Spectral of News Merchandising: Journalists' Beat Socialization, Influence, Implications and Regulation

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Abstract

One of the key issues in the political economy of the newspaper is the way news is influenced by newspaper reporters, editors and news sources. This study investigated the type of influence beat socialization has on the journalists in the course of news reporting, the implications of beat socialization on journalists' routine and suggested measures to regulate the influence of beat associations on journalists' work. In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 purposely sampled senior journalists in two of Nigeria's highest circulating newspapers: Daily Trust and The Punch, to generate data. The study found four types of influence of journalists' beat socialization, namely journalists' news source influence, camaraderie influence, news value influence and professionalism influence. On the implications of journalists' beat socialization, the study found that journalists' beat socialization creates a cabal dictating the focus and pace of the news, causes multiplication of errors in news reports through copy sharing, and promotes corruption through news merchandising. Finally, the study came up with five measures on checking unethical practices among journalists on the beat, which include cultivating investigative spirit, constant monitoring of beat journalists, imposing sanctions on erring journalists, upholding the interest of the news organization and shunning bad company. The study recommends that news organizations need to work out strategic measures to monitor and control influences on journalists' beat reports so that the newspaper would be able to fulfill its functional role in societal development.

Keywords: *News merchandising, Journalists, Beat socialization, influence, implications, regulation*

Introduction

Journalists' socialization with their colleagues and news sources on the beat has substantial influence on the news reporting pattern, giving rise to concern that journalists' beat socialization casts doubts on news credibility (Marchetti, 2005; Magin &Maurer, 2019). On the news beat, journalists socialize with their reporter-colleagues and share off-the-record information and ideas that influence the news (Entman, 2004)directly or indirectly. They also "look to their own colleagues for daily stimulus on the job" and for

"confirmation of their news-value decisions" (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001, p.57), a situation that confirms the argument that news is a product of the news-gathering and news originating bureaucracy (Tunstal, cited in Aliagan, 2006). In Nigeria, journalists belong to beat associations, a professional group that brings together journalists covering the same aspect of human life in the society. According to Olukotun (2005), individual journalists compromise and engage in 'syndicated corruption' through the 'beat organization' by allowing news to be dictated by corporate and political institutions.The journalists' beat associations are also believed to wield enormous powers on the news sources, and oftentimes enter into news merchandising deals with news sources for pecuniary gains (Aliagan, 2019). News racketeering and corruption had increased since the advent of civilian rule in Nigeria in 1999, observed Olukotun (2005). Thus, the influence of journalists' beat associations on journalists' work is a common subject of discourse among Nigerian journalists and managers of news organizations. Based on the perceived influence, which the beat association has on journalism work in Nigeria and on news framing, this study investigates, through qualitative interviews,the influence and implications of journalists' beat socialization on the news, and explores efforts by news organizations to control the powers of beat associations on news framing.

Conceptualizing Beat Journalism

According toMarchetti (2005), beat refers to the fragmentation or segmentation of media production environment along thematic specialization. However, beat reporting, according to Magin and Maurer (2019), refers to thematic or subject specialization by journalists or routine reporting carried out by journalists, with reference to places visited for reporting and people seen regularly for reporting.It is also seenas a form of specialized reporting which enables a reporter to have a fuller grasp of the area of reporting he is assigned, thereby promoting good journalism (Adeniyi & Suleiman, 2017). To Obe (2005), specialized reporting allows a reporter to concentrate on special areas or fields of reporting, as distinct from generalized reporting.In the words of Magin and Maurer (2019), beat or specializedreporting reflects a distinction

between a generalist reporter and reporters assigned to beat or specific area of coverage by media organizations, by geography or subject matter in the society.Thus, beat reporting is an offshoot of specialized reporting, as reporters are deployed on the beat with the aim of making them specialists in certain areas of news coverage and reporting.

Beat reporting heralded modern journalism. It began towards the end of the 19th century, with the aim of enhancing the efficiency of journalism work, to boost professionalism and to transform the newspaper into a mass product (Magin & Maurer, 2019).Modern beat system was said to have been pioneered by James Gordon Benneth, an economist who covered the Wall Street for *Courier and Enquirer* but later left the newspaper to found the*New York Herald* where he set up the beat system covering business, sports, society, entertainment, local, national and so on, in 1835, based on theunits and sections which he created in his newspaper(Olawunmi, 2014). Beat system was introduced into Nigerian journalism in the 1970s by the *Daily Times* with the recruitment of the first set of economics and political science graduates, who came in from the teaching background into its editorial section. Early beats in the *Daily Times* were economy, politics, sports, crime and police, court, airport, and women affairs (Olawunmi, 2014).

