomes every religious programme as long as it is paid.

In summary, the extent of *FRCN* and *Raypower* owners' political influence on investigative journalism is very high as both stations recorded a cumulative mean of more than 3.00. This agree with the media ownership theory which argues that news content is built into the interest of owners in line with their ideology andpolitics (Shoemaker & Reese, 1987).

Conclusion

Although journalists from both private and government-owned broadcast stations admit that they face threat from media owners like interference with news content, intimidation and harassment especially when owners' interest is at risk, they however welcome positive interference if the story can result inloss of lives and property.Owners of both government and private media are more sensitive to political news with government owned stations tilting towards serving the ruling party, while the private stations give preference to the party of interest to their owners. Owners of government stations do not give much consideration to economic interest because their stations are not profit making ventures. The private stations, on the other hand, give much consideration to economic interest because they operate as commercial ventures and sustain themselves from revenues they generate. Owners of *FRCN* (government owned station) are more sensitive to religious broadcasting than their private counterpart. It was also found that the banning of stories can be tackled by either broadcasting/publishing the stories in social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc.

Based on the above findings, this study concludes that journalists from both stations admit that media owners do interfere with the operations of investigative journalists in one way or the other and at various levels especially when their interestis at stake. This concurs with the first theory adopted in this study i.e. 'Media Ownership Theory' which provides that journalists are not free agents but are responsive to owners' dictates.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the above findings:

1. Government shouldenact laws that will protect journalists from sanctions by owners whenever they air any stories that affect their interests.

2. Journalists should exercise their editorial independence by resisting any unnecessary interference from media ownersas provided by section 22 of the 1999 constitution**.**
3. Journalists should use an alternative platform like the social media in case of sanction or ban by their media owners.
4. Journalists engaged in investigative journalism can learn new ways of news presentation without necessarily using harsh words.

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