Essentially, beat system has to do with deploying journalists to certain location or subject-specific areas for the purpose of news reporting over a period of time and on a consistent basis. The journalists could be generalists posted to such areas to develop their skill and understanding of the beat and improve consequently the quality of their news reports or a subject-specific specialist in any area of life such as judiciary, bank, and agriculture. Such journalists may also possess academic training in the chosen subject area or in journalism, humanities and science, as the case may be.According to Marchetti (2005), some journalists become specialists after spending a number of years as generalists. Some are moderate specialists having stayed only briefly on a beat. To Marchetti (2005), the higher a journalist goes in hierarchy, the

more likely he becomes a generalist, though this is not always the case. As recorded in Nigeria (Olawumi, 2014), specialized journalists was boosted in France with the entry of a category of journalists with long years of post-secondary school training. In some situations, according toMarchetti (2005),knowledge of the specific area of coverage is considered as less important than an ability to deal with all coverage areas. Media organizations, according to him, recruit specialist journalists both for professional and commercial reasons. This is because knowledge of the subject is considered important in establishing credibility with the specialized source and generalized (reader) publics.

Journalist Beat System in Nigeria

Journalists working in newspapers in Nigeria are posted to news beats by the editor, the editor-in-chief or the managing editor, depending on the editorial/administrative system in operation in news organization, sometimes based on the observed capabilities of the individual reporters. The most important beat which many journalists are assumed to covet is the State House beat, which Olawunmi (2014) likened in rank to the American White House,which the most experienced and senior reporters are often deployed to. Olawunmi (2014) adds that beat deployment system in Nigerian newspapers is influenced by newsroom politics, and it could be used as an instrument of reward or sanction. Some of the important beats in Nigerian newspapers are sports, education, science, health, business, politics, energy, entertainment, religion, defence, and property, among others.

Obe (2005) divides beat system in Nigerian journalism into six, according to different sectors of the economy. These include the Economic ministry beat that covers sectors responsible for regulating the fiscal policy and preparation of national budget. A reporter covering this beat extends coverage to the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Commerce, Trade and Investment and Ministry of Budget and National Planning. The second category listed by Obe (2005) is the sensitive ministries beat. This extends to ministries responsible for the internal and external defence of the country. These cover the Defence Ministry, Interior Ministry,

Foreign Affairs Ministry and Information Ministry. The third category is the social ministry that covers ministries linked with the social and cultural life of the people. They include Education, Health, Justice, Women Affairs, Sports, Youth and Culture. The fourth category, as given by Obe (2005), is the Diplomatic beat that relates to the working of the foreign office. The fifth category is the Sports beat and the sixth, the court beat.

According to Olawunmi (2014), journalists'beat associations were formed in the early 1980s and mid-1990s to facilitate in-depth coverage of the beats. Some of the important beat journalists' associations include the State House Press Corp, League of Airport and Aviation Correspondents (LAAC), Sports Writers Association of Nigeria (SWAN), among others.

Journalists'Beat Socialization

One of the key concerns of the political economy of the newspaper is the way news is influenced by newspaper reporters and news sources(McChesney,2000) through beat socialization.Socialization process varies according to the specialized areas of coverage in journalism, and it accounts for the differences in content production in the media (Marchetti, 2005). In his analysis of socialization, Singer (2004) identifies four different stages of socialization. These include (a) vocational (b) anticipatory (c) encounter and (d) adjustment stage of socialization. Vocational socialization, according to Singer (2004), is influenced by education, interpersonal and mass communication while in anticipatory socialization individuals develop impressions of specific future work environments through communication with others already in the organization. At the encounter stage, the individual is initiated into the work group; and on the last stage, new members adjust to group norms and values. Journalists beat socialization may be identified in three of the stages, namely anticipatory, encounter and adjustment stages.

According Marchetti (2005), socialization involves formal professional interactions overtime. It begins from the journalist's workplace, the newsroom, the bureau office, and informal meeting place such as headquarters of associations, cafes, homes of

colleagues or even primary sources. The journalist is, therefore, influenced by the newsroom culture through relating with other journalists and specialists. In the same way, journalists who work in close proximity to one another are exposed to all kinds of heterogeneous pressures. As explained by Marchetti (2005), for journalists on specialized beat, the principal workplace is not the newsroom, but headquarters of the institutions they cover where they are often provided with offices. The journalists on the beat see themselves as a small family, accredited by the institutions they cover. They often meet each other in the same places every time, in the hallways, the cafeteria, courthouse, the hearing rooms, in hotels and restaurants where they meet regularly to compare notes.

The workplace forms the first layer of socialization. The second layer based on the model by Marchetti (2005) is the socialization through journalist's professional associations other than the employer or workplace. Thus, aside from the socialization among the journalist-colleagues on the beat, there is also socialization with the news sources on the beat. News sources, whether on the specialized beat or on the general beat, exercise some influence over the journalist and the news routine. This is what is meant by news source power in hegemony discourse or in political economy of news production. News source power explains the dominance of a category of news sources through journalists' conscious efforts or manipulation. McChesney (2000) draws an analogy on the power of news sources on journalists and the news content, saying that to find out "why a story is getting covered and why it is getting covered the way it is, look at the sources" (p.70). Thus, journalists on the beat, as indeed on the general beat, are wittingly or unwittingly subjected to news sources' influence on their work. This influence by news sources is encouraged either by the journalists themselves or by the media through their approach to news sourcing.

It is argued that the idea of cost saving makes news organizations patronise influential and cheap news sources as prevalent on the news beat, though this argument is countered by the abundance of cheaper news sources made available by the emergence of the

Internet and new media technologies (Lunden, 2009). The same view on patronising influential but cheap news sources by news organizations is shared by McChesney (2000) who thinks that giving preference to official sources in news reporting and placing reporters "where official sources congregate" makes news "fairly easy and inexpensive to cover" (McChesney, 2000, p.69). However, aside from powerful news sources, there are other influences on journalists' work. For instance, journalists, including reporters, editors and the publishers communicate regularly with their colleagues both within and outside their media organizations, the same way those in government interact and fraternize with journalists often at formal and informal gatherings, and share off-the-record information and ideas that influence news directly or indirectly (Entman, 2010). In view of this, journalists, in the course of their work, look up to their colleagues on the beat or on the job to confirm their decisions on news values and professionalism in treatment of the news. They also manage their relationship with the news sources based on "mutually accepted ground rules" (Bulmer & Gurevitch, 2001, p.57), as the case may be.

In view of this relationship with news sources and among their peers, journalists are often torn between their professional loyalties to the journalism profession and the need to maintain and sustain their relationship with news sources that may have hidden agenda and out to manipulate the media for their own goals. Such manner of influence is noticeable in the news beat where journalists are heavily influenced both by their colleagues on the beat, the news sources and sometimes by the editors and managers of the news who have official and personal links with sources on the beat, especially where they represent high ranking officials of government, or chief executives of powerful corporations and influential politicians or the powerful elite class, as obtainable in Nigeria. This development informs the phenomenon of beat socialization and news merchandising which this study explores.

Appraising Journalists' Beat Socialization and News Reporting

Beat journalism has some advantages and disadvantages. According to Magin and Maurer (2019), beat reporting saves

resources since the beat reporters are experienced and know exactly where to get their information at any point in time. Also, the long term relationship with news sources on the beat enables beat reporters to have access to exclusive, trustworthy, and newsworthy information. Lacy, Coulson and Cyr (1999)observe that studies have been done on the nature of news beat competition but little was done on the impact of beat competition on content. They note that competition could influence journalist-news source relationship and could also have impact on news coverage and content. Their general finding was that a "majority of reporters who face daily competition perceived that it had some impact on their behaviour and their content" (p.331).

Beat reporting also has its bad side. According to Magin and Maurer (2019), beat reporting limits diversity of views and of news coverage. It can also lead to what is described as 'pack journalism' which results from group thinking. According to Magin and Maurer (2019), there are three risks of losing professionalism associated with reporter-source relationship on the beat: (a) Beat reporters can be instrumentalized if they become too close or too loyal to their sources. (b) Beat reporters may lose the trust of the audience if they become too adversarial toward their sources. (c) Beat reporters might behave like activists, rather than detached observers, if they act like advocates of their own interests.Also, specialized journalists, according to Marchetti (2005), are often accused of turning into spokespersons for the organizations they report. This way, political journalists are labeled as activists while sports journalists are likened to fans. Specialized journalists are also seen as being narrow minded, with incomplete vision, as well as partial and not being enterprising in news pursuit. According to Marchetti (2005), the specialized journalist lacks the versatility of the generalized reporter and is in difficult position to demonstrate their credibility both with their peers and their employer and they also struggleto address a broad audience, rather than limited audience, like a normal journalist.

As recorded by Olawunmi (2014), "A content analysis shows, predictably, that much of the information generated by beat

reporters revolves around authority figures in the beats. The outcome of this is that quite a number of stories read more like official bulletin pieces from some corporate organizations" (p. 63). Some of the explanations given for this development include the demand of copy deadline which encourages reporters to court and woo sources through whom copies are easily generated. Another is that most newspapers do not provide movement logistics for their journalists, thus making them dependent on official activities on the beat, rather than independent reportorial activities of reporters, among other factors. This makes it impossible for journalists on the beat to be objective (Oso, 2012)."What perhaps is shocking is that many beat reporters, like their generalist colleagues, do not even earn regular pay while some are freelancers," argues Olawunmi (2014, p. 64). This situation, therefore, places the beat journalists at the mercy of the beat sources for his or her survival.

Blumler and Gurevitch (2001) in their study of the coverage of the British Parliament by reporters reveal the kind of relationship between journalists and news sources on the beat and how this impacts on the news routine. They identify three categories of journalists who were related to the Parliament. The first category was comprised of editors, correspondents, and commentators who worked at Westminster. They were related physically by reporting from there and socially through interactions with the MPs. The second category were journalists, editors, managers and channel controllers working with various radio organizations on networked news and current affairs programme, and had influence on parliamentary reports. The third category was the higher executives and policy makers in the broadcasting organizations, who had the responsibility of ensuring that the parliament and the MPs were projected in good light. In this wise, the authors argue that the journalists not only networked among themselves but were also in constant touch, not only with their editors in the office, but also parliamentarians who ensured their daily access to proceedings and interviews.

Corruption is also commonplace on the beat. A common reference to corruption on the beat as captured by Pate (2002) was recorded

during the regime of Nigeria's military president, Ibrahim Babangida, who reportedly offered journalists covering the State House beat a parting cash gift of N50,000 ($150) each, while he stepped aside as the nation's helmsman. The cash exchange came to the public glare when Alex Kabba, then a member of the State House press corps, working for the opposition newsmagazine, *Tempo,* which had beena torn in the flesh of the military regime, blew the lid open. This caused a lot of reprehension, forcing media houses with reporters on the State House beat to call their representatives to answer questions. However, the scandal never went beyond allegations and nothing could be proved, hence the matter died a natural death. Even though most media employers knew it to be true, none could take the matter up.

Some newspapers, through reports by their journalists on the various beats, became megaphones of power elites and abandoned their primary responsibility to the readers. During the Babangida (1985-1993) regime when bribery and corruption became institutionalized, he was said to have been able to draw close many journalists and newspaper proprietors who became sympathizers of his regime and were doing his bidding. He courted this group through state appointments, bribery, contract awards (Oso, 2012), among others. In addition, many state correspondents, and political journalists were said to be on the payroll of government or prominent politicians to slant the news, kill stories or concoct some. Some of the gratifications enjoyed by these journalists included gifts of lands, cars and sponsorship of pilgrimages to Mecca or Jerusalem, among other forms of inducements (Oso, 2012).

In view of the fact that some beat associations were said to operate a cabal system, cases of self-censorship abound. Also, threat of sanction from news sources and the journalists group also existed. Some of the sanctions against non-compliant colleagues by the journalists' associations included blacklisting or outright ban, de-accreditation which completely shuts out the reporter concerned from major beat activities and events. As recorded by Pate (2002), non-conforming journalists could suffer from mild or overt

blackmail and intimidation, while in the case of the state house beat, such journalists could be tagged security risk or eased out of the beat permanently as in the case of *The Punch* reporter, Lekan Adetayo sacked from State House by the President's Chief Security Officer, but later recalled after clearance by the Director General of the State Security Service, Lawan Daura (New Mail, 17 April). Adetayo's sacking was not unconnected to his scathing report on the then trending state of health of the president. For this reason of state repression at some point, beat reporters are at all times sandwiched between loyalty to the employers, conforming with the ethics of journalism, and battling the powerful forces on the beat that seek to control them.

Objectives of the Study

The study had three main objectives, namely (1)to determine the type of influence beat socialization has on the journalists in the course of news reporting, (2) to examine the implications of journalists' beat socialization on journalists' routine, and (3) to suggest measures to regulate the influence of beat associations on journalists' work.

Methodology

The study adopted qualitative in-depth interview method to elicit the views of senior journalists in two mainstream newspapers in Nigeria to determine the type of influence journalists' socialization with colleagues and news sources on the beat has on news reporting, the implications of such socialization and to bring up measures that news organizations could initiate to regulate beat journalism.According to Gilham (2000), an interview method enables the researcher to obtain "information and understanding of issues relevant to the general aims and specific questions of a research project" (pp.1-2). Thus, in-depth interview method was chosen because it can be very enriching based on the volume, richness and vividness of the material it brings out.Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) citeKuzel who argues that a sample size of 12-20 is appropriate "when looking for disconforming evidence or trying to achieve maximum variation" (p.61).They further quote Romney and colleagues who canvass that small samples could be

very reliable in providing comprehensive and accurate information "within a particular cultural context, as long as the participants possess a certain degree of expertise about the domain of inquiry" (Guest et al., 2006, p.74).Thus, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 purposely selected participants, who included senior journalists, editors, news editors and line editors, who had reported on the beat at some point in their career. Specifically, the interviewees had worked as beat journalists for at least five years for their newspapers and had worked for not less than 10 years as journalists. The journalists were selected from two mainstream newspapers, namely *Daily Trust* and *The Punch*, two of the highest selling Nigerian newspapers based on newspaper circulation audit of 2009 (Zue Bureau Limited, 2009), at a ratio of 10 participants per newspaper. The interviews covered a period of two months, February to March, 2017. All the respondents met the criteria for participation in the in-depthinterviews and had sufficient experience to contribute qualitatively to the enquiry.

An interview protocol was generated to guide the interview process. The protocol was pre-tested through face and content validity by two senior academics to ensure clarity of the questions and to check against ambiguity. After that, a pilot test of the interview guide was done with three senior local specialized journalists to confirm that the interview guide could reveal data in conformity with the research objectives. The interview questions were designed to be open-ended so that the interviewees could be free with their responses. This was also to enable the researcher to obtain detailed information from the participants. Open-ended questions also allowed for probing and follow up in case of insufficient or incomprehensive responses. This was most useful where respondents initially were not too forthcoming with detailed answers (Creswell, 2012).

All the interviews were taped with digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim as suggested by Lofland and Lofland (1995) and Yin (2011). The interviews were transcribed manually and verbatim to ensure that nothing was left out. Thereafter, the researcher proceeded to reading the entire transcribed interview

scripts to get familiar with the trend of thoughts of the interviewees and to visualize the concepts and themes emanating from them in accordance with the suggestion by Kowal and O'Connell (2004) and Bird (2005). Thereafter, the transcription was followed by detailed step by step coding, to identify the themes and sub themes in the interview responses. These were later grouped into related categories, in relation to the research objectives, and analysed in line with thematic analysis. Each of the journalists, in view of confidentiality clause agreed with the respondents, was identified by initials derived from their first names and surnames. The generated code names for identification were:
(1) SN (2) LA (3) OF (4) MO (5) NI (6) SO (7) NP (8) AA (9) NL (10) RA (11) AL (12) TO (13) HI (14) FA (15) NA (16) SE (17) TA (18) AL (19) AJ (20) AY.

The interview data generated three main themes in line with the three research objectives. These are (a) type of journalists' beat socialization influence (b) implications of journalists' beat socialization (c) measures to regulate the influence of beat socialization on journalists' work. Each of the main themes, however, has sub-themes.

Findings

Generally the study found four types of influence of journalists' beat socialization. The first type is journalists' news sources influence, by which journalists rely on each other for news break on the beat. The second type of influence is the camaraderie influence which enables journalists on the beat to function as a team. The third type of influence is the news value influence that results in similarity of news in the newspapers due to news syndication practice and the professionalism influence which tempts journalists to work as allies of news sources on the beat.

On the implications of journalists' beat socialization, the study found that journalists' beat socialization creates cabals dictating the focus and pace of news on the beat, causes multiplication of errors in the news through copy sharing among journalists, and promotes corruption through news merchandising. Finally, the

study came up with five measures on checking unethical practises among journalists on the beat, which include cultivating investigation spirit, constant monitoring of beat journalists, imposing sanctions on erring journalists, upholding the interest of the news organization and shunning bad company.

Detailed analysis of the findings of the study,guided by the research objectives, covers three main themes: (a) influences of beat socialization on journalists' work (b) implications of journalists' beat socialization and (c) measures for regulating journalists' beat socialization. Each of the main themes had sub-themes and they are presented in the next section of the paper.

A. Influence of Beat Socialization

In line with Objective 1 of the study, analysis of the responses of the respondents revealed that beat socialization influences the journalist in the course of his reportorial work. The analysis of the theme on the influence of journalists' beat socialization yields four sub themes that identify the types of influence beat socialization has on the journalist in the course of his reportorial task. These are (i) journalists as news sources (ii) camaraderie influence (iii) news value influence(iv)professionalism influence.

(i) Journalists as news sources

The study revealed that journalists must socialize to make news happen. Six of the respondents shared this view. Respondent SE, for instance, explained that it was very important for journalists to socialize "because you cannot be everywhere at every point in time. Sometimes, some of your colleagues serve as your sources. They would tell you this is what is going on. So, it is very important for a journalist to have cordial relationship with his colleagues on the beat." Also, respondent SN was of the view that "if you socialise well with your colleagues, it would boost your reports. Nobody is an Island; you cannot know it all; you cannot have all the information; somebody will have a piece of information that you do not have. So, good relationship, professional relationship with your colleagues is quite essential,"

while respondent SO argued that a journalist who did not socialize with his colleagues could be in a mess because he cannot be everywhere all the time; hence, he could miss stories.

(ii) Camaraderie influence

It is revealed that beat socialization fosters camaraderie spirit among the journalists. This view was held by six of the respondents. Respondent NI reasoned that working as a team could be a safety valve for reporters. It could serve as a bailout for a reporter or a news medium during a crisis, or a mixed up report which other newspapers also published. Also, contributing to the point on the issue of team spirit, respondent AA stated that one thing he had learnt while on the job and which he had been taught in journalism school was that "the reality that we must accept in the contemporary practice of journalism is group reporting," thus reasoning that no reporter can do it all alone.

(iii) News value influence

Journalists' beat socialization has influence on the nature of news coverage and determination of news value as revealed in the study. This is because there are constant reviews and decisions on news pattern and its focus among journalists on the beat. News value influence is reflected in the similarity of news due to news syndication practiced by the beat journalists. According to respondent AJ, beat socialization "goes a long way in influencing reporter's perception and manner of reporting of certain issues." Also, respondent TA believed that "it is common for journalists to discuss news ideas and development" and that in most instances, "it is the understanding of the event that people use to write the story," thus, suggesting influence of colleagues on the beat on what a journalist writes as news.At least five of the respondents were of the view that beat socialization encourages similarity in the news reported by journalists due to news syndication. According to Respondent AA, syndication or similarity in the news reports occurs when a reporter was absent from a news event and he had to copy from colleagues. He explained this as follows:

> It is only when you were not there and I feed you or I make my report available to you, then you are constrained to toe the same line with me. But if you were there, you witnessed the event yourself, even when a governor or a president delivers a speech, the one that will interest you and will be your news peg may not be the one that will interest me. I will give you an example. Yesterday we had the opportunity of interviewing Vice President Yemi Osinbajo on Buhari's state of health. If you look at the papers today, if you look at *The Nation* for instance, *The Nation*'s peg was 'Buhari is hale and hearty – Osinbajo'. *The Punch*'s peg was 'I can't disclose Buhari's health status – Osinbajo'. There is this other paper that said, 'I am not under pressure to resign – Osinbajo'. It is still the same event but with different news pegs and the reporters wrote differently based on their perception of the interview.

Thus, it is mostly when reporters copy stories from each other in view of being physically absent at news events that news reports tend to have similar focus, similar angles or slant. Respondent NL gave this description of how news similarity is enhanced through beat socialization by journalists, "Sometimes you will take a story in the *Daily Trust* and you take another story in *The Punch*, and then the only difference you notice, maybe is just the name (*byline*). That tells you one of the reporters was not at the venue of the event. He relied on his colleague to give him the story. And sadly, some of them are very lazy that they cannot even do their own investigation or try to change certain aspects of the story." Many newspapers fall victims of this professional misdemeanour of their reporters. According to Respondent HI, this kind of attitude tells on the professional integrity of the reporter who had copied and that of his newspaper that published such story.

(iv) Professionalism influence

The study revealed that beat socialization by the journalists has an influence on the professionalism of the reporters. This is reflected in the following ways:(a) It encourages lazinessamong journalists (b) it facilitates compromised reporting, and (c) it makes journalists to become ally of news sources. Just as found in news syndication, the study discovered that beat socialization encourages laziness among reporters, especially when they rely on

each other's copy. Three respondents, namely NA, NL and TO, believed that beat socialization among journalists and colleagues on the beat makes journalists to become lazy about their work. For instance, respondent NA described the professional laxity of the beat journalists in the following way: "Go to Nigerian Union of Journalists, the press centre where journalists socialize; all that they do is drinking, womanising, and searching for bribes and what have you. This act is not adding any value to journalism profession." Also, respondent TO painted the scenario of lazy journalists this way: "Most of them, by this time of the day, this is 2:30pm, they would put their feet on the table and they would be watching DSTV satellite broadcast. By 4:00 or 5:00pm, they would come to my office, asking 'what story is available?' They would want to copy from me because they had not done their job."

Also, respondent AA gave an elaborate description of what was being done on the beat by journalists. In his words:

> There is what we call embargo; embargoing story is like keeping a story, Sunday for Monday. The story of Friday, they would say let's embargo it; let's leave it until Sunday for Monday. That is unprofessional and I have had problem with that. When I was covering the People's Democratic Party, a story broke on a Thursday and it was agreed that it should be embargoed. I told them that I can't embargo it. If I write it and it is not used, that is a different thing. But that I should keep it? No. I would file my story and I filed it and it was used by my paper and a lot of them were not happy with that.

Respondent AA was of the belief that because the journalists were perpetually under the influence of colleagues on the beat who dictated what could or could not be reported and because journalists had to abide by the group norms, their professionalism suffers. Respondent HI, while agreeing that beat socialization kills the spirit of professionalism in the reporter, observed that, "... when you go to the newsstand these days, you realise that from the first paragraph to the last paragraph of maybe four or five stories

you see, the same language, the same quotation. So, it kills the spirit of research. It kills spirit of investigation. That is one of the disadvantages of this camaraderie kind of a thing on the beat." The study further revealed that a journalist who stays too long on the beat and depends too much on his colleagues on the beat for his reporting could lose his professional skill.

Aside from the issue of laziness that it encouraged, the study also found that journalists' beat socialization leads to compromised reporting. This happens when journalists on the beat agree on self-censorship and doctoring of stories to favour or disfavour a source as revealed by some respondents. Four respondents shared this opinion. According to respondent RA, colleagues on the beat who were close to some sources influence other colleagues on the position to take on news related to such sources. She added, "At times, your report will be mostly controlled by the journalist-friends around. Most times, some journalists will want you to kill a story."The study further discovered that beat socialization could turn some journalists into unofficial Public Relations Officer for the organizations they report. This occurs when some journalists get overwhelmed by their relationship with the news source that they get subsumed into the management, and become unofficial spokespersons or consultants to their news sources. As evident from the study, their role in the journalist-source relationship included planting or killing stories, lobbying journalists-colleagues, and sometimes helping to identify enemy-colleagues who are uncompromising. This view was canvassed by respondent HI.

B. Implications of beat socialization

The study revealed three implications of journalists' beat socialization. These include: (i) multiplication of errors in news reports (ii) corruption and (iii) cabal promotion.

(i) Multiple errors in the news

The study revealed that errors are multiplied in the news through news syndication by journalists on the beat. According to

respondent NL, this is caused by copying or sharing of news reports by beat journalists. In his words, syndication encouraged multiplication of errors in the news because the reporter who was absent from a news assignment would not know if a mistake had been made in the story given him and might duplicate such mistakes in his news.

(ii) Corruption

The study revealed that corruption is prevalent on the news beat. This is reflected in the (a) unethical practices ofwriting or killing stories for a fee(b) arm-twisting of news sources, and (c) currying favours from news sources. As revealed by respondent AA, beat journalists look forward to sharing money after every news event, and only those present could partake in the gift sharing. According to him, "There is what they call 'Shoot at Sight.' Shoot at sight is that if you are there, you are there. What we call the fewer the merrier. It means whatever benefits come from interviewing a person you can only share in it if you were there." Also, according to respondent NP, when a journalist depended too much on his colleagues on the beat, "...they begin to tell you that certain aspects of the story should be removed, so that it will not embarrass your source. When you associate with them too much and you do not demarcate that kind of relationship, it will begin to affect your reporting and you begin to slant it to suit the taste of your source." Furthermore, respondent LA opined that "some beat organisations have been accused of ganging up against some news sources". This practice, he stated, has turned the beat association into a club in which news is traded for a fee and non-conforming organisations or sources are blackmailed. Some beat journalists also seek financial favours from news sources to settle house rent, children school fees or to meet expenses on child naming, wedding or funeral, as revealed by respondents NP, TO, RA and AL.

(iii) Cabal promotion

Beat socialization, as found by the study, creates a cabal among reporters whereby some journalists constitute themselves into a

force, dictating the pace and directions of the news, deciding what would be reported and what would be ignored as well as how journalists must relate with news sources. This was the argument of respondents FA and TO. For instance, respondent TO revealed that a journalist who refused to cooperate with the colleagues on the beat might find himself in trouble because others could gang up against him. Colleagues could set a trap for him by denying him information about a news break or an important forthcoming event. Consequently, based on the submissions of the respondents, it is revealed that journalists on the beat get socialized into having a common ground in news reporting. This socialization determines news focus and direction, as well as what news would be reported and which would be discarded. This is what some respondents meant by the beat associations evolving into a cabal.

C. Measures for regulating Beat socialization

In view of the concerns that have been expressed on beat socialization by the journalists and its effect on professionalism, some media organizations were said to have frowned at the membership of such association by their reporters. Some of the respondents supported regulating journalists' membership of the beat associations in the interest of professionalism and good journalism. Some of the reasons suggested for regulating journalists' membership of beat associations include (a) checking corruption influence (b) preventing ganging up by journalists and (c) the need for journalists to operate more independently and professionally. Some of the respondents, particularly respondents FA, LA and TA, explained why some newspaper organizations prevented their reporters from joining beat associations. Respondent LA, for instance, reasoned that "many of the newspapers try to discourage that for the fear that it may lead into corruption of one kind or the other, or the fact that it may lead to people trying to gang up against some other interests." Also, respondent TA noted that "Some media organisations are not too comfortable with their journalists becoming members of the different groups because of the need to operate more independently and professionally rather than to fall into the bandwagon effect when it comes to interpreting and analysing a report."

The study also revealed how undue influence from beat socialization could be checked. This include (a) cultivating investigative spirit in news reporting on the beat (b) constant monitoring of beat reporters by news organization to check abuse (c) imposing sanctions to curb negligence (d) journalists to be guided by the interest of the news organization in their dealings with colleagues on the beat, and (e) journalists to strive to be different by shunning bad influence. According to respondent MO, when reporters do not stay glued to their beat but endeavour to go out in search of investigative stories, even on their beat, the influence of beat colleagues would reduce and professionalism would be enhanced. According to her, even if the reporter picked a story from his or her colleagues because of not being physically present at an event, he or she could endeavour to make some inquiries before publishing, as new perspectives or facts about the event in question might come up while doing that. Also, respondent TO informed that reporters in his newspaper who were on beat reporting were constantly monitored to ensure that they did not compromise. He explained that, in his newspaper, reporters were required to give updates on what stories they were doing, when such stories would be turned in and if such deadlines would not be met, to explain why. This, according to him, if practised by other news organizations, could help to put reporters on the beat in check, and caution them against joining the bad eggs on the beat.

Also, some newspapers, to ensure that their reporters do not become careless with their work, impose sanctions for missing stories or any other professional misconduct. According to respondent NL, “sometimes reporters are surcharged, sometimes it is suspension. Sometimes it is even sack. You know because like in your own case in the academia, plagiarism is outright sack. If you copy someone’s work and then claim the story to be your own, once it is out there, nobody can defend you. You are gone.” He canvassed that such measures by news organizations could help to curtail the negative implications of beat membership by their reporters and ensure independence and professionalism in their reporting.

However, conscious journalists, on their own, also try to evolve strategies to cope with the negative impact of beat reporting.The interviewees stressed that reporters on the beat face a lot of pressures, especially in socializing with their colleagues. They were expected to follow and obey certain group norms and practices. Failure to do that might result in clashes or even becoming victims of set-up. Some interviewees in this study suggested how journalists on the beat could cope with these pressures and how they could protect their professionalism. Thus, they canvassed that in handling pressures from colleagues on the beat, journalists should be guided by the interest of their news organization. Respondent FA suggested that journalists were, first and foremost, employees of their respective media organizations; hence, if anyone must dictate to them about what to report, it was their news organization. She therefore, advised that journalists must be guided by the interest of their news media and rank it first when it comes to deciding who to follow.

As compromised reporting had been linked with beat socialization, some respondents, particularly respondent AA,reasoned that a journalist that wanted to build a career should never compromise on professional ethics no matter the pressure on the beat. When things come to that, he advised that a journalist must have to draw the line in the relationship with colleagues or the news source. He explained, “A journalist on the beat must relate with his colleagues. It is a must but he must also rule a line on where and how such relationship should operate. It should not be allowed to tamper with your professional practice.” Generally, some respondents argued that professionalism entailed being guided by the rules of the profession in a journalist’s conduct with his colleagues. Also, some respondents, particularly respondent HI, advised that a journalist must endeavour to be different even when every other person was following the wrong path. According to him, endeavouring to be different required a lot of courage. He canvassed that a reporter should learn to always be ahead of his colleagues by adding an investigative angle or fresh perspectives even to stories that were collectively sourced.

Discussion of Findings

According to the model presented by Marchetti (2005), there are two layers of socialization reflected in this study. The first layer of socialization is the employer or workplace socialization. The second layer is the socialization through journalist's professional associations, other than the employer or workplace. Thus, aside from the socialization among the journalists on the beat, journalists also socialize with the news sources on the beat. Both the journalist-colleagues and news sources exercise some influence over the journalist in the course of his work. In view of this, journalists often find themselves in dilemma in deciding which of the two influence to yield to.

As this study found out, journalists' beat socialization has not only influence but also implications for journalists' work in news gathering and dissemination. The study's findings on the influence of beat socialization on journalists' reports are affirmedthrough what has been established in literature that news is a product of agreements among news gathering team (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001; Olukotun, 2005; Tunstall, cited in Aliagan, 2006; Entman, 2010), just as it is influenced by news sources (McChesney, 2000; Entman, 2010) as dictated by the political economy of news production. Journalists depend on one another to confirm their news value judgment, and sometimes news angle and focus. The challenges of beat socialization revealed in this study is a reality in modern news gathering as affirmed by Marchetti (2005);hence, its existence in Nigeria is in conformity with the realities in global press ecology. Thus, news organizations have had to grapple with the implications beat socialization has on news production.

The influence that journalists' beat socialization has with journalists on the beat on the one hand, and the news sources on the other hand, affectsnews values and pattern of reporting, as revealed in the study. News value influence is reflected in the similarity of news due to copy sharing practised by the beat journalists. This finding supports the assertion by Magin and Maurer (2019) that beat reporting limits diversity of views and diversity of news coverage, leading to what is described as 'pack

journalism' which results from group thinking, that is in tandem with what obtains on the beat. The professional influence of beat socialization on the journalists' work is reflected through encouraging laziness among journalists, facilitating compromised reporting and making journalists to become ally of news sources as revealed in the study. This supports the argument by Olawunmi (2014) that news from the beat reads like official bulletin of major organizations and McChesney (2000) who remarks that journalists' socialization on the beat has tendency of making journalists "appear as stenographers to those in power" (p.70), through simply echoing what they say.

The case of prevalence of corruption on the beat through news merchandising as revealed in the study is supported by revelation in Oso (2012) and Aliagan (2019). Corruption, as revealed in the study, covers demand for monetary gratification to settle house rent, children school fees or to meet expenses on child naming, wedding or funeral, and monetary gift sharing after news assignment. The practice of demanding for money to publish or withhold publishing of news constitutes professional misdemeanourin journalism but it is commonplace in beat reporting. Also, the issue of journalists who had stayed too long on the beat getting subsumed into management and acting as unofficial spokespersons of the organizations they cover corroborates the claim in Marchetti (2005) whereby political journalists turn into activists and sports journalists become fans of sports athletes. It was argued that most journalists on the beat operated like a cabal system as confirmed in this study. Most journalists fear to rock the boat, knowing that there could be repercussions. Thus, most stories are often lame and uncritical, while the reporters often engage in self-censorship and doctoring of reports to gratify the news sources or the controllers in the beat associations. Journalists are conscious of the possible sanctions from news sources and the journalists group. This revelation is in agreement with the claim in Pate (2002) which states that non-conforming journalists could suffer from mild or overt blackmail and intimidation or eased out of the beat as in the case of sensitive beats.

Conclusion

Journalists' beat socialization is a modern reality that is global in nature. The challenges posed by dual socialization between journalists and colleagues and between journalists and news sources influence news gathering and delivery. As obtainable in other parts of the world's press system, Nigerian journalists are not insulated from the dual influences which tend to condition news value decisions and news framing. The challenges of skewed news value judgment, news framing, corruption and professionalism are universal, and each system tries to evolve measures to check them. The suggested measures in this study are some of the ways to mitigate the undue influence on journalism work on the news beat. News organizations need to work out strategic measures to monitor and control influences on journalists' reports from the specialized beats so that the newspaper could be able to fulfill its functional role in societal development.

